

Celebrating Pinoy Representation

An Interview with Filipino Picture Book Authors

STEPHANIE E. MAHAR

This feature celebrates Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month in May with a spotlight on four children's picture book authors of the Filipino diaspora, specifically Filipino and Filipino American authors living in the United States. Through an email-based interview with Lynnor Bontigao (LB), Sophia N. Lee (SL), Michelle Sterling (MS), and Dorina Lazo Gilmore-Young (DG), we learn about the experiences that motivate them to create and share their stories for young readers.

How did you become a published author, and did you face any difficulties? The world of publishing has changed a lot over the years, and while we're seeing more diversity in publishing, this hasn't always been the case.

LB: I think it was hard for me in the beginning because I didn't know how to get there. I went to SCBWI conferences in N.J. when I could afford it (time-wise and financially). I met a lot of creative people and was always amazed at their portfolios. I had so much to learn. It wasn't until I listened to Vanessa Brantley-Newton at one of these conferences that she shared her story of not seeing herself in books, her obstacles, and telling us about *We Need Diverse Books* (WNDB). It was like a light bulb moment for me! Why wasn't I drawing characters who looked like me? In the Philippines, from early childhood, my visual references in books, TV, comics, and ads, featured fair-looking models. I thought to break into the US market, that's how I should draw! Vanessa's talk encouraged me to lean into my own roots. I left there knowing that I needed to draw characters who looked like me and the kids in my community. So, I filled my portfolio with diverse kids and personalities. I was really active on social media then. I followed an agent from Andrea Brown Literary Agency. She checked out my profile and was interested in knowing more about me. Eventually,



Sophia Lee at a presentation for her book *Lolo's Sari-Sari Store*.

she couldn't take me as a client but she was so kind to pass me to Caryn Wiseman, a senior agent there, who said she was enamored with my work. We had a phone call and at the end of that call, she offered representation. I feel truly lucky. She has been my agent since 2019. It may seem like my journey was fast because all the opportunities opened up for me since then. But because I always had the dream to illustrate a book from when I was young and woke up every day towards this goal, I like to call my journey "an overnight success thirty years in the making."

We pitched *Sari-Sari Summers* after being rejected for another Filipino-themed picture book. Thankfully, Candlewick Press' editor Melanie Cordova said yes.

SL: It took me a long time to get to the point where I felt ready to explore writing fiction. I was scared to give myself permission to try it, honestly. To begin, I enrolled in a creative writing master's program at the University of the Philippines Diliman, and there, I enrolled in a class focused on writing for young adults.



Stephanie E. Mahar, MLIS, is a Filipina American first-generation PhD candidate in the Language, Literacy, and Technology program at Washington State University, College of Education. She is also the Vice Chair/Chair-Elect of the Washington Library Association's Public Library Division, a book coder for the Diverse BookFinder, and the YALSA Book Awards/Lists Oversight Committee liaison for Great Graphic Novels for Teens and Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers.

That's where I wrote the earliest manuscript for *What Things Mean*. I was incredibly lucky to learn from a wonderful professor, Heidi Eusebio-Abad, and to get great advice and feedback from my writing peers there. Upon the encouragement of Professor Abad, and of writing mentors I had met shortly after as a fiction fellow in the Silliman Writers' Workshop, I entered my manuscript in the Scholastic Asian Book Award, and it won first prize. With it came the incredible opportunity for your manuscript to be evaluated for publication by Scholastic Asia. I still can't believe how everything unfolded for me. I was completely floored when they called my name as the winner; I was completely unprepared. At the same time though, I felt really excited to know that there was a place in the world for stories like mine.

After growing up reading about mostly blonde and blue-eyed heroines, it was empowering to know that a world-renowned publishing house like Scholastic was making space for Filipino stories. I went to the US as an MFA student with the intention of refining my craft and learning more about writing for children and young adults. Not long after that, I found my agent, and with her guidance, we were able to publish my first two picture books with Simon & Schuster.

I realize how lucky I've been; I know that most publishing journeys do not look like mine. I'm grateful to have benefited from many mentors, and to have an agent like mine who is proactively championing BIPOC stories, and an editorial team that's really supportive of stories like mine.

MS: My first story, *When Lola Visits*, was out on submission for a little over seven months before it found a home with HarperCollins. That was a really discouraging time...but I'm so thankful to my agent for championing my story and also to my editor for her vision for the story. They both knew that it was a story that the world needed to hear.

DG: My first published book was *Children of the San Joaquin Valley* published by Poppy Lane Publishing. At the time, I was a newspaper reporter for *The Fresno Bee*. A local publisher commissioned me to write this nonfiction children's book about the kids from many cultures who lived in California's Central San Joaquin Valley.

