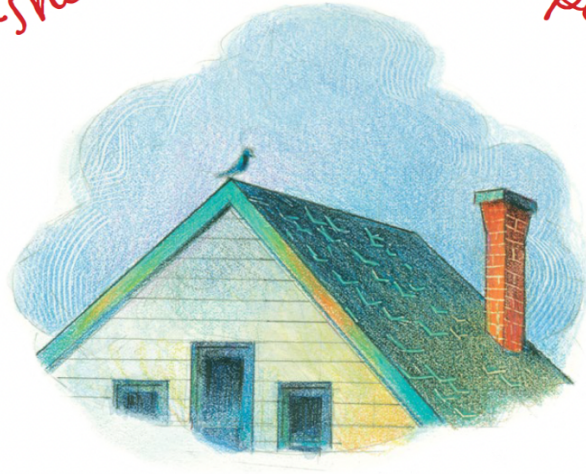


# *The Little House of Hope*



**BY  
TERRY CATASÚS JENNINGS**

**ILLUSTRATED BY  
RAÚL COLÓN**

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To turn a shabby little house into a welcoming home, all it takes is a big-hearted family eager to help others. . . and a little hope. La casita offers a home for those who don't have anywhere to go. It's a safe place in a new land, and Esperanza is always the first to welcome them. An inspiring, semi-autobiographical story of how immigrants can help each other find their footing in a new country, accompanied by the rich and vivid illustrations of award-winning artist Raúl Colón.

## **Reviews**

"Beautifully illustrated using Colón's trademark scratched-watercolor technique, this book reflects the stories of many a refugee family and humanizes a group of people often othered. In an age-appropriate way, it touches on the complicated reasons people leave their homes. Spanish words and hints of Cuban culture are scattered throughout." Kirkus

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### TERRY CATASÚS JENNINGS

#### Mini Bio:

Terry Catasús Jennings is a Cuban-American writer who immigrated to the United States after her father was jailed in Cuba by Fidel Castro's government. She was twelve at the time, and knew no English. *The Little House of Hope/La casita de esperanza* is a semi-autobiographical story in which immigrants give each other a helping hand in a new country. Her goal in life is to lead us to embrace our common humanity, as well as sing the praises of Cuban food.

#### Short Bio:

On September 11, 1961, Terry Catasús Jennings landed in the United States with her family after a short flight from Cuba. Their only possessions were \$50 and one suitcase each. Her family, including her father, who had been jailed during the Bay of Pigs invasion, was now in a free country. On September 12, Terry found herself enrolled in seventh grade, drowning in a sea of English she didn't understand. With time and help, the family thrived. Terry was a late bloomer in her writing career. The Definitely Dominguita series was named SLJ, Kirkus, and Parents Latina Best Books of 2021. Her biography in verse, *Pauli Murray, The Life of a Pioneering Feminist and Civil Rights Activist* released in February. In *The Little House of Hope*, illustrated by Pura Belpré medalist Raúl Colón, Jennings portrays her immigrant experience, showing how a helping hand in a new land can make a life-saving difference for a family. She encourages us all to embrace our common humanity. She lives in Reston, Virginia with her husband, and enjoys visiting with her five grandchildren, often encouraging them to bring their parents along. She is a member of SCBWI, Las Musas Latinx Collaborative and the Children's Book Guild of Washington, DC.

#### Longer Bio:

On September 11, 1961, Terry Catasús Jennings landed in the United States with her family after a short flight from Cuba. Their only possessions were \$50 and one suitcase each. Her family, including her father, who had been jailed during the Bay of Pigs invasion, was now in a free country. On September 12, Terry found herself enrolled in seventh grade drowning in a sea of English she didn't understand. Often being the only Cuban in her school—even through college—Terry knows what it's like to be the new kid on the block.

As a child, Terry dreamed of being an author, but she was dissuaded from a writing career by an insensitive teacher and instead majored in math and physics at the University of Richmond, in Virginia. She worked in finance for many years. Terry began writing in earnest when her children were in high school. She wrote for newspapers and magazines, as well as educational text for the Smithsonian and internet sources. Her first published books were science-based narrative non-fiction from Arbordale Publishing. She fulfilled her dream of having her fiction for children published with the Definitely Dominguita series. The series is about a Cuban American third grader who has modern day adventures while pretending to be characters in the classics her Abuela read to her as bedtime stories. The first book, *The Knight of the Cape* was named Best Books of 2021 by both School Library Journal, Kirkus, and Parents Latina. Released in February,

2022, her biography in verse—*Pauli Murray: The Life of a Pioneering Feminist and Civil Rights Activist* chronicles the life of the woman who was a pivotal force behind both the civil rights and the women's rights movements. With *The Little House of Hope*, Jennings portrays her immigrant experience in the hopes of showing our common humanity and emphasizing how a helping hand in a new land can make a life-saving difference for a family. Terry is delighted that *The Little House* was illustrated by Pura Belpré medalist, Raúl Colón, who captured her father's image without ever seen a picture.

