

The Songs in Our Stories

by Alina Celeste Hevia

The [oldest known lullaby](#) is etched onto a clay tablet. It is written in cuneiform and was crooned to babies in ancient Babylon. Like many folk lullabies, it's a little threatening. The baby is warned that its crying has woken the household god, and if it doesn't stop and go to sleep the god will eat it up. Frankly, that's nicer than some of the things I have gently promised recalcitrant babies.

There is something reassuring, though, in the idea that the act of caring for a young child hasn't really changed much in the last 2000 years. The feelings of joy and frustration are a perpetual part of the baby experience. So are lullabies, stories, and lack of sleep. Because of this, lullabies, as a genre, are deeply embedded in the human psyche. In fact, some [cognitive scientists](#) in England published a study in 2018 in which they asked the subjects to identify songs from 86 different societies by their function, i.e., "songs to soothe a baby" and "songs to dance to." The lullabies were among the easiest to identify, across the board. As far as I know, there is not a culture without them.

Lullabies tend to share traits across all known cultures: They are typically simple, repetitive, and soothing. They often have a higher pitch than other songs, and a rocking, lilting feel. In western cultures, they tend to have a 6/8 or 3/4 meter, also known as waltz time, a rhythm almost impossible not to sway to. Since so many of us discover that a swaying or rocking motion does the trick, it makes sense we'd build that into our songs.



*Folklorist Atahualpa
Yupanqui*

Most cultures also seem to contain a vast repertoire of celebratory (wonderful baby!) and threatening (go to sleep or X will eat you) songs that shift and change and yet endure for generations. One [South American classic](#), for example, collected by renowned folklorist Atahualpa Yupanqui, tells the baby that if it doesn't sleep the white devil will eat its



*Illustration by
Brooke O'Neill*



The Songs in Our Stories

feet but, you know, lovingly. Regardless of the lyrics, lullabies live on and are often loaded with feelings of safety and peace, long after the words have lost all meaning.

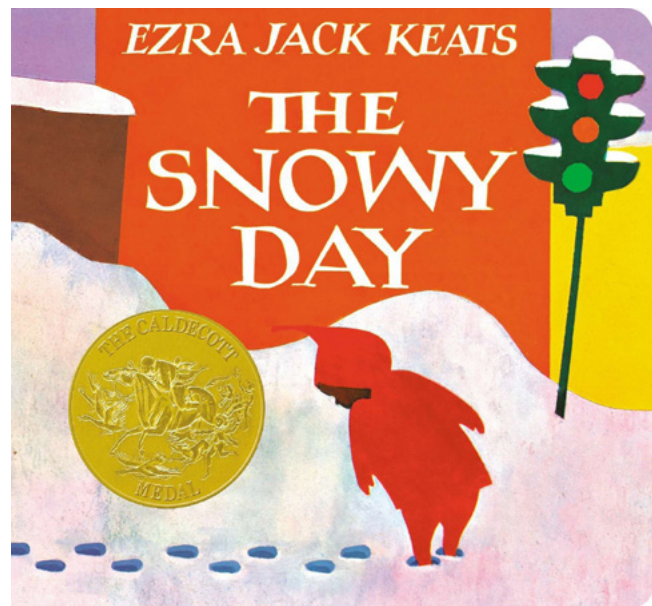
I suspect this is partly because lullabies don't just lull babies to sleep. They create a relationship between the singer and the audience. They often tell stories or give voice to feelings the caregiver needs to express within a context that feels safe and natural, or they simply serve as a more artful appeal to the baby than a gently growled, "JUST SLEEP, DAMN YOU." In other words, they soothe the singer as much as they do the singer's audience. They are a ritual in and of themselves, carried through generations of memory and hardship and love.

Lullabies aren't the only foundational form of the early childhood repertoire. Most grownups discover early on that if you aren't making noise, the baby is. Any adult who finds themselves in the company of a young child often discovers that vocal and auditory interaction is the path of least resistance. Babies crave it and often reward their caregivers with that most magical sound: the baby laugh. So we sing, rhyme, clap, and babble away.



Margaret Wise Brown and her classic children's book, Goodnight Moon.

Because of this, learning through music is most children's earliest educational experience. It remains a highly effective technique throughout our lives. I can remember only one equation from my years studying math. My tenth grade teacher taught us to solve the quadratic equation to the tune of "Row Your Boat." To this day, it's the only math problem I can successfully perform without using my fingers. If you ever need to find the roots of something (lullaby or equation), I'm your girl.



