



★ **Under the Cottonwood Tree: El susto de la curandera**

Paul Meyer

Carlos Meyer

Margaret Hardy, Illustrator

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Steeped in folklore and the supernatural, *Under the Cottonwood Tree* is a wonderful story about a group of children who try to save themselves and their village by convincing a once-helpful *curandera* to renounce her wicked ways.

A *curandera* is a traditional Latin American folk healer or shaman, but as this story begins, it's revealed that the old woman once known by that title has since strayed toward bitterness and evil. After disturbing the *curandera*, a young boy, Carlos, is turned into a calf; he later changes again, into a caterpillar. His older brother and little sister are joined by a friend; they attempt to reverse the spell by apologizing to the old woman, whom they now consider a *bruja*, or witch. Things only get worse as they are captured, and two of them are turned into animals. Developing a taste for performing such transformations, the *curandera* prepares to turn the entire village into animals. But the children discover the tragedy that caused her to turn away from helping others and convince her to embrace a hopeful future instead.

The tale has a long history; it originated in 1980, in a dream of Paul Meyer's, and his older brother, Carlos, developed it into a short story. Together, they conceived of this graphic novel version, which is aided by outstanding, beautifully colored illustrations from Margaret Hardy. The book draws on the cultures of Latino, mestizo, and Native people of New Mexico, including "New Mexican Spanish" and the idea of "susto": a kind of psychological trauma, here described as "a soul that is off-balance."

Full of memorable characters, creatures, and concepts, *Under the Cottonwood Tree* is exciting, humorous, and affecting—a rich and magical graphic novel.

PETER DABBENE (November / December 2019)

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