Terry lives with her husband in Reston, Virginia and enjoys spending winters hiking and biking in Southern Utah. She enjoys visiting with her five grandchildren and often encourages them to bring their parents along. She is a member of SCBWI, Las Musas Latinx Collaborative and the Children's Book Guild of Washington, DC.

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## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **PRAISE FOR THE LITTLE HOUSE OF HOPE**

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT WRITING THE BOOK

*The Little House of Hope* has been five years in the making. It was born in a moment of anger and dismay. A realtor friend told me that he never rented to Mexicans because they would live four families to a house and always destroyed the property. At first, I was baffled. How could he say that? More importantly, how could he say something like that in front of me? Did he forget I was Cuban? He was so wrong! I tend to chew on things that bother me, and I did. And then I remembered. Wait! I was one of those immigrants who lived in a multi-family house when I first came to the United States. Two of my uncles had come to the United States before we had. We lived with one for a couple of months and then we moved in with the other for almost a year. In this second house, which was in Largo, Florida, there were twelve of us during the week—three families--and fourteen of us on weekends, when my aunt's brother's sons came to stay with us. We would have been homeless in the United States if they hadn't taken us in. My parents didn't have jobs. We had \$50 for our whole family.

What that realtor got so, so wrong, is that the parents all eventually got jobs—even if they were a shadow of the jobs they had had in Cuba—were able to get homes of their own, all the kids went to college, got jobs. We all became citizens. And we never trashed that house or any other home where we lived.

What that realtor didn't understand, is that we didn't come to the United States on a whim, or to better our economic standing. We came to the United States because our lives in Cuba were untenable. Because in Cuba we were in danger. This was a very difficult and heart-wrenching decision that our parents made. We left everything behind, including our grandmother, who died twelve years later without any of us seeing her again.

Our realtor friend wasn't alone in his beliefs about immigrants. I had to do something. And to me, the best way to change the conversation is to write a book. It may not get published, but if it does, it has the chance to change hearts and minds.

I wrote the book very quickly, it sort of wrote itself. Normally I have gobs and gobs of rewrites and versions, and my agent sends a picture book manuscript back a couple of times. But this manuscript was more about tweaking than about rewriting. There was a version where the evil American neighbors were just miserable people—that one was nixed by my husband and one of my critique partners, but the story stayed pretty much the same. It is grounded on the truth of our experience, but some things are fictionalized. When I got the manuscript to my agent, Natalie Lakosil, we only had one rewrite, and I was delighted that Neal Porter agreed with us. He expressed interest within two hours of Natalie sending out the submission and made an offer within two weeks.

Once we started the editing process, Neal and I batted around some ideas. We added the evil Americans back in, and took them out again. Instead of making room for more family, which is what actually happened in the real casita, we had them make room for other immigrants in need whom they really don't know. The original story spoke of the old country, the final version is very much about Cuba (and this just warms my heart). In the end, what Neal's magic helped me find was that the heart of the story was hope. The name of the protagonist changed to

Esperanza, which means hope in Spanish. When that happened, I knew that we had something very special.

Of course, Neal had a vision for this book, and that vision included the wonderful Raúl Colón as an illustrator. We had to wait a bit for Raúl, but Raúl captured the people. They actually look Cuban. They look like my family and friends did. The father in this book looks like my father and Raúl and I have never met, nor has he seen pictures of my father. His illustrations are exquisite. The book is a happy book. I know that anyone who sees it laying on a table will have to open it. And then, when they do, they will be able to find the message of hope.

### **Additional Questions and Answers:**

#### **When did you become interested in writing?**

I've wanted to write since I was a young child. I wanted to be like Jo March, in little women. I even lived in a house with an attic for about a year and went up to the attic to write. I wrote a few very forgettable stories as a young girl. But in eleventh grade, my English teacher singled me out in front of the class for writing words she "knew" could not be part of my vocabulary in an assigned essay. She accused me of using the Thesaurus because I was Cuban. I hadn't, but I was humiliated. I had signed up for her creative writing class my senior year to try to figure out if I, should, indeed try to become a writer. I took myself out of that class. I eventually decided to major in Math in college. My math teacher, Mrs. Vaughan, had always been supportive and she believed in me. I ended up attending her Alma Mater, the University of Richmond.

