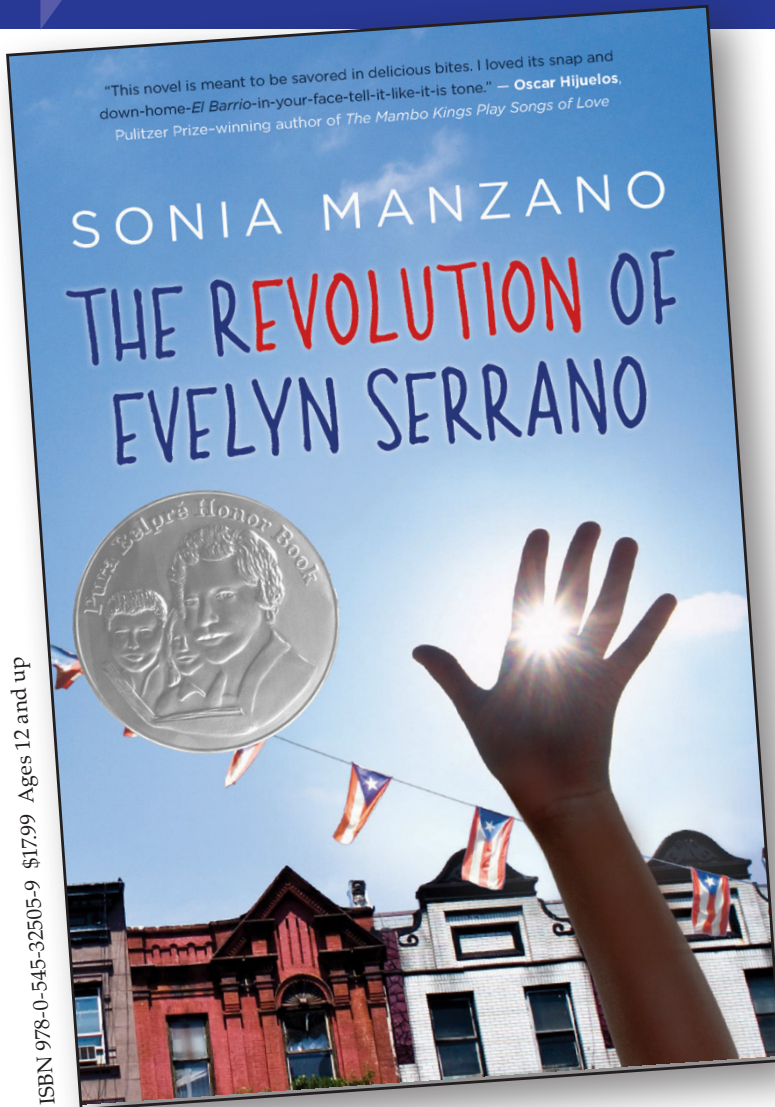


# Discussion Guide



## THE REVOLUTION OF EVELYN SERRANO

BY SONIA MANZANO  
*A Pura Belpré Author Honor Book*

**T**HERE ARE TWO SECRETS Evelyn Serrano is keeping from her family—her true feelings about growing up in their Spanish Harlem neighborhood, and her attitude about Abuela, her sassy grandmother who’s come from Puerto Rico to live with them. Then, like an urgent ticking clock, events erupt that change everything. The Young Lords, a Puerto Rican activist group, set the street’s garbage on fire, igniting a powerful protest. When Abuela steps in to take charge, Evelyn is thrust into the action. Tempers flare,

loyalties are tested. Through it all, Evelyn learns important truths about her Latino heritage and the history makers who shaped a cultural identity.

Award-winning actress and writer Sonia Manzano has crafted a gripping work of fiction reflecting her own experiences. Infused with actual news accounts from 1969, this stirring story reflects a fiery, unforgettable time in America, when young Latinos took control of their destinies.

