

A CONVERSATION WITH Jessica Love

Why did you decide to return to Julián's world rather than create and explore a new one?

My editor told me to! I'm joking. I mean, initially I was reluctant to do a sequel, because I was really nervous about spoiling a good thing with an unnecessary addendum. But as I did readings in schools and libraries, I met so many people who saw themselves in the story and asked when I was going to make another story about Julián and his abuela. I started to relax into the idea that people might actually want another book. Once it became about making the book for those people who wanted it, it became much easier for me.

Was there a wedding you attended that inspired the setting? Tell us more about your decision to set the story at a wedding.

There were several. I had a pretty good run as a flower girl back in the eighties. My greatest triumph, however, was at a wedding in New York City: It was the first time I'd been to New York. I was about six or seven, and it was for my uncle Michael's wedding to his girlfriend. I worshipped both of them. The wedding was somewhere along the banks of the Hudson River. After the ceremony, the ring bearer and I were down by the bank of the river, and I was showing off, leaping from boulder to boulder. I slipped and fell in. I was soaked! I destroyed my dress (some beautiful antique lacy number) and was completely shaken. But my parents took me to a souvenir stand and bought me an extra-large tie-dyed "I ♥ NY" T-shirt, which ended up being my outfit for the rest of the wedding. I loved it. I thought it was so completely awesome.



The moment when Marisol's abuela presents her with the baseball cap is such a great parallel to the moment in Julián Is a Mermaid when Julián's abuela presents him with a beaded necklace. Are there other connections between the books?

I think of the two books as different verses of the same song, and that moment of handing over a talismanic object is the chorus. We ask children to perform their genders in different ways, and just as Julián's nature is larger than the role society would ask him to play, Marisol's nature doesn't fit inside her dress. Because this is an experience Julián understands, he is able to use his empathy and creativity to help his friend move from shame into joy. They are both stories about finding a way of being at home in yourself, then finding the courage to share that self with the world.

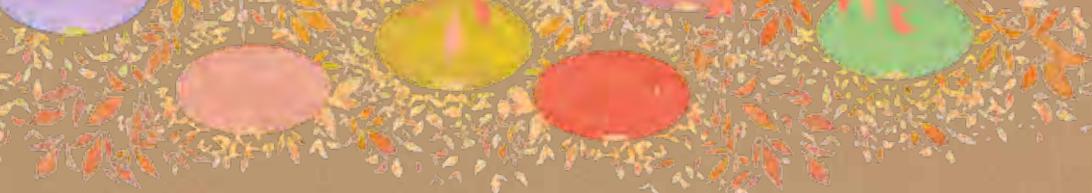


What part of this story did you enjoy illustrating the most?

This book ended up being rather more elaborate than *Julián Is a Mermaid*. There were a lot of really lacy details and patterns, and I found that to be fun but not as essentially compelling as drawing moments between people. My favorite thing to draw is the stuff that's most like acting: specific, nuanced emotional exchanges between characters.

The expressions that you convey on the characters' faces throughout the story are incredible. How do you manage to capture emotions so clearly? Do you ever use photos or models?

Thank you. I think this is what I'm best at. I don't use models or photos; it's more like I'm acting out each part, but I'm drawing the performance instead of acting it. Actually, I think I *am* acting it out as I draw, feeling the way the character would stand, where in their body shame lives, where joy lives, what they hope for secretly . . . These are the things I'm consciously thinking about, and then I'm often able to draw what it feels like.



The flowers and nature illustrated against the backdrop of New York City are gorgeous. Were there specific plants or flowers you drew inspiration from?

Yes, I am a devout nature-worshipper from way back. I grew up in a cabin in a national forest in California, and to me the natural world is the original source of beauty. In this book there are tributes to a weeping willow (classic stunner, obviously) and an American beech (beech trees are organized into families, and they share nutrients with one another!). The wedding flowers are nasturtiums and bougainvillea (both tributes to my California roots), and there are dayflowers, clover, knotgrass, and poppies in the meadow (poppies are my favorite flower). Lastly, one of the brides' hair is filled with my favorite wildflowers: sweet peas, clematis, lilies of the valley, and mariposa lilies.

Are there any Easter eggs that lovers of the first book will notice in the second? Julián's abuela's dress pattern brings another outfit to mind . . .

There are many subtle details that probably won't get noticed at first. My personal favorite is on a spread where Julián and Marisol are under a table. You can see Abuela's feet, and she is slipping off her high heels. Because that's what you do with high heels: you wear them for ten minutes, then you dance barefoot!

What do you hope readers will take away from Julián at the Wedding?

It was my hope to bottle the feeling of being a child at an adult party. When you're little, there is something really amazing about seeing adults playing dress-up and dancing, because what they're doing is playing, really. Mostly you just see adults working, accomplishing, and enforcing, and you rarely get to see grown-ups at play. To have those rules suspended and to see the child within the adult is a really magical experience when you are little. It's also a story about making a friend by sharing a feeling of *complicité*, about connecting in a moment of vulnerability. It is a story about the power of dress-up, and it's a celebration of nature, love, and, of course, dancing. I suppose my hope for the book is a simple one: that it will make people happy.

ABOUT Jessica Love



Jessica Love is an actor and the author-illustrator of *Julián Is a Mermaid*. She has a BA in studio art from the University of California, Santa Cruz, as well as a graduate degree from Juilliard. She has appeared in plays both on and off Broadway. Jessica Love lives in Brooklyn.

