

"Outstanding Book of the Year." —*The New York Times*



Nilda

NICHOLASA MOHR

"*Nilda* is a singular achievement: powerful, unflinching, wise and a landmark in Puerto Rican diasporic literature. One of the books that drove me to the page and that inspires me to this day."

—Junot Díaz, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning
The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

Nilda

ALSO BY NICHOLASA MOHR

A Matter of Pride and Other Stories

In Nueva York

Rituals of Survival: A Woman's Portfolio

Nilda

NICHOLASA MOHR

FOREWORD BY ALMA FLOR ADA



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*Dedicated, with love, to the children of El Barrio—
and of the many barrios all over the world.*

THE CHILDREN

*Why do you go so far
from the little square?*

MYSELF

*I go in search of magicians
and of princesses!*

THE CHILDREN

*Who showed you the path
of the poets?*

MYSELF

*The fountain and the stream
of the antique song.*

THE CHILDREN

*Do you go far, very far
from the sea and the earth?*

MYSELF

*My heart of silk
is filled with lights,
with lost bells,
with lilies and bees.
I will go very far,
farther than those hills,
farther than the seas,
close to the stars,
to beg Christ the Lord
to give back the soul I had
of old, when I was a child,
ripened with legends,
with a feathered cap
and a wooden sword.*

THE CHILDREN

*You leave us singing
in the little square,
clear streams,
serene fountain!*

—Federico García Lorca

Foreword

Drawing on her personal experiences of growing up in New York during the Second World War period, Nicholasa Mohr has created one of the fundamental Latino novels for young adults.

Although the Spanish-speaking world has a very strong literary legacy, a body of Hispanic literature for children and young adults in the United States was almost nonexistent for many years. And, for a number of reasons, a catalog of Hispanic children's literature grew slowly. One significant factor was the language. There were not many avenues in the United States to publish books in Spanish. There was also very little inclination on the part of publishers to produce books in English about Latino topics.

Mohr's work is commendable because she was one of the first to write about Latinos in the United States. As one of the earliest books depicting the lives of young Latinos, *Nilda* was very relevant at the time of its publication in 1974; it was a precursor for all Latino young adult novels that followed in its footsteps.

Today, *Nilda* continues to be a significant book for its literary merits: the strength of the narrative, the highly descriptive background and the realistic characters, particularly the unforgettable Nilda. This engaging story has met the highest test: once started, readers will feel compelled to finish it, and they will soon realize that it has become a part of their own lives.

The world in which we follow Nilda is one of hardship and scarcity, of free summer camps more akin to reform school than summer joy. It is also a world of confusing beliefs, of untold secrets and half-learned truths; it is a world where justice seems to have no presence and institutions that should offer support abuse their power and demean the persons they are supposed to

protect. But though the outside world is harsh, Nilda is fortunate to be surrounded by a large and loving—if somewhat eccentric—family that encourages her artistic abilities. Her friends, too, are a source of joy and fun as they engage in typical childhood mischief.

Today's reader will feel that while the novel's setting has undergone significant changes, many of the social issues persist. The pivotal themes have been masterfully presented and remain relevant to this day: coming of age, finding a place within one's own family, sorting out contradictory feelings and accepting in those around us their limitations as well as their strengths. This novel is very powerful.

Arte Público Press' decision to introduce a new edition of *Nilda* is a testament to its quality and importance in American literature.

Alma Flor Ada
University of San Francisco

Preface

In 1972, I was a working visual artist when Ellen Rudin, Vice President and Editor in Chief of Harper & Row children's books, asked to see my portfolio. She needed an artist to design a book jacket featuring multicultural poetry. Although she liked my portfolio, it did not suit her project. When I asked Ellen for her opinion of my written childhood recollections, she graciously agreed to look at my writing.

Weeks earlier, my art agent, together with a collector, asked me to write fifty pages about growing up Latina in New York City. They were interested because my recent artwork included graffiti about injustice, violence and prejudice. He reminded me that there were few books about growing up Latina and assured me they would find a writer who could convert my words into professional prose. Reluctantly, I agreed.

Writing came easily for me. My older brother Vincent taught me to read and write when I was four years old. Consequently, assisting others with documents, reviews, essays and letters were tasks I'd undertaken ever since childhood. But writing about my life was tougher than I imagined because traumatic childhood events began to surface. But I persisted, transferring the same resolve I utilized in my artwork over to my writing. I discovered that the creative process was the same regardless of the discipline. Finally, by approaching fiction in the same way that I did visual art, I was able to complete those fifty pages.

I soon sat dumbfounded as I listened to my agent reprimand me and insist I get beyond childish memories because such sentimental recollections would never sell. Both he and my collector acknowledged my flair for words, but importuned that I

write about factual issues: gang wars, police brutality, prostitution and other real-life problems in the Puerto Rican community. They urged me to try again.

My humiliation was overwhelming. I'd written with honesty and integrity of all that I knew to be valuable and noble without whitewashing only to be ignorantly mistreated yet again by those outside my own community. My agent did very well by me both economically and professionally and so I gathered my will power. I reminded him that I was married with two young sons living a quiet life in the suburbs. I'd never been in a gang or arrested and suggested they look for their candidate inside a women's prison. He ignored my words, urging me to try again. Ultimately, I placated him and said I'd reconsider.

Back home I hugged my children, thanked my husband for his support and shoved my rejected manuscript inside a drawer. I had forgotten all about Harper & Row when two weeks later I received Ellen's letter requesting I write a novel for young adults based on those fifty pages. Terms for a contract and an advance were included. That summer I was accepted at The MacDowell Colony—a retreat for creative artists in Peterborough, New Hampshire. There, in the quiet woods, I wrote the first ninety pages of *Nilda*. I finished the book that fall.

It was launched with great success in 1974, and my writing career began in earnest.

I wish to express my thanks to Arte Público Press and specifically to Nicolás Kanellos and Marina Tristán for the release of this new edition of *Nilda*.

Nicholasa Mohr
New York City
December 20, 2010

Nilda