I always dreamed of publishing children's books. I wrote several manuscripts for fiction books, but received many rejections. Editors and agents would often praise my writing but told me there wasn't a market for the niche multicultural books I was pitching.

After taking a summer course, I ended up pursuing a masters of fine arts degree in Children's Literature from Hollins University. I learned a lot about the craft of writing for children and the business of publishing through that program and the people I met there. My first contract for a fiction picture book came in 2010 from Shen's Books. I published *Cora Cooks Pancit* on a modest royalty rate. Through the years, that book won several awards and has gained momentum selling more than sixty thousand copies to date.

Which aspects of Filipino and/or Filipino American culture does your work portray?

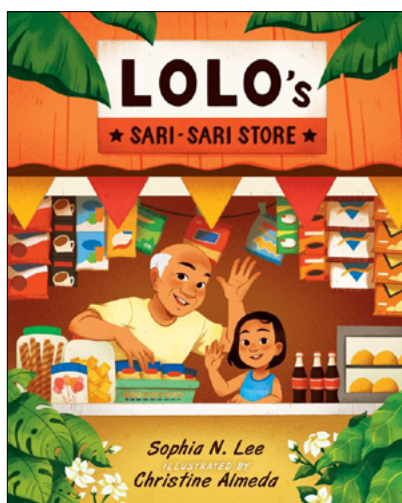
LB: I like illustrating the family dynamics, our traditions, the setting, and food. I like our readers to say, "We had those in our house while I was growing up." *Sari-Sari Summers* is set in the Philippines. At first, this worried me because I thought the readers might not be able to relate. I also had some text in the speech bubbles without translation. It was my invitation to the readers to say them out loud and figure out their meanings by using the visual cues. My kind editor reassured me that it was a good thing.

SL: Families, especially huge extended families, and deep inter-generational relationships are always present, whether I'm consciously centering Filipino culture or not. I come from a pretty close-knit extended family (my mom is one of twelve siblings, and my paternal grandmother is one of eight siblings), and so that always comes out naturally in my stories.

Different aspects of community care are also often featured in my stories; growing up, I benefited from the attention and guidance of so many *titos* and *titas*, *ates* and *kuyas*, *ninongs* and *ninangs*, and *manongs* and *manangs* around me. My days were so rich because I had so many influences modeling what it meant to live meaningfully. I learned about love and care and responsibility from my parents, but I observed my cousins and *titas* as they themselves grew up and devel-

oped their sense of style and beauty routines. I understood what it meant to have bigger social circles like *barkadas* from my other cousins and uncles. I learned about Filipino-style courtship and relationships from watching many different family members go through *ligawan*—seeing them falling in love and learning how to be vulnerable around me. I learned that friends could feel like family. Many of the characters that I write about are the same, I think. Their lives are rich because of that Filipino sense of community-making too.

MS: My books portray Filipino families engaging with Filipino and Filipino American culture through cooking and eating



together, passing on of Filipino traditions from one generation to another and creating new ones, such as when Lola and her granddaughter pick kalamansi and make kalamansi pie on the Fourth of July in *When Lola Visits*. I love those scenes because for me, the making of an American custard pie with the Filipino kalamansi represents a coming together of Filipino and American cultures, reflecting many of our experiences growing up as Filipinos in America, as well as in the wider diaspora.

DG: My book *Cora Cooks Pancit* celebrates Filipino food and heritage as well as the history of the Filipino farmworkers in California. My forthcoming book *Kailani's Gift* features a Filipino American girl learning to dance a traditional dance called the Tinikling. That book also celebrates food along with dance and multigenerational relationships so often experienced in Filipino culture.

How does your Filipino heritage shape your storytelling? Does your family history influence your stories, and if so, how?

LB: Absolutely! I want to share more of what I grew up with in my stories. So much of it centers on family. We have so many unique traits, customs, and traditions. But being an immigrant now also plays a part. I remember feeling small and unsure in a new place. I'm sure my parents also have their immigrant stories. Insecurities. Familial bonds. I find myself missing home but at the same time accepting where I am now. I would like to eventually write another story about what all of that means to me.

SL: I navigate the world, both on and off the page, with a Filipino lens. My upbringing definitely influences my storytelling too. I was raised in a middle-class Filipino family, but I understood how much privilege that came with, because it was different from the way my parents were raised. My father's family was comfortable in the province where they lived, but my mom grew up very poor. She was the first one to finish college in her family and it was through her and her siblings' hard work that they were able to uplift everyone else that came after.

