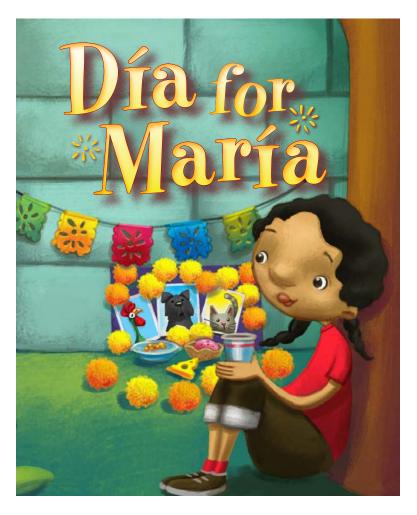
LEVELED BOOK . P Día for *María Written by Katherine Follett Illustrated by Carolina Farías www.readinga-z.com



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Focus Question

How do María and her family celebrate loved ones who have passed away?



Having a cat named Mouse sounds like a joke. *Ratona's* name was not meant to be funny, though. She was a lot like a mouse. She was small, with thick gray fur, and her meow was a tiny squeak. She loved to hide in holes. Her favorite spot was a missing brick in the wall of our garden shed.

Ratona lived for a very long time. About eight months ago, she died. I'm not sad anymore, but I think about her often.

One day, I was thinking about Ratona just as Mamá set a picture of Tía Teresa on an *ofrenda*, a special **altar**. Mamá was getting ready for *Día de los Muertos*, or Day of the Dead. Teresa **passed away** when I was a baby.

"Mamá, is Día de los Muertos also for pets?" I asked.



"Usually Día de los Muertos is for family . . ." Mamá said, thinking. "Though I suppose Ratona was part of our family, too."



"Maybe we can have a special **celebration** for her," I suggested. "It can be the day before Día de los Muertos."

"That sounds like a nice idea, María," Mamá said. "Some of your friends can come celebrate their pets, too."

What Is Day of the Dead? Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, is a Mexican holiday celebrated around the world that usually happens on November 1 and 2. Día de los Muertos is a joyous holiday when people celebrate family and friends who have passed away. People may build ofrendas, march in parades, visit graveyards, and prepare special dishes to honor those who have died. Some people believe that the spirits of loved ones visit during this time.

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That afternoon, Mamá and I went to the big market in Puebla. I clutched her hand so I wouldn't get lost in the crowd. There were dozens of booths selling toys, flowers, **decorations**, and **firecrackers** for Día de los Muertos.

I bought pink and red paper banners and three pretty candy *calaveras*, or **sugar skulls**. Mamá got a big bundle of orange **marigolds**. I even found a funny skeleton doll holding a cat.





After school on October 31, my friends Adriana and Gloria came over. Adriana brought her big white dog, *Sal*, or Salt. She had a photo of Sal's sister, *Pimienta*, or Pepper, who died last summer.

Gloria also had a picture of a pet she had lost. "This is Raúl, the world's friendliest rooster."

"Let's set up the ofrenda by the garden shed," I said. "That's where Ratona used to sit."

We arranged marigolds in and around Ratona's hole and hung paper banners on the wall. Then we set up our photos among the flowers. "One time, Pimienta got into our refrigerator," Adriana said. "She ate over a pound of *queso*. We thought she would feel sick, but that night, she got into the trash and ate what was left!"

We all laughed.

"So I brought Pimienta some queso," Adriana said. She set a piece of cheese in front of Pimienta's photo.





"Raúl also got into our food," Gloria said. "It was on Día de los Muertos. My mother makes spicy *pepitas* for my great-grandfather's ofrenda. Raúl jumped onto the ofrenda and ate them! My *madre* was so mad. She didn't forgive him until he sat on her shoulder. That was how he made friends. So I brought pepitas for Raúl, the world's friendliest rooster."

Gloria set the pumpkin seeds on the ofrenda.

"Ratona was usually very quiet," I said.

"Unless someone had *helado*. Then she went, *Squeak! Squeak! Squeak!* until you let her lick the bowl. She would lick it all the way across the house! I have some helado just for Ratona." I placed the bowl of ice cream in Ratona's old hiding spot.





When it was time for Adriana and Gloria to go home, I gave each of them a colorful calavera.

I loved having the special ofrenda in our yard. It reminded me of all the funny things Ratona used to do.



At sunset on the last day of celebrations, my whole family walked to the graveyard to visit Tía Teresa. My two brothers carried bundles of flowers, and I carried a big candle. Every family from the neighborhood came out. The graveyard was full of laughing voices. There was even a *mariachi* band.

My grandparents were already there, along with Mamá's brother, Tío Juan, and my cousins. Tía Teresa's **gravestone** was piled with flowers, sweet *pan de muertos*, and twinkling candles.

Someone began lighting fireworks. My cousins and brothers dashed away to watch, but Mamá stood by the gravestone. She smiled thoughtfully.



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"I have a story about Teresa that I don't think you know," Mamá said to me. "One day, Teresa was walking to town. She heard a tiny squeak coming from some tall grass. It was a little gray kitten. She was so tiny that Teresa named her Ratona."

Tío Juan and my grandparents smiled at the memory.

"When Teresa died, I took Ratona home," Mamá continued. "You were just a baby, María, but you loved her right away. You always kept her by your side. Seeing you with Ratona reminded me of Teresa. It made me very happy."





Everyone in the graveyard was laughing and dancing. Their faces were lit by warm candlelight. I was too young to remember Tía Teresa, but we had both loved Ratona. Thinking about them together made me happy, too. That was what Día de los Muertos was all about.

Mamá took my hand and stood up. "I think it's time to dance!" she said.

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Glossary

a table or other raised surface altar (n.) that is used for religious or spiritual purposes (p. 4) **celebration** (*n*.) a joyful gathering to mark an important occasion (p. 5) decorations (n.)things used to make something more attractive, often as part of celebrations (p. 6) firecrackers (n.) small paper tubes with explosive powder inside that make a loud noise when set off (p. 6) a marker at the head of the gravestone (n.)

gravestone (n.) a marker at the head of the place where a dead body is buried (p. 13)

mariachi (n.) traditional Mexican folk music; a member of a band that performs mariachi music (p. 12)

marigolds (*n*.) flowers in the daisy family with orange or yellow petals (p. 6)

passed away (v.) stopped living; died (p. 4)

sugar skulls (n.) brightly colored skulls made from sugar cane, used in the Mexican celebration of Day of the Dead (p. 6)

Words to Know

altar mariachi celebration marigolds

decorations passed away

firecrackers sugar skulls

gravestone

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Connections

Writing and Art

María celebrates family members by telling stories about them. Write and illustrate a favorite story about one of your family members.

Social Studies and Art

As a class, discuss how the ofrenda is an important part of Día de los Muertos. Make paper banners and decorations for an ofrenda and set it up in your classroom.

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