*“The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano should be placed on proud display with the literature that enriches our multicultural America. History will come alive for young readers who will identify with how a great historic moment can affect one girl and her family.”*

—JULIA ALVAREZ, Pura Belpré Award-winning author of *Before We Were Free* and *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*



# Praise for the Book

*“An important story about activism, acceptance, and love. Sonia Manzano vividly portrays a neighborhood in turmoil, with embraceable characters who change history.”*

—PAM MUÑOZ RYAN, Pura Belpré Award-winning author of *The Dreamer* and *Esperanza Rising*

★ *“Starting with the title, this wry, moving debut novel does a great job of blending the personal and the political without denigrating either.”*

—BOOKLIST, starred review

★ *“Like most real-world teens, [Evelyn] changes subtly, rather than through one earth-shattering epiphany. The author effectively captures this shifting perception in the dialogue and Evelyn’s first-person narration. Secondary characters of surprising dimension round out the plot and add to the novel’s cultural authenticity, as do the Spanish and Spanglish words and phrases sprinkled throughout the text so seamlessly that a glossary would be moot. A stunning debut.”*

—KIRKUS REVIEWS, starred review

*“Evelyn’s journey combines a coming-of-age story with important lessons in Puerto Rican and Nuyorican history. Evelyn is an engaging character, and the straightforward prose and easy-to-grasp emotions render this a useful curricular addition to a unit on the civil rights movement that extends students’ understanding of Latinos during that struggle.”*

—BULLETIN OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN’S BOOKS

*“Based on true events, the story develops organically through well-realized fictional characters dealing with complex family dynamics. Manzano has a gift for providing just the right amount of historical and political context for today’s young readers without slowing the pace.”*

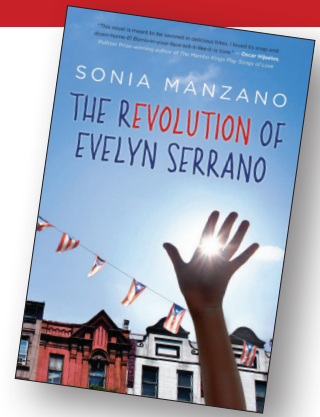
—THE HORN BOOK MAGAZINE

*“Manzano shines light on a little-known moment in history through the eyes of a realistically mercurial protagonist who can be both petulant and sympathetic. Evelyn’s tale fascinates, ending on a hopeful note.”*

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

*“Based on historical facts, the story paints a time line of the Young Lords movement as seen through Evelyn’s eyes. She brings to life the sense of cultural awareness and pride that the movement invoked as well as the human-rights inequalities that were exposed by the Young Lords in Spanish Harlem. This novel is reminiscent of Pam Muñoz Ryan’s *Esperanza Rising* (Scholastic, 2000), not only because of the strong Latina characters in a historically important setting, but also for the hopeful, coming-of-age story that unfolds.”*

—SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL





# Discussion Questions



1. Mami's style of decorating her home with fake roses, plastic covers, and crocheted, lacy table coverings is in direct contrast to the garbage-strewn neighborhood in which she lives. How does Mami's approach to beautifying her home relate to the Puerto Rican expression "*tapar el cielo con la mano*"—to cover the sky with the hand?
2. Many teenagers wrestle with how they look and are caught between wanting to be an individual and wanting to fit in with their peers. Rosa struggles with her curly, frizzy hair, the size of her feet, and even her name. She decides she would rather go by the name Evelyn than Rosa. She says that "*El Barrio, Spanish Harlem, U.S.A., did not need another Rosa, María, or Carmen.*" What is the significance of Rosa wishing to change her name in terms of her cultural identity and her desire to be an individual?
3. Evelyn begins to work at a local five-and-dime store. She assumes her boss, Mr. Simpson, trusts her not to steal because Evelyn "didn't wear a ton of Cleopatra eyeliner like everybody else in *El Barrio.*" What is the role of a person's appearance in determining potential behavior? Evelyn remarks that some in her neighborhood don't call it stealing but instead "liberating" when something is taken. Do you think Mr. Simpson's perceived stereotype of the neighborhood kids is justified?
4. Señor Santiago and his *piraguas* cart is a fixture in Evelyn's Spanish Harlem neighborhood. Evelyn says Señor Santiago's eyes were as sad as *la esperanza de un pobre*—as sad as the hope of a poor person. Señor Santiago is hassled by the police for not having a license to sell his colorful flavored ices on the street even though it is the only way he can make a living. Evelyn's mother works hard at the *bodega* in the hopes of buying a house in the Bronx. What part does hope play in impoverished circumstances? Are their hopes realistic?
5. A walk through Spanish Harlem is described as walking "from garbage pile to garbage pile on practically every corner of every street." Garbage, overflowing trashcans, and foul odors are strong elements in the setting of this novel. Evelyn and Angel walk "through the stench, with nowhere to go." The characters are surrounded by refuse. How does the setting help define the characters and their station in life?
6. It is a surprise to all in Evelyn's family when her *abuela* appears. Abuela is described as a flashy and provocative dresser with a strong point of view. Mami expresses mixed emotions with the arrival of her mother. Mami is frustrated with her mother's attention to others and her seeming lack of