Being on the other side of that and having been on the receiving end of so much privilege and grace, I'm always really careful about how I write about the Philippines and how I shape Filipino characters. I have Filipino beta readers, people whose insight I trust, read my work before it goes to my agent or my editor because I want to make sure that I'm being authentic and thoughtful. I want to be certain that I'm not misrepresenting anything or contributing to Western assumptions and stereotypes of what a developing country like the Philippines must be like, just because I'm trying to sell a book in the American publishing market. In spite of its imperfections, I see the Philippines as a beautiful and

joyful place. I see Filipinos back home and everywhere as hard-working, noble, kind, and generous people, and I hope that when I write about us, I am getting that right on the page.

MS: I try to include details in my stories that reflect my family history, and hope that these details help to broaden representation of different Filipino groups in the Philippines. For example, pinakbet makes an appearance in *Maribel's Year* because it's a dish that originated in Ilocos Sur, where my mother's side of the family hails from. In *When Lola Visits*, Lola sings in both Tagalog and Ilocano, both languages spoken on my mother's side of the family.

DG: My dad's family is predominantly Filipino with a mix of Chinese and Polynesian, which is typical of Filipino families. I often draw on my own experiences growing up in the kitchen with my grandparents, aunties, and cousins. Although my books are fiction, they incorporate my own connections with my

culture and research about Filipino heritage. I love celebrating the Filipino American experience through my writing.

In addition to family themes, food seems to be a common topic. What drove you to include those details?

LB: One of the ways we can connect to our Filipino culture is with food. Family members cooking together becomes a core memory.

We seem to capture that kitchen scene in our minds like a snapshot. Aromas take us back to a moment in time. Food is more than a dish on a plate. It is home, love, and childhood. I think that most countries also feel this way about food, so it is a universal way of showing cultures.

SL: Both of my parents are Kapampangan, and that's one of the regions really well-known for their culinary traditions, and so by virtue of that, I'm naturally drawn to food-related stories.

Filipino food takes time—it's stews being simmered over charcoal for hours, it's the kind of flavor that takes a long time to develop. It's also the kind of food that's innovative; I love how we were doing nose-to-tail cooking long before it was considered fashionable.

Another reason why I love featuring Filipino food in my stories is because it's incredibly personal; there are many Filipino dishes that aren't as accessible or as portable as tacos or burgers or even dumplings would be (though admittedly, we have versions of those too). To fully experience Filipino dishes like *sinigang* or *nilaga* or *tinola* for example, along with the different types of *sawsawan* and the rice and the sense of community those meals come with, one would often need to be invited into someone's home. I like that to experience our food is almost always an invitation to



Learn More About the Authors



Lynnor Bontigao is a Philippine-born author-illustrator. *Sari-Sari Summers* is her debut as an author-illustrator. She also illustrated *The World's Best Class Plant* by award-winning authors Liz Garton Scanlon and Audrey Vernick, as well as *You Are Revolutionary* by Cindy Wang Brandt, and *Jack & Agyu* by Fil-Am author Justine Villanueva. Lynnor is the recipient of the 2020 SCBWI Tomie dePaola Professional Development Award, the 2020 Kweli/SCBWI Emerging Voice Award, and the 2021 Kweli Sing the Truth! Mentorship. She lives in New Jersey.



Sophia N. Lee grew up in the Philippines. She wanted to be many things growing up: doctor, teacher, ballerina, ninja, crime-fighting international spy, wizard, time traveler, journalist, and lawyer. She likes to think she can be all these things and more through writing. She is the author of *Soaring Saturdays: What Things Mean*, which won the Grand Prize at the 2014 Scholastic Asian Book Awards; *Holding On*; and *Lolo's Sari-Sari Store*. Sophia received the Ani ng Dangal

Award from the Philippine National Commission for Culture & the Arts for her work in children's literature. She has an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from The New School in New York City and works as a teacher of creative writing.



Michelle Sterling is a children's book author, photographer, and speech-language pathologist living in Orange County, California. *When Lola Visits*, Michelle's first picture book illustrated by Aaron Asis, received four starred reviews, was an ALA Notable Children's Book of the Year, Kirkus Best of the Year, NYPL Best of the Year, Bank Street Best of the Year, Book-Page Best of the Year, and more. Her most recent book, *Maribel's Year*, was illustrated by Sarah Gonzales.



Dorina Lazo Gilmore-Young is a speaker, podcaster, teacher, and mother of three girls, who grew up in a multiracial family. She is the author of *Cora Cooks Pancit*, *Chasing God's Glory*, and her 2024 release *Kailani's Gift* coming in 2024.

be part of one's family. I think that's why I'm constantly trying to recreate that warmth and familiarity in my stories.

