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Culture

My Name is Gabriela: The Life of Gabriela Mistral
Monica Brown
John Parra, illustrator
Luna Rising
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With illustrations as textured and brilliant as a child's dream, this book introduces young readers to the first Latin American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Gabriela Mistral, born Lucila Godoy Alcayaga, was a poet and teacher enthralled by language. The story opens with an explanation of her pen name: "It is a name I chose myself because I like the sound of it." Among the many accolades of a career started in adolescence in Vicuña, Chile, Mistral published more than thirty collections of poetry, helped shape the national educational system of Mexico, and lived in the United States and Europe, giving lectures and teaching. She received the Nobel in 1945.

Written in English and Spanish, the narrative sketches her biography, focusing on the childhood roots of her adult achievements. In portraying this important role model as a child, the author makes her accessible to young readers, encouraging their potential to equally great achievements. The story captures her childhood imagination, how it fed her love of language, and how that in turn led to an illustrious career as a writer and educator.

In a lovely two-page spread illustrated with butterflies and flowers, Gabriela says, "I loved words—I liked the sounds they made rolling off my tongue," and lingers on the internal rhyme of "fluttering butterfly" and "*mariposa posando*." It is a shame that such attention to language is not carried throughout the narrative, especially in a book about a famous poet. With an informative section in the back, the main body could have afforded to be more lyrical.

An associate professor of English at Northern Arizona University, Brown has written a previous bilingual picture book. The first, *My Name is Celia: the Life of Celia Cruz / Me Llamo Celia: La Vida de Celia Cruz*, won the 2004 Américas Award for Children's Literature, awarded by the Consortium of Latin American Studies Programs.

If this book's primary merit is that it brings an important literary figure into the hands of

young readers, its other virtue is the luscious illustration. The illustrator's portfolio seems a cross between Diego Rivera, Marc Chagall, and your child's best refrigerator art. Drawing strongly from the muralist tradition, the bold images perfectly capture the richness of imagination. From the bustle of a Mexican plaza to the intimacy of a mother reading to her baby to a stately lion with eyes closed in concentration, the illustrations are strongly symbolic and full of magic.

Well suited to the classroom and the living room, this book provides just enough information to pique the reader's interest without becoming overwhelming. A good bedtime read, it also has the potential to be the inspirational seed for a child's future goals.

Naomi Millán