Children’s literature of the Southwest

To learn more about a place, immerse yourself in the literature of that region. Let’s go on a journey to the Southwestern part of the United States through literature written for children. Here are selected books that will delight, challenge, and inspire children.

**Preschool**

**Bedtime in the Southwest** by Mona Hodgson. Rising Moon, 2004
Ages 2-5

Animals in the Southwest are getting ready for sleep in this visual and poetic treat. Renee Graef illustrates this picture book brilliantly. Each page has rhyming text written in the form of questions. It is a wonderful story to read with children when they are going down for a nap, or getting ready for bedtime at night. Challenging sleep behaviors are questioned as children learn about the diverse animals living in the Southwestern habitat.

**Bravo, Chico Canta! Bravo!** by Pat Mora.
Groundwood Books, 2014
Ages 4-7

The Cantas are a family of mice. Mr. and Mrs. Canta are raising their 12 children in an old theater, where they can see plays and shout “Bravo, bravo!” Mrs. Canta speaks English, Spanish, and Italian as well as various animal languages. The gift comes in handy when they are threatened by a cat that looks like a small orange tiger named Little Gato-Gato. Mora wrote this story with her daughter Libby Martinez. Amelia Lau Carling illustrated the book in watercolor and mixed media. The writing and illustrations honor the splendor in speaking multiple languages.

**“Doña Flor: A Tall Tale about a Giant Woman with a Great Big Heart** by Pat Mora.
Alfred A. Knopf, 2005
Ages 3-7

Illustrated by Raul Colón, this story is about a woman who is different from everyone else. Doña Flor is a giant, towering over all the people in her community. She uses her difference to benefit the town. This story shows children that being different can be a blessing.

**Songs of Shiprock Fair** by Luci Tapahonso.
Kiva Publishing, 1999
Ages 4-10

This story takes place in Shiprock, New Mexico. The author, Navajo Nation poet laureate Tapahonso, writes about this special fair through the eyes of a young Navajo girl named Nezbah.
Anthony Chee Emerson provides vivid illustrations in folk-art style of the food, carnival, powwow, and dance.

Ages 3-7

Children will love counting to 10 and finding the hidden numbers on each page cleverly illustrated by Kenneth J. Spengler. The 10 animals in the Sonoran Desert include horned toads and tarantulas. The end of the book provides a glossary and a song called, Way Out in the Desert.

Way Out West Lives a Coyote Named Frank by Jillian Lund.
Puffin Books, 1993
Ages 2 and older

Frank is an adorable coyote living a carefree life in the Southwest. He plays with his friends Larry and Melanie. Lund’s colorful illustrations show Frank surrounded by Southwestern beauty in nature. He, along with his friends, encounter other animals of the desert. Children will enjoy Frank’s playful adventures.

Why Oh Why Are Deserts Dry? by Tish Rabe.
Random House, 2011
Ages 4-8

This book is part of the Cat in the Hat Learning Library series and illustrated by Aristides Ruiz and Joe Mathieu. The colorful pages will seem familiar to children if they watch the PBS show or have read the Dr. Seuss classics. The science of the desert is explained in a fun way. There are also helpful descriptions of how Spanish words are pronounced. When discussing a specific type of woodpecker, for example, Rabe gives the reader a tip through a character holding a sign saying Hee-luh for the Gila woodpecker. The back of the book offers a glossary and further readings on books about the desert.

Kindergarten and school-age

*Grandma Fina and Her Wonderful Umbrellas/La Abuelita Fina y Sus Sombrillas Maravillosas by Benjamin Alire Sáenz.
Cinco Puntos Press, 1999
Ages 5-7

Grandma/Abuela Fina has a broken yellow umbrella that she takes with her on walks through town where she sees many of her friends and family. On Abuela Fina’s birthday, her friends throw her a party. Everyone brings her an umbrella. What is she to do with 10 umbrellas? Sáenz teams up with the talented illustrator Geronimo Garcia in this bright and colorful treat for both children and adults. (Spanish and English text)

The Gum Chewing Rattler by Joe Hayes.
Cinco Puntos Press, 2006
Ages 5-12

Arizona native Joe Hayes tells the story of his beloved childhood pastime of chewing gum. Antonio Castro L. brings the characters to life with the brightly colored pages of a rattlesnake chewing gum and blowing...
bubbles. (Hmmm, I wonder if the rattlesnake added peanut butter to make the bubbles bigger as they do in chewing gum contests.)

**Hairs/Pelitos**

by Sandra Cisneros.

Dragonfly Books/Alfred A. Knopf, 1996

*Ages 5-8*

In perfect unity, the author Sandra Cisneros and the illustrator Terry Ybañez tell the story of family diversity. Each family member has different hair. The book offers a beautiful message to celebrate what makes us unique. (Spanish and English text)

*In My Family/En Mi Familia* 

by Carmen Lomas Garza.

Children’s Book Press, 1996

*Ages 6-12*

Carmen Lomas Garza shows the many traditions she grew up with in Kingsville, Texas. Every time you turn the page, you will learn something about Southwestern and Hispanic culture. A special treat is waiting for you at the end of the story where the author/illustrator answers questions from children. (Spanish and English text)

**Magda’s Piñata Magic**

by Becky Chavarria-Chairez.

Piñata Books, 2001

*Ages 5-8*

The tradition of the piñata is celebrated in this story of how a girl named Magda uses her imagination to create a joyful party. Illustrator Anne Vega provides enchanting pictures of the characters and places. Rich description accompanies the colorful images, as in this example: “The children’s mouths fell open! It was a life-sized piñata of Gabriel, wearing his favorite outfit, too – a cowboy shirt, a fringed vest, blue jeans, and boots complete with toy spurs.” (Spanish and English text)

*Perfect Season for Dreaming/Un Tiempo Perfecto para Soñar* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz.

Cinco Puntos Press, 2008

*Ages 6-10*

The main character, Octavio Rivera, is 78 years old. It is summer time when he goes on a dreaming spree. The book offers an opportunity to talk to children about the dreams in “perfect season” and ask children to share their own dreams. Esau Andrade Valencia portrays the world of dreams with his colorful illustrations. This would be a sweet story to read anytime, but especially in September for Grandparents Day. (Spanish and English)

**The Unbreakable Code**

by Sara Hoagland Hunter.

Cooper Square Publishing, 1996

*Ages 6-8*

This is an incredible story about the Navajo Code Talkers. The author writes about the World War II contribution made by Navajo soldiers who created a secret code used to transmit sensitive information during war time. Illustrator Julia Miner depicts John, the young boy, talking with his
grandfather in earth tones and beautiful detailed pictures. Children will learn about an important time in U.S. history, Native Americans, and the Navajo Nation.

*Editor's note: These books won the American Library Association’s Belpre Award, named in honor of the first Latina librarian at the New York Public Library.

About the author
Marisa Macy, Ph.D., formerly with the College of Education at the University of Texas at El Paso, has accepted a child development position at the University of Central Florida in Orlando. She received master’s and doctoral degrees in education from the University of Oregon. Her research interests include assessment of children 0-8 with delays, developmental screening, play, and personnel preparation.