



Meet the Artist Andrés Vera Martínez

Andrés Vera Martínez is a cartoonist and illustrator. He is the co-author of the graphic memoir, *Little White Duck: A Childhood in China*. Andrés' work has been recognized by The Society of Illustrators, *American Illustration*, *3x3*, Junior Library Guild, Slate Cartoonist Studio, *School Library Journal*, *Horn Book Magazine*, NPR, and the *New York Times*. He currently lives in New England with his family. For more, find Andres at andresvera.com.

Q&A

Tell us about yourself. How did you become an illustrator?

I'm a Native American and Spanish artist from Texas. As a young person I struggled with reading. I was a reluctant reader. I was shy and suffered from anxiety when assigned to do book reports in front of my classmates, sometimes having panic attacks. I decided the best way to avoid this was not to do reading assignments. The only books I read were comics, which were not assigned at school. It wasn't until my senior year in high school that I read my first novel, *Frankenstein*. My English teacher tricked me into making a series of drawings to show that I had read the book. After bringing the drawings to class, she asked me if I wanted to talk about them. I did, in front of the whole class. The response I received for my art and my presentation filled me with joy and I didn't get nervous at all! I got a slow start, but my love of reading grew from there. Eventually, I received a merit scholarship to attend college. I studied painting but went back to study illustration and cartooning for a Master's degree. Fast forward and I'm making graphic novels professionally and also teaching illustration as a college professor.

What have been the biggest influences—people or experiences—in your work?

My introduction to drawing and superheroes was through my Uncle Adam's comicbook collection. When I was young, Tío Adam would entertain me by drawing—with great skill—our favorite characters. My lifelong love of art and storytelling was sparked by trying to emulate my uncle's drawing skills and by reading *Marvel Comics*.

My older sister was my first and harshest art critic. She would ask me why I only drew muscled super heroes and why I didn't draw other things like, houses, cars, trees and girls. My sister motivated me to draw more and diversify my subjects. She's still the first person to see all of my drafts and sketches for my work.

There were also a handful of public school and college teachers that truly understood my love of art and pushed me to hone my craft, guiding me to use art to better myself.

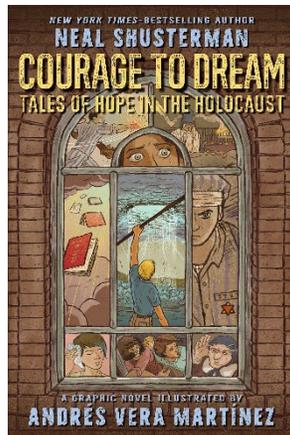
What was your creative process like for this book?

I was tasked to create the visual world of *Courage to Dream*, how the characters look and interact, and how they fit into their illustrated environments. Fantastic elements and harsh realities played a powerful part in Neal's nuanced storytelling. I needed to find an artistic style that mirrored that balance. As part of my research, I collected numerous historical photos to help me accurately depict clothing, architecture, uniforms, and even landscapes of the time. Then, I turned to art history to research the extraordinary aspects of the stories, searching through dozens of ancient paintings, sculptures, and period illustrations to design the magical elements and characters. This intensive research proved to be a very fulfilling part of rendering the world of *Courage to Dream*.

I also understood that it was necessary to find an artistic style that would engage young readers. My search led me back to the work of Jewish American comicbook artists that inspired me as a young person. Stanley Martin Lieber and Jacob Kurtzberg, better known as Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, the creators of the Marvel Universe, became my real-life heroes. Lieber and Kurtzberg had changed their Jewish names to Lee and Kirby. They grew up enduring racial discrimination in the United States just like me and my family. Jack Kirby and Stan Lee and a long list of talented Jewish American writers and artists formed the backbone of the comicbook industry. I continue to admire their careers and how they have shaped popular American culture. Although our backgrounds are different, I found a lot in common with them. This reference point and inspiration seemed like a great fit for the art of *Courage to Dream*.

If there was one message that you'd want every reader of this book to have, what would it be?

Courage to Dream is engaging and deeply necessary. It allows young people and the adults in their lives to have the difficult conversations about our history. We need stories like these, not just for humanity to learn from its mistakes, but to heal and to dream into existence a more just future. Neal Shusterman's *Courage to Dream* has given me the chance to express this, and I feel very fortunate to be part of this long tradition of making fantastic illustrated stories full of inspiration and hope.



Courage to Dream

By Neal Shusterman and illustrated by Andrés Vera Martínez

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National Book Award winner Neal Shusterman presents a graphic novel exploring the Holocaust through surreal visions and a textured canvas of heroism and hope.