It is also important to understand that my parents would not have approved of an occupation as insecure as writing. The combination of those two things steered me toward a more secure career, but stories never stopped rolling around in my head. When my children were of an age when their schools no longer needed me as a volunteer, I decided to give writing a chance.

#### **What sparks your creativity?**

What sparks my creativity is getting the idea of a character in a situation. I am often very creative while I am walking or riding my bike. Or working in the garden. I can work out dialogue and plot problems while I exercise.

#### **How did your experience as a young immigrant shape your life and your writing?**

As a young person, when I first came to the United States, I experienced some subtle and some not so subtle forms of discrimination. Those experiences, while nothing like what we see now, were hurtful. Trying to avoid discrimination shaped all my choices in my early life. I decided to learn English as well as I possibly could, assimilate and lose my "Cubanness" in order to be accepted. That need not have happened. I believe I can speak eloquently in both English and Spanish on the need to impress readers with the humanity of each of us. On how at our core, we are all the same. How the sum of small, thoughtless acts can change the trajectory of a life—never mind the impact of the systemic racism that afflicts our society.



### **What is most rewarding and/or challenging about writing children's books?**

The reward is connecting with a reader and making a difference. My hope is to reach children and cement the belief that there are no "others." That we are all the same—human beings. The protagonist of my chapter book series, Dominguita, is every child. Whether she is American, Cuban or the descendant of a purple popsicle, she loves and misses her grandmother, tries to manipulate her brother, flirts with disobeying her parents, loves sweets, has moments of brilliance and moments of sheer folly. Sometimes she's good, sometimes she's not so good. Sometimes she gets in trouble. She is just as human as any of her readers. She is just a kid who happens to live in a household where black beans and rice with a side of plantains are a staple.

In *The Little House of Hope* readers can learn about the reasons why immigrants may come to this country, how difficult an immigrant's life can be, and how a helping hand can make all the difference in the world.

From a craft standpoint I love seeing a story take shape and finally say exactly what I meant it to say. I love writing so much, that I see very few challenges. I guess the hardest thing for me is to write in a voice appropriate for the age group.

### **When did you first realize that you were not thought of as equal to Americans?**

I became a very good friend of the daughter of a Girl Scout leader when I first came to the United States. She invited me to join the troop. On our first camp out, I expected to share her tent. Instead, an African American girl and I were put in a tent by ourselves, while all the other ten girls slept in two six-person tents. It became clear to us both that we were considered "other" and less than the rest of the troop.

### **Why did your family come to the United States?**

An autocrat, Fidel Castro, was allowed to take power over the government of Cuba in January 1, 1959. Soon after taking power, he allowed no dissent, freedom of speech, or freedom of religion. He wrecked Cuba's economy and became a puppet of the Soviet Union. At first, my father was not allowed to leave the country because he worked for the Cuban equivalent of the Federal Reserve System, but in April of 1961, he was jailed during the Bay of Pigs invasion. People yelled for him to be executed by firing squad behind our house for the two nights he was in jail. Luckily, he was freed by Ché Guevara after three days. We came to the United States soon after that with \$50 for our whole family to begin a new life. We lived with one uncle for a while and a second uncle for a while longer. We were one of those families who lived twelve or fourteen people in the same house. My father finally found a job at the Richmond Federal Reserve Bank two years after we reached the United States. It was not at all at the level at which he worked in Cuba, but it allowed our family to thrive.



### **How long did it take you to write the story?**

I began writing the story on April 10, 2016. My agent, Natalie Lakosil, submitted the story to Neal in February, 2017, and he e-mailed to say that he was interested right away. Two weeks later, we had an offer.

### **What was the favorite line you wrote?**

The description of *La Casita*. is one of my favorite parts of the book. “It smelled like old wet socks. It had rickety, tattered furniture that came from a church basement.”

Also I love the line about Esperanza making a collage of pictures of home and in it, she put her name, both in English and in Spanish, because that is what they had found in their new home. (The name is Hope.)

