‘Lucía’ author wants more Latino kids to see themselves in books

By Alyson Ward

In “Lucía the Luchadora,” a little girl named Lucía beats boys in all areas.

On the playground, Lucía reports, “I go POW. I go BAM.” The boys go, “BOOM. They go CRASH.” They jump off the monkey bars, but only Lucía can make a high-flying leap from the top like I can. I dive, I spin, I sail my landing. “Every! Single! Time!”

“Girls can’t be superheroes!” one of the boys on the playground complains. Another boy chimed in: “Girls are just made of spice and everything nice!”

But with the help of her abuela, Lucía dresses as a luchadora in Mexico’s Luche Libre wrestling, with a mask and cape. She identifies as a superhero. “The crowd: boys go BOOM. They try to CRASH into me. But I’m light. One can catch me. No one can wow like I can.”

That’s the story behind “Lucía the Luchadora,” Cynthia Leitich Smith’s new picture book for kids. The book, which published in the fall, received a starred review from Kirkus Reviews, a publisher.

Garza, a Rice graduate and a former Houston Chronicle reporter, lives in Nairobi now, where her husband, Peralta, is a correspondent for NPR. But she is in Houston this week to read her new kids’ book to little superheroes, both boys and girls.

The story of a luchadora came naturally to Garza, who has two daughters, 4 and 7.

When she was growing up in South Texas, Garza said, she and her family used to cross the border to Mexico often to shop, eat or hang out. “The little Luche Libre rings and action figures,” she said.

Her brothers would get a ring, but Garza always got something else — usually a doll — “because I was a girl.”

“I wanted a wrestling ring,” she said. “I was fascinated by the fact that (Luche Libre wrestlers) wore masks. The idea of a mask was always interesting to me.”

And in Garza’s picture book, her heroine, Lucía, gets to strut around the playground in costume, while no one knows who she is. She might be a real luchadora.

Garza said she wanted to write her first picture book for kids like her — and for kids like her daughters. “I was looking for something I wasn’t finding: picture books that featured kids who looked like her kids.

Just a few years ago, a study by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center study revealed that only about 3 percent of kids’ books are by or about “Animals and trucks are more widely represented in children’s books than Latinos,” Garza said. So she wrote “Lucía the Luchadora,” hoping to rectify that statistic.

In Houston this week, Garza has signed her book for a number of little girls named Lucía. Other kids have identified with the book’s heroine because they have accents in their name, just like Lucía does.

At a Houston storytime this week, one little boy showed up wearing a Luche Libre shirt. “He was super excited about it,” Garza said, and he told her he was a Luche Libre fan. “He was so into the book,” she said. “I don’t think he noticed it was a ‘girl superhero’ book. Kids don’t have that we have.”

With “Lucía,” she said, “little boys get the message that girls can be superheroes. That’s the big message they walk away with.”