interest in her own family: “You always have to help everybody in the world. Why don’t you clean your own house first? Sweep our apartment? Or the *bodega*? No, you want to sweep the streets!” Abuela’s energy is directed to the cause in the neighborhood. Can a person be a successful activist at large if her family and home are neglected?

7. Evelyn begins to bond with her *abuela* as Evelyn sorts through artifacts of her grandmother’s past and discovers the roots of Abuela’s interest in activism and social change. As she shares old newspaper clippings from Puerto Rico, Evelyn’s grandmother says, “Don’t you see, *mija*? It’s people standing up for themselves. It’s Puerto Ricans standing up for what’s right. It’s little guys standing up to big guys.” In what ways does her grandmother inspire Evelyn as social activism takes hold in Spanish Harlem?
8. After the garbage fire, the Young Lords emerge as agents of change in Spanish Harlem. The church becomes a meeting place to encourage Puerto Ricans to demand basic rights. Initially, Evelyn sits with her mother in church. As the weeks go by, she physically distances herself from her mother as she chooses to sit nearer to those who support the Young Lords and their ideas for change. Why do you think that Mami and the pastor are frightened and resistant to the efforts of the Young Lords?
9. All of the tension in the neighborhood comes to a head when the police decide to raid the church as a member of the Young Lords is trying to speak to the congregation. Evelyn is literally caught between her mother and her grandmother and their opposing points of view about the Young Lords and change. In the chaos of the raid, Evelyn’s head is spinning: “Who was right? I had to get away. Unbuttoning my coat, I twisted my way out of it and ran down the street.” Mami and Abuela are left behind, each clutching one shoulder of Evelyn’s empty coat. “They look funny,” Evelyn thinks, “standing there clutching a ghost of me flapping in the breeze.” What might this ghost of Evelyn represent?
10. Pops appears at the rally to find out why Evelyn is not at home with her mother. Evelyn stresses the importance of her connection to the Young Lords saying, “I feel like somebody now, Papi.” How does Evelyn’s involvement with the Young Lords help her discover her identity?
11. Evelyn/Rosa is in the midst of her own internal revolution about who she is and who she wishes to be. She is surrounded by a community in revolution as its members work to have their voices heard and their basic needs met. How does Evelyn/Rosa’s unique point of view inform and enhance the story of a larger, external revolution? Look at the front cover of the book and notice the way the word “Revolution” in the title is depicted. How does this graphic element represent what happens to Evelyn/Rosa over the course of the novel?

The discussion questions in this guide were written by Leigh Courtney, PhD. She teaches in the Global Education program at a public school in San Diego, California. She holds both master’s and doctoral degrees in education, with an emphasis on curriculum and instruction.

# Q&A with Sonia Manzano

By Shannon Maughan, *Publishers Weekly*



Actress and author SONIA MANZANO is perhaps best known for her ongoing role as Maria on *Sesame Street*; she joined the cast in the early 1970s. But she has also won 15 Emmy Awards as part of the show's writing staff, and in 2004 she published her first children's book, *No Dogs Allowed!*, illustrated by Jon J. Muth (Atheneum). Another picture book, *A Box Full of Kittens*, illustrated by Matt Phelan, followed for Atheneum in 2007. Her new title, *The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano* (Scholastic, Sept.), is something of a departure: a YA novel about a Puerto Rican girl awakened to political activism and to her cultural heritage while living in Spanish Harlem (El Barrio) in 1969.

**Why did you want to write about the Young Lords, a short-lived Puerto Rican activist group in 1960s-70s New York City?**

I thought it important to write about the power of youth. I remember seeing footage of Juan González [one of the group's leaders], who is now at the [New York] *Daily News*. The group would shout things like 'We think Puerto Rico should be independent – and kids should eat oatmeal!' There was a sense of 'We can do all this stuff!' I'd forgotten about that. Kids do have a lot of the answers but they can't always move things forward. There was so much youthful indignation: 'What?! People are being unfair?!' What they were doing seems so revolutionary. And they looked like Castro. I think people were afraid of them because of the way they looked.

