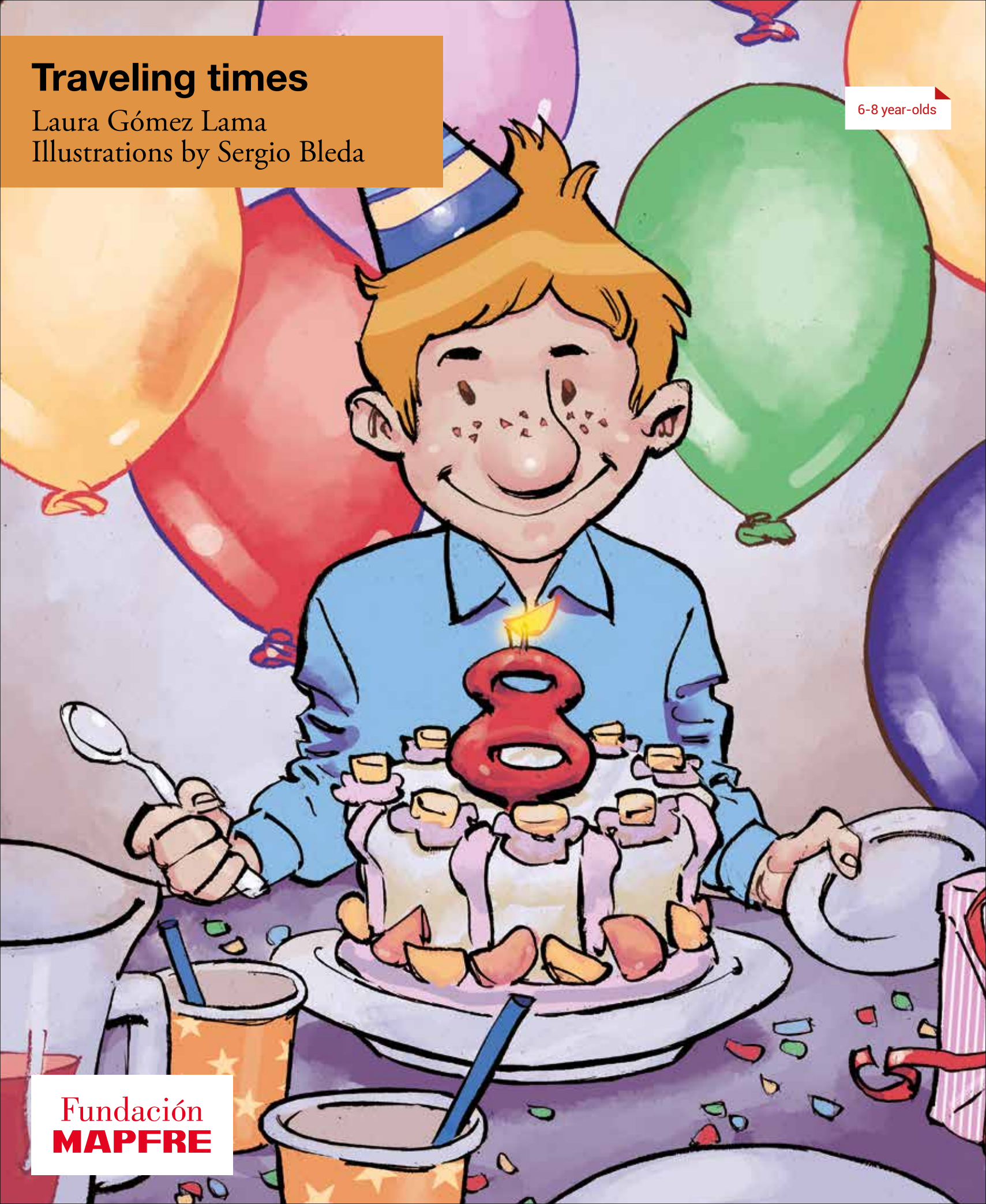


Traveling times

Laura Gómez Lama

Illustrations by Sergio Bleda

6-8 year-olds



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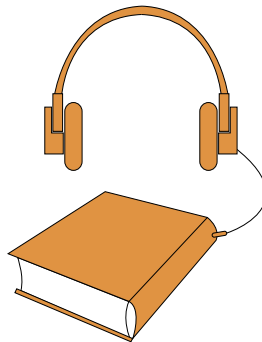
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Accident Prevention and Road Safety Program in the Classroom for six to eight year-olds.

