



THE (RE)DISCOVERY OF CULTURAL HERITAGE THROUGH CHILDLIKE WONDER TALES

AN INTERVIEW WITH RHODE MONTIJO

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Rhode Montijo is an American creator and illustrator, whose diverse work spans from children's books to quirky artifacts and Halloween-inspired oddities. His "fantasmical world" is an articulated universe in which the ambiances of childhood wonder tales blend with an underlying gothic mood, exploiting a variety of genres and media. Aside from his prolific activity as children's book author and illustrator¹, Montijo has participated in projects for animated series as character designer, as well as co-created the viral, award-winning animated web series *Happy Tree Friends* (mostly produced by Mondo Media, 1999–2016). Composed by short stories introduced by a children's book opening trope, the Flash-animated series incorporates cute anthropomorphic animal characters, their everyday adventures and consequent extremely violent outcomes, challenging some of the conventional canons of children's animation and delivering a rather unique campy, dark-humored product. Samples of Montijo's artwork can be found on [his personal website](#) and [his online portfolio](#) provides a taste of his versatile art, configuring a rather peculiar fantasmical world indeed. As far as comic books are concerned, he's the creator of mini-series *Pablo's Inferno* (1999–2000), a supernatural adventure in the underworld protagonized by a child right after his untimely violent death. The comic was granted the Xeric Foundation's publishing award in 1999 and was published independently in the following months.

¹ Among publications as individual creator, it is worth mentioning his book series titled *The Gumazing Gum Girl!* (2013–present), as well as his acclaimed *Cloud Boy* (2006) and *The Halloween Kid* (2010). As illustrator, Montijo worked on the *Melvin Beederman Superhero* chapter book series, written by Greg Trine (2006–2010).



ANNA MARTA MARINI: You've created a variety of characters, many of them Halloween-inspired, that populate your fantasmical world. Your creations hold an intrinsic mood that to an extent I find in Pablo's story as well: there's a pervasive gothic ambiance—sometimes verging on macabre and eerie—and, at the same time, an underlying sense of childlike wonder. What are your main sources of inspiration in this respect?

RHODE MONTIJO: I appreciate your insight and analysis. I am inspired by stories that are off the beaten path or that tackle the supernatural. Perhaps I can trace back to early stories that were told to me by family that stuck with me. What immediately comes to mind is the tooth fairy, which in Mexico (perhaps regional) is a rat that buys your teeth and not a magical fairy². We grew up with "El Ratón" and it was spooky to imagine this thing going under your pillow at night to buy children's teeth! Stories like this sparked my curiosity immensely, and having a visual mind, I of course visualized these spooky and quirky scenes.

Montijo's Mexican American heritage emerges throughout his work, and in particular in his children's books series *The Gumazing Gum Girl!* and his illustrated album *Skeletown*, as well as in *Pablo's Inferno*. The comic book series' articulated references to Aztec mythology and cosmogony represent one of its most evident features, and the reconstruction of the protagonist's heritage is the pivot of the whole story. After his sudden death, little Pablo ends up in Hell, where he meets ancient god Quetzal and from where he'll embark in a quest across the underworld to discover his heritage.

ANM: From butterflies to the reproduction of Mexica representations of a few deities, I find the reinterpretation of Aztec tropes and themes very effective. They are coherent with historiographic literature and, at the same time, transformed to suit your narrative without distorting them. Why did you decide to delve into Aztec mythology, as well as Mexican folktale, and how did you work on each character you chose?

RM: Thank you for the kind words. *Pablo's Inferno* started as a parody of Dante's *Inferno*. Between books #1 and #2, I took a fateful trip to deep down Mexico and came back extremely inspired, not only with Aztec mythology, but with legends and folktales of Mexico. I grew up going to Mexicali, where my parents are from, but this was the first time I travelled deep into Mexico with my cousins and aunt who lived in Mexico City. I learned a lot on that trip and thought there were so

² The fantasy character embodied by the Tooth Fairy in English-speaking countries exists in many a culture and with different configurations, taking the shape of a mouse especially in the folklore connected with Romance languages (e.g. the French and Italian versions of it, as well as the Latin American and Spanish ones). Despite its origin in the Spanish tale protagonized by a small mouse called Pérez, in Mexico it is simply known as *el ratón de los dientes*.



many amazing things that's never been explored in comic books at that time (around 1995). I knew that I wanted the protagonist to be of Mexican descent—something which I was hungry for when I was growing up and didn't see in comic books or cartoons—so Pablo was born from that hunger. If you look closely, a little detail is that he wears the colors of the Mexican flag. The Spider Women (the weavers), Tlaloc, Huehuetéotl, Coyoacán and the town's legend, the messages through the cracks of the glass of a saint, the underground caverns for priests escaping the crusades, the Aztec numbering system, and more, all came from that trip throughout Mexico. As for the characters, young Pablo is the catalyst that puts all the pieces in motion upon his sudden passing. He is innocent but learns a lot in his journey and the reader is seeing the unseen world through Pablo's eyes. Quetzal's fate is linked to Pablo. Quetzal is an ancient Aztec God who lost his way long ago. He becomes the mentor seeking redemption and who teaches Pablo (and the reader) about his past and his people's past.