**How does the group fit into your latest book?**

I have always been fascinated by things that were happening in 1969. Coincidentally, *Sesame Street* first aired in 1969 and one of the main curriculum goals of the show was that American children should know that Latins lived in America, and the Latin child should know that he is important in the world. Latins were totally invisible at the time. 1969 was the very beginning of Hispanics being public. It started with the Young Lords [they set garbage on fire to draw attention to a lack of sanitation services and occupied a church from which to offer the community help]. Everyone had a platform then; it was a time of idealism and change, and the status quo was being challenged. That small event had great impact. It feels like a perfect time to bring attention to it.

**There seems to be a renewed spirit of activism in our country, reflected in the various Occupy movements over the past year or so. Do you have a philosophy about activism that you hope to convey to your readers?**

Well, the Occupy movements seem to be about general discontent and not very specific. But there is a harshness in society nowadays. People are uncaring of other people; there is an incivility. It's not the kind of society we would like to think of ourselves as being. If it [the book] makes kids look out for the other guy, that would be a good thing. There is also a great lack of critical thinking these days. People can't see the gray in things; everything is black or white. [In the book,] at first Evelyn is thinking "either my mother is right or my grandmother is right." But in the end, she says she hopes they are both right. Each has something she can take.

**Your descriptions of El Barrio are particularly evocative. What is your personal experience with the neighborhood?**

My grandmother lived on East 111th Street, right across from the church [First Spanish Methodist Church] seized by the Young Lords. I was raised in the Bronx, but we visited her often. When we would come across the Willis Avenue Bridge it was like Puerto Rico Central. I remember the food sold in the street; it was so exotic seeing all those fried foods. And I remember the congestion of people at the time, and the sadness of people gazing out the window. My grandmother's maiden name was Serrano and she lived with my cousin Evelyn. Using their combined names in the book is another personal connection for me.

**In addition to Evelyn's political awakening, your book explores Evelyn's connection to her heritage and cultural identity. Does this reflect your own experience?**

I remember becoming politically aware and seeing myself in the big world, separate from my parents. I was 21. Evelyn is much younger, 14. The way she begins to see her family is because of her issue about being Latin. It reminds me of that movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, when the main character recalls that she was the only kid in school with sideburns because she was Greek. It's a universal problem that people from many cultures can relate to. [But] when you know your past, you can have a stronger future. You can at least understand your parents and grandparents better. My parents would always paint our kitchen turquoise and I wanted everything to be beige. When I went to Puerto Rico and saw all the bright colors, it hit me that my family was from the tropics. I realized how hard it must be for them to be indoors all the time in New York. We have so many old family photos taken up on the roof – it was just like *West Side Story*. It was my family's way of being outside as much as possible.

**Before becoming an author, your first professional success was as an actress on *Sesame Street*. How do the two art forms – acting and writing – compare for you?**

When one acts there is a feeling of recklessness. "Know your lines and be ready to go" is something I learned from a Muppet person. I had always wanted to practice everything over and over. But this person said, "Let's just go and not practice." You can know the lines but still have room to just go with it and improvise some things. It worked really well on camera.

With writing it's just the opposite. You ponder the word, look at the sentence, leave it alone for a while, then come back to it. It's very particular – do I use an exclamation point or not?

**You first entered the children's book world as a picture book author. How was it to shift gears and write for an older audience?**

I don't have to spell everything out for older readers. They can infer and guess and put their own lives into it. I'm still learning the genre, but I'm happy to have such a wonderful editor in Andrea Pinkney.

**What's up next for you? Any new book projects you can talk about?**

I love to write and I have been working on a memoir for a while. I've also been working on another memoir with a family member.

And I just did my first event for the new book, at La Casa Azul Bookstore on 103rd Street – a few blocks from where the Young Lords were demonstrating.

**So it sounds like we'll be learning more about Sonia Manzano. Is there any of you in Evelyn Serrano?**

Yes. There is a lot of me in all the characters I write. There's even some of me in Big Bird and Ernie and Bert when I write for them!

Interview first appeared in *Publishers Weekly*, Sept 13, 2012. Copyright © 2012 *Publishers Weekly*. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.