### **Were you a reader?**

Learning to read in Spanish is not difficult. It is totally phonetic and there are only 27 or 28 sounds (don’t hold me to that, but it’s a very small number). I learned to read when I was three. My mother was sewing on her pedal sewing machine and I would ask her the sounds of the letters on the bubbles in the Sunday comics (Cuban). I remember that vividly. I read for myself from that point on, often staying under the covers with a flashlight to read. As I got older, my father, who was a banker, gave me an allowance. I can’t remember how much it was. The only thing I had to do to earn it was to keep an account of what I spent on a green accountant’s sheet. It was easy. Every Saturday I spent \$0.25 for the movies and \$0.05 for a Sugar Daddy which lasted the whole movie. The rest I spent on books. There was a book kiosk about two blocks from my house and I would go on author binges. The owner of the bookstore often ordered the books that I wanted. It was easy to keep track of that.

Once Castro came and things got bad, my mother decided to quit work. She was a professor at a teacher’s college, and she really couldn’t NOT work. So she volunteered at my school. I was reading so much that she convinced the Mother Superior at my school to tell me that I should stop reading and instead have more friends. My books were my friends and Mother Superior couldn’t dissuade me of that.

### **What was the hardest part about editing?**

Editing with Neal Porter was a dream. He is very quick. He knows what he wants and he helps you understand that that’s the right thing to do. You know, when you work with Neal Porter, you mostly say, “Yes, Neal,” because he knows so much. And he would come to a phone call with exactly what he wanted to do, and let me think that it had been my idea all along. If I had a good reason, however, Neal listened and most of the time he agreed. In the end, we have a wonderful book.

**What was the most surprising part of this journey?**

When I wrote this book, I wrote it as taking place back in 1961. When Neal read the book, he saw it as taking place right now. It was surprising, but also made me feel great. The experience that we captured is timeless and I hope universal. Also seeing the picture of the father that Raúl Colón drew, made me cry. It was just like my father.

**Talk about the translation of *La Casita***

When Neal asked me if I would like to do the translation, I was blown away. I had wanted to translate some of my science based creative non-fiction, and I was not allowed to do it. I felt like someone took my child away from me to raise. The best thing was that Neal assured me from the beginning that someone would look over my shoulder to make sure the grammar and spelling and usage was correct. This was very helpful, because I left Cuba when I was twelve years old. Although I read a lot and I was a good student, my Spanish is still not the greatest. But having the opportunity to translate *La Casita* was another dream come true.

I translated it using my “Cuban” Spanish. I had a couple of my older cousins who were older when they came to the United States, and they weighed in on the translation. One criticism from one of my cousins was that I had used many Cuban terms. I had used guagua, for bus, instead of autobus; medias, for socks, instead of calcetines. What was so wonderful is that Neal let all those Cubanisms stand. And Eida del Risco, my translation godmother, was supportive and flexible.

The two books are very parallel. Sometimes we even changed the original completed manuscript in English because there was a nuance in the translated work that was not parallel. There were four of us involved in the translation—Neal, Eida, xxx and I. And together, I think we ended up with a wonderful translation.

## **Other Published Work:**

### **Pauli Murray: The Life of a Pioneering Feminist and Civil Rights Activist (2022)**

Biography in verse

Little Bee Books

### **The Definitely Dominguita Series (2021)**

Chapter Book Series

*The Knight of the Cape*

SLJ, Kirkus, and Parents Latina Best Books of 2021

*Captain Dom's Treasure*

*All For One*

*Sherlock Dom*

Aladdin / Simon and Schuster

### **Hydroelectric Power**

Non-fiction

ABDO Publishing (2018)

### **Vivian and the Legend of the Hoodoos (2017)**

Narrative non-fiction picture book

Arbordale Publishing

### **Magnetic Magic (2016)**

Narrative non-fiction picture book

Arbordale Publishing

NSTA Recommended

### **Sounds of the Savanna (2015)**

Narrative non-fiction picture Book

Arbordale Publishing

NSTA Recommended

Bank Street Center for Children's Literature—Best Children's Book of the Year

Keystone to Reading Elementary Book Award List

### **The Women's Liberation Movement: 1960-1990 (2013)**

Non-fiction

Mason Crest

ALA's Amelia Bloomer Project Recommended Feminist Literature 2014-2015

**Gopher to the Rescue! A Volcano Recovery Story (2012)**

Narrative non-fiction picture book

Sylvan Dell Publishers (Now Arbordale Publishing)

2013 Outstanding Science Trade Book – National Science Teacher’s Association (NSTA) and Children’s Book Council.

2013 New Books for Missouri Students

2014-2015 South Carolina Book Awards Program Selection

Educational Content for The Smithsonian Science Education Center and other educational publications.

Articles in *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Long Island News Day*.

Weekly humor column for *The Reston Connection*, in Reston, Virginia.

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