Quetzal and Pablo are co-protagonists in this underworld adventure and bring very different yet synergic moods. Right from his first appearance, Quetzal (aside from being rooted in Mexica myth) seems to be charged with repentance and the need of redemption. On the other hand, Pablo is a fresh, brave child character relentlessly facing the challenges that his new condition as a spirit presents him with.

ANM: How did you build the two characters? Did you put anything of yourself or with reference to real life into them?

RM: They say there's a bit of you in all that you create. I think Pablo is open to learning about his culture and Quetzal is the keeper of knowledge and a link to the past. Each holds a key to a bigger puzzle. Together, the two are powerful in that they represent a team-up of the past and present. Visually, originally, Pablo's design was inspired by PRECIOUS MOMENTS figurines as a contrast to the initial spooky surroundings in the comic books. Quetzal, although he remained nameless for many years, is a character that I've had for many years in various forms- but he took final shape in *Pablo's Inferno*.

Within the series, book #3 is built around references to lucha libre. Pablo and Quetzal encounter a character inspired by legendary Mexican luchadores, who will help them out and face monsters remindful of the *cine de luchadores* film tradition. Furthermore, El Calambre brings to the story an evident connection with the ethos intrinsic to the lucha libre mythic imaginary, based on loyalty and heroism.

ANM: What is your relationship with lucha libre?

RM: I grew up watching El Santo El Enmascarado de Plata films at my grandmother's house in Mexicali. These movies left an impression on me. Movies like *El Santo*



contra las Momias de Guanajuato were like horror movies mixed with superhero films and I was mesmerized. And unlike superheroes in the United States, in Mexico, there was no alter-egos. Batman was Bruce Wayne, Superman was Clark Kent, but in Mexico, El Santo was El Santo and I thought that was amazing as a kid. El Calambre, the undead masked luchador in *Pablo's Inferno* book #3 was heavily inspired by El Santo!

In book #2, Hell is described as a fittingly horrific place where Pablo meets known figures such as psychopomp Charon. Despite an underlying humor fueled by the child's irreverence, his passage here is characterized by Dantesque moods and a grotesque carnival setting in which Quetzal is introduced.

ANM: What were your main references for the construction of the inferno where Pablo starts his afterlife journey?

RM: In book #1, if I remember correctly, the carnival as Limbo was my friend and original publisher, Dan Chapman's, concoction. He tried to imagine a place that might be fun initially but could easily turn nightmarish the longer one stays. Dan helped me write the first book because I was not yet confident as a writer. After my Mexico trip, I came back inspired and wrote books #2 and all the way to the end.

As you said, Pablo is the catalyst that puts all the pieces in motion. I find that one of the qualities your child characters often show is a definite agency and throughout the story they develop in insight, rather than acquiring an agency they didn't have before. In some cases, their adventures follow a reconstruction of their own cultural heritage roots, a particularly interesting take considering that the author himself grew up in the US, where cultural assimilation has been structural and any cultural heritage that is "other" can be object of stereotyping and commodification.

AMM: For *The Gumazing Gum Girl!* series, you've built a Latinx context, occasional dialogues in Spanish, luchadores, and Mexican heritage again. Gabby too reconnects with her cultural roots in *Cover Blown*, taking a trip to Mexico with her family. Although the premises are very different, is there any parallel between her story and Pablo's? Based on your own reflections, would you say that a first-hand experience is a fundamental key to open the door of one's own heritage?

RM: I cannot say what is fundamental for each individual person to connect to their culture. I feel that everything and anything is a first-hand experience for someone. A connection to heritage can be fueled by so many things, it could be a grandparent's story, it can be music, food, language-anything can create a connection to one's heritage. For Pablo and Gabby (Gum Girl), going to Mexico deepened their connection to their Mexican heritage. Pablo and Gabby added a



layer of connectedness and deepened their view of who they are in relation to their culture and saw that they are a part of something bigger.

[Spoiler alert: the closing question describes the ending of *Pablo's Inferno*!]

ANM: The ending of Quetzal and Pablo's story is quite compelling. A shapeshifting devil—that thus seems to represent all evil—is defeated by the protagonists and turns into a *chapulín*³, while his demons confronted by ancestral spirits. Even though Pablo doesn't go back to the world of the living, there is a sense of rebirth thanks to the return of the rain, as well as the writing work Quetzal undertakes to perpetuate ancient knowledge. Can you tell something on how you decided to end Pablo's story this way?

RM: I knew from the start that I didn't want a cookie-cutter or traditional ending where everything wraps up nicely. I think a lot of readers were hoping that Pablo would get his life back. That would be great, of course, but I thought it would be powerful if Pablo and Quetzal remained in the spirit-world and aided the living. Quetzal, becomes the keeper of the knowledge of the past documents it (that he saves from burning) and keeps them in the library on top of the town's mountain that they end up residing in. He also begins to write history through his point of view, as most of Aztec recordings that survived were documented by the Spaniards. Pablo helps re-plant the corn, life-blood of his ancestors and his people today, continuing growth and fuel for the future. The two become protectors in the spirit-world and work together to keep the balance.

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³ In pre-Hispanic Mexican cultures—and in particular the Mexica, based in the area where Mexico City is located—the grasshopper (or *chapulín*) represented supernatural powers, aside from being a traditional staple food still consumed to the present day.



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