The Accident Prevention and Road Safety Program in the Classroom is an initiative of the Accident Prevention and Road Safety Area of FUNDACIÓN MAPFRE, aimed at all levels of education between 3 and 16 years old, to encourage accident prevention and good road sense in teaching centers.

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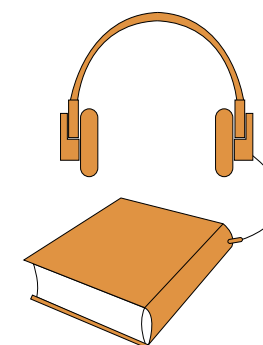
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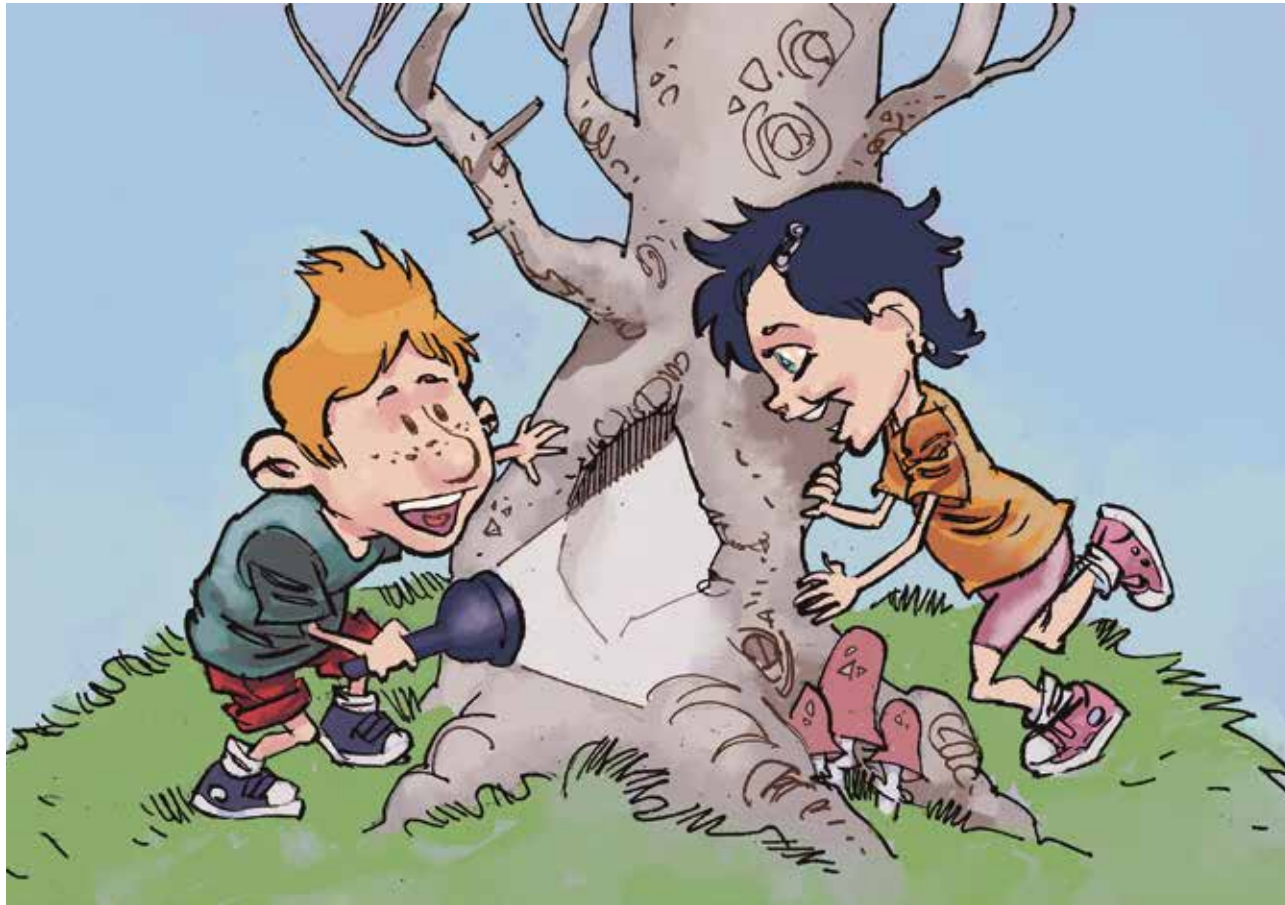
Laura Gómez Lama