MS: Food is one of the lenses through which I see the world; it's such a great connector—an experience that connects one generation to another despite language barriers and age differences. Furthermore, breaking bread around the table together opens up opportunities to bond, laugh together, and share stories with one another.

In what ways do Filipino and Filipino American experiences enrich children's literature?

LB: We open up people's minds when we share our stories. To see books by Filipinos and Filipino-Americans growing in numbers is so inspiring. Our kids will grow up seeing themselves and feeling proud of their heritage. We also let other people learn more about us and I believe when one learns about another culture, it leads to better understanding and appreciation.

SL: There's so much value not just in kids seeing themselves as heroes and central figures in the stories they read, but in being able to be seen fully. I think there's so much to learn and understand from the Philippines' history and why our culture has taken the shape that it has—from the colonizations and the battles for independence, to the way that we as a people assimilate and take in what we can from all these different cultural influences; there's

so much value in preserving and sharing those stories, not just so that we can learn from past mistakes, but also so that we can build a better world for children everywhere.

MS: Readers are able to get to know aspects of Filipino and Filipino American culture in books that they might not encounter otherwise if there's not a sizable Filipino population where they live. Books provide so many insights into different cultures and can serve as springboards for further exploration, discussion, and getting to know other cultures. The unique qualities of Filipino and Filipino American culture can be experienced in books, as well as discovering commonalities with other cultures, leading to the realization that although we are all so different, we have so much in common.

DG: It's important for kids of all backgrounds to learn that the Asian American experience is not a monolith. Filipino culture is one of many Asian experiences. The Filipino American experience is even more nuanced depending on the generation.

Do you have any favorite Filipino crafts or traditions to share with children?

LB: I like the tradition of the Mano Po, a gesture that Nora does on the cover of *Sari-Sari Summers*, where she takes the hand of her lola and places it on her forehead. It is a traditional way of greeting our elders as a sign of respect. It is just so unique to us, I think. My

parents love it when my kids greet them with a kiss, hug, and the Mano Po. It somehow feels extra special.

SL: Storytelling was such a huge part of my childhood—not just the kind we read from books, but also the kind of myth and lore that was much better told in person, voices hushed in some dark corner. It was through my older cousins that I learned about many Filipino mythological creatures—how one became an *aswang* or how one could find a *kapre* smoking outside one's window, for instance, or how if you drove past Balete street after midnight, you could see the white lady whose soul is tied to the tree that the street is named after. I hope that kind of oral tradition continues—those stories made me even more curious about the world, and also more open to discovering magic and mystery in things that most people would consider ordinary.

MS: During my author visit presentations, I'm especially excited to share about the parol star lanterns in the September spread of *Maribel's Year*, along with details about how the Philippines has one of the longest holiday seasons in the world.

DG: Our family loves to cook together. We especially love rolling Filipino lumpia (egg rolls) and gathering at the table.

What advice would you give to children's librarians curating book collections/displays or creating library programs for AAPI Heritage Month?

LB: First of all, thank you to all librarians for what they do! I think they are already doing an amazing job displaying more diverse stories front and center. During AAPI Heritage Month, it may be good to invite more creators to their libraries and perhaps do an activity related to the books whether it's a craft, game, or recipe. It is also wonderful to see AAPI creators featured at all other times of the year.

SL: I hope that children's librarians everywhere are able to curate a collection of books that's reflective of how rich and diverse the world is. Yes, it's important to have books that function as mirrors which affirm our existence and highlight the value of our stories as they form part of the larger human experience, but libraries also carry the responsibility of having books that open windows into other people's worlds.

Children, especially, need to read diversely, not just to see common threads within our humanity, but also to celebrate and embrace the things that make us different. I hope more realize that AAPI books are for all children, not just those who identify as AAPI. That's true for all books that center different facets of diversity. They are there to teach kids empathy, acceptance, and understanding so that they can grow up to be the kind of adults who will help shape the world into a better place.

What's next for all of you?

LB: I illustrated two picture books (*At the End of the Day* by Lisl H. Detlefsen; *Kailani's Gift* by Dorina Gilmore-Young) and one early reader series, *Seashell Key* by Lourdes Heuer, coming out in Spring 2024.

SL: I'm in the middle of finishing several manuscripts.

MS: My next picture book comes out in 2025 from Viking and is about a father and son and their journey through the Philippines.

DG: *Kailani's Gift* will be released in April 2024. I also recently contributed to a cookbook project called *We Cook Filipino* with details here: <https://amzn.to/3MTBTRL>. &