

❖ The story behind *Zonia's Rain Forest* ❖

by Juana Martinez-Neal



Photo by Jade Beall

The idea for *Zonia's Rain Forest* began with a blanket made by the Shipibo people from the Peruvian Amazon. My father received the blanket from a man who worked at a corporation that exploited the lands of the Indigenous people. The man had been given the blanket as a gift from the leader of the Indigenous community he met with. When my dad

brought the blanket to me in the United States, I was in disbelief hearing the story behind it—especially hearing that the man who first received it gave it away. I keep the blanket as a reminder of the change that is needed. (You can see it behind me in this picture.)

In January 2019, I took a call from the Caldecott Award Selection Committee and learned I had received a Caldecott Honor for *Alma and How She Got Her Name*. It was life-changing news, but the call was unusual for another reason. When I spoke with the award committee, I was on a research trip in the Amazon rain forest. I had traveled on roads, paths, and

rivers to the Peruvian Amazon to share a different area of Peru in my constant, purposeful attempt to break the stereotype of Peru in my work.

I visited the high jungle and the low jungle. There were birds calling, insects chirping, rivers flowing. I was surrounded by life. As I traveled, I was welcomed into villages of several Amazonian communities, including those of the Asháninka people. I got a glimpse of their daily lives—lives that I would love to see continuing with little imposed change. And this is the reason I created *Zonia's Rain Forest*. The story is about a girl and her community resisting and existing, where the Indigenous people are not saved but take charge, in control of their own life and destiny.

It is my hope that if readers meet Zonia, her home, her friends, and those she loves, if they can see the world from the perspective of one little girl, they will be more invested in the story. Zonia becomes our friend through the pages of the book, so the stakes are high by the time we see the unwelcomed changes that come to her and her home.





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But why, you may ask, bring such a message to young children and their families? Because the stakes are high for them, too—they are living through the destruction of nature all around them. They will recognize the message as they learn what is happening to our world.

Today everywhere we look we see the consequences of so-called progress. We are taking too much of our Earth, and it is destroying our lands, environment, and lives. We are disguising greed as development, and with that destroying ways of life. We ignore the warning signs and are seeing the results in the devastating wildfires in the United States and around the world, including in the Amazon. Why is this happening? How is this happening? Who is doing this? It is us. It is us disrespecting life and disrupting the delicate balance of our planet.

In Peru, despite laws that protect the Indigenous lands and its people, we continue to see the overuse and poisoning of land, air, and water. It is through organizing that these laws are passed, and it is through community organizing that the different Indigenous

groups achieve some of the changes they need most. Yet local community organizing will take us only so far if the pollution continues at the current rate. Following the leadership and guidance of the communities directly affected, we should work together to maintain the delicate balance of our Earth.

I am delighted that the Asháninka translation is included in both the English and Spanish editions of *Zonia's Rain Forest*, and I am grateful to the many people involved in it. This was a book about Zonia and her lands. She had to be able to read the story in her mother tongue. And as I was working on sketches for *Zonia*, I learned about a very small group of women from Chazuta making paper from banana bark. The texture and color were perfect for the book, and more importantly, the paper was handmade by women from the Amazon with the Amazon itself. I knew this was the paper to use for the illustrations of *Zonia*, and through friends and technology, I found a way to get the paper from Chazuta to my studio. Drawn on paper fashioned from banana bark by the hands of the people of the Amazon, the book became a living thing. A living thing just like our Amazon breathing for and with us.



Photos by Juana Martínez-Neal