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It was the morning of the first of November, Vicky's eighth birthday. It was great having a birthday on that date because it was always a public holiday and all her friends came round in fancy dress because of Halloween. As autumn passed by, it began to get dark earlier and Vicky felt very grown up being able to have a “night-time” party at which she was allowed to wear makeup.

Antonio, her younger cousin —and the only one she had— wasn't so keen on that day, as he didn't like that fact that his favorite cousin —there weren't any others— had yet another birthday. He always got the feeling he was being left further and further behind. It's not that he didn't have a birthday every year; it's just that his cousin always seemed to be ahead. For example, if both of them grew, she was always that bit taller. If they both were the same age for half of the year, she was always one school year ahead of him. If their names came together on the swimming list because of having the same first surname, Vicky had to call herself Vargas Heredia while he was Vargas Pérez, and between them there was always a Vargas Iglesias, Vargas López, and so on...



While it was true that there was only half a year between the two cousins, the school year that separated them created a big gap, in that she was always looking forward towards the next year up and, of course, never in a million years did she ever look back. Or should we say down? Let's be honest, the people in Antonio's year didn't even exist for her.

That's why Antonio, who had previously asked his parents if he could go to the same school as his cousin, now wondered if she would acknowledge him at break time or pretend not to see him in the corridors, and the truth was that he didn't really want to find out.