The advent of the picture book, rather than diminishing the role of lullabies and nursery rhymes, has given these small, timeless traditions new voice. Trailblazing educator and writer Lucy Sprague Mitchell once said that "communication is not the earliest impulse that leads to the use of language." What young children responded to, she observed, was "rhythm, sound quality, and patterns of sound." Not surprising, given the soundtrack of most early childhoods is a collection of singing, rhyming, and clapping. The importance of the rhythm inherent in language is key in the most enduring picture books, such as *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown. The hypnotic meter of that classic has been written about and examined often since its publication in 1947. Other classics share an undeniable rhythm and flow. Even a book like *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats, which is neither rhyming nor obviously rhythmic, has an engrossing pull created by the words as they are read aloud. With books written in verse, the connection is even more obvious.

After children grow too old for lullabies, they move on to other forms. For most of human history this included a repertoire of folk songs. People sang, played music, and told stories for countless generations around fires, hearths, and tables. The weight of so many voices and a human preference for predictable patterns means those forms and tropes are still ubiquitous in music today. Thousands



The Songs in Our Stories

of years of folk songs, ballads, and epic poetry also created a standard for verse. That standard has transferred seamlessly into picture books.

My first deliberate look into the connection between folk music and picture books was prompted by Chicago educator Brigid Finucane, who taught a workshop on musical storybooks. I was struck by the obviousness of her assertion that, by their very nature, picture books in verse lend themselves to folk music.

Part of this easy partnership is due to the physical structure of picture books. The pages of most modern picture books come in multiples of 4 or 8. Most western folk songs are in 4/4 time. The standard 24 to 32 pages become that many measures in a song. Music and language developed to support each other and that relationship made its way onto the page.

I challenge you to try this: Pick up a rhyming picture book in your home. Any one will do. As you read through it, try singing the words to a common tune. Not all will work. It can take a little massaging, but it's amazing how easy it is to find a match, once you are looking for one. Some of my favorite examples are:

- *Oh, No!* by Candace Fleming and illustrated by Eric Rohmann, sung to the centuries-old classic "Froggie Went a-Courtin"
- *I Like Myself!* by Karen Beaumont and illustrated by David Catrow, sung to "Skip to My Lou"
- *Welcome to the Party* by Gabrielle Union and illustrated by Ashley Evans sung to "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"

The language carries the music with it into the world of the book. One of the more magical aspects of this relationship is that most of these books can be sung to several different melodies. For example, *One Red Rooster* by Kathleen Sullivan Carroll and illustrated by Suzette Barbier can be sung to "Skip to My Lou" and "London Bridge is Falling Down." In fact, whenever I teach this method in workshops, I encourage teachers and librarians to try several different melodies when singing their books and to choose the one that works for them.

It is a slightly mystical process. You'll hear a story sung to one melody, but when you try it yourself, another melody may flow most naturally for you. Perhaps it has to do with how your

brain processes language, perhaps it is simply because you know one melody better than the other. What this means is that each sung book becomes a unique, personal experience informed by the reader.

As my work began to involve more Spanish language and bilingual programming, I became curious as to whether the same relationship between folk songs and picture books existed in Spanish, especially in the case of a translation.

It does.

- *Buenos Dias/Good Morning* by Meritxell Martí and illustrated by Xavier Salomó can be sung to the tune of "Arroz Con Leche."
- *¡Me gusta como soy!* by Karen Beaumont and illustrated by David Catrow can be sung to "Los Pollitos Dicen."
- *La Llama Llama Rojo Pijama* by Anna Dewdney can be sung to "Los Elefantes."
- *El Artista Que Pintó un Caballo Azul* by Eric Carle can be sung to "Que Linda La Manita."

Not every picture book can be sung, of course. Many cannot, nor should they be. I see the ones that can as a thread between the old and the new. Given the prevalence of rhyming picture books, that thread isn't going anywhere. It just adds to the tapestry begun with a clay tablet in Babylon. 🌟

ALINA CELESTE HEVIA is an educator, musician, and writer from Miami, Florida. Her YouTube channel, Alina Celeste Music, won the Parents' Choice Gold Award in 2018 and keeps kids laughing and learning with one new video a week. With her partner, Hamlet "Mi Amigo" Meneses, she teaches, performs, and presents workshops for educators, librarians, and children living all over the world. Find them at gocreativeprograms.com. She is a Jubilation Foundation Fellow of 2020 and won the SCBWI Illinois Many Voices Prize in 2020 for an unpublished manuscript. When she's not writing, teaching, or singing, she is cooking! Be sure to reach out if you want the best sweet potato brownie recipe ever.