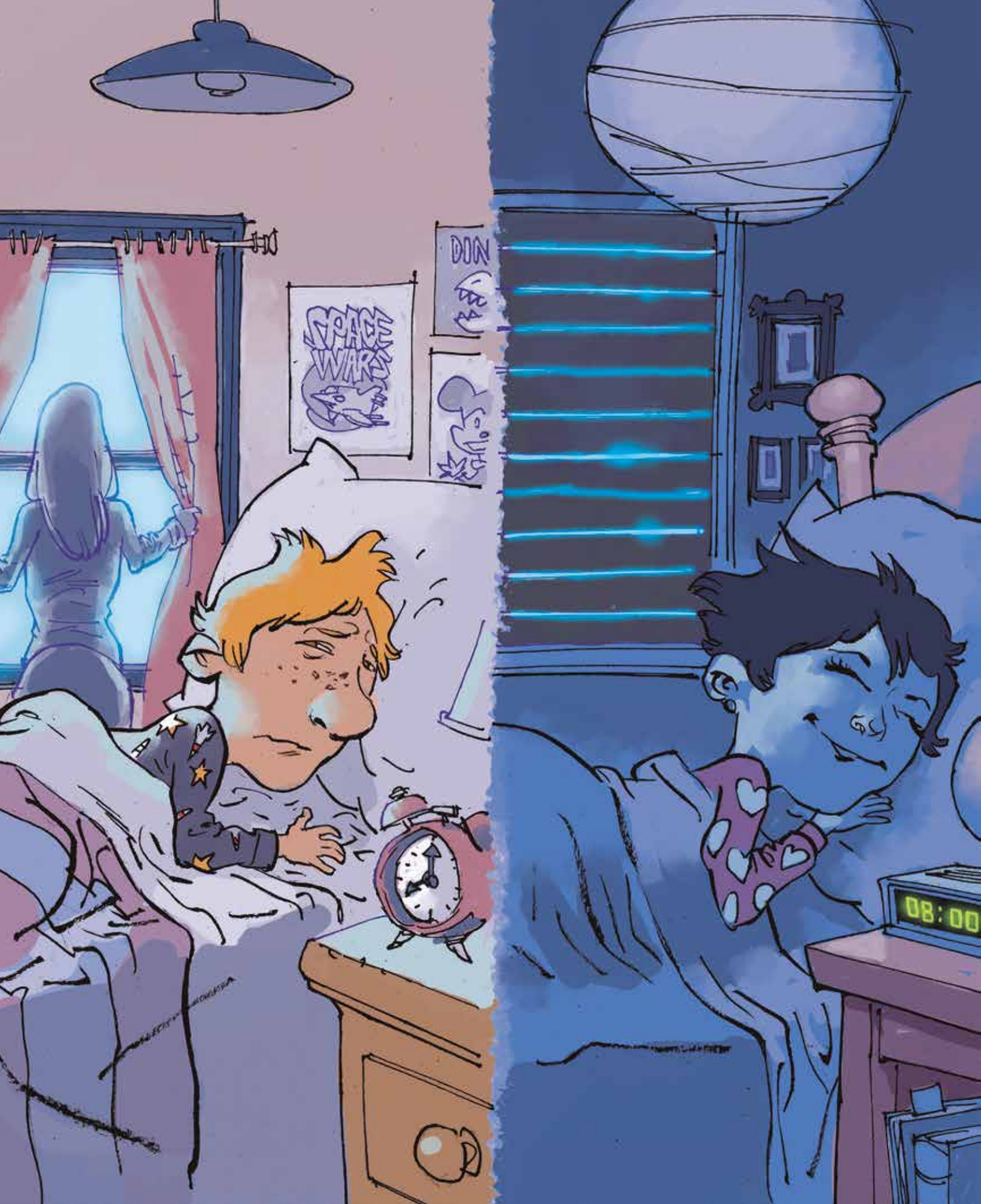
It would have been disappointing because before, when Vicky wasn't so stuck-up and arrogant, Antonio and she were as close if not closer than a brother and sister. And, when the whole family was together during the summer vacations at their grandmother's house, Antonio didn't get the impression that Vicky would leave him behind. If, by being ahead, she always learned everything first, she would always teach him and so they remained on a par with each other. And while being on a par turned out to be more stressful for Antonio than Vicky, the two children had a great time doing everything together.

—Vicky, we're going on an inspection visit —said Antonio with the blue torch in his hand.

—OK —answered Vicky, opening the drawer to take out the red torch from the set their grandmother had given them.

Then they would go down into the garden to explore the most obscure nooks and crannies. “The darker it is, the more things there are to inspect!”, Antonio observed, laughing. But straight away, his expression changed as he remembered how snooty and conceited his cousin had become. Well, hadn't she spent the previous Sunday going on about how cool it was to drive to school with her father, knowing full well that he went to his school on the bus!?

—I just love to go by car in the mornings with my Dad. Don't you? Oh yes, of course, you go by bus. What time do you get up? Oh, how I love staying curled up under the sheets and getting up just in time to get dressed and comb my hair... I have my breakfast in the car. At first my Dad didn't let me because it made a mess but, in the end, with me being such a sleepyhead, there was no other solution... Also, I'm very careful not to leave any stains. So it's really great going by car, eating my breakfast and chatting to Daddy about all the



important things we have planned for each day. Although, because I talk so much, he sometimes has to tell me to be quiet so that he can concentrate on the road. Another thing I love doing is answering his calls, because when he's driving, he can't use his cellphone. So basically I become his secretary. And I must be doing it really well because Mum bought him a hands-free device, but he always says that he prefers me to take care of answering and that any calls can wait until he gets parked. He says that our safety is the most important thing and he never turns the engine on until everybody has their seat belt fastened. He's a real stickler! My friends all think he's great. Did you know that when he comes to pick me up he always brings me a snack? Everyone else was really jealous but, since I told him that, now he nearly always has candy for them and obviously they all adore him!

Antonio couldn't think of a word to say having been given so much information in one go. The only thing that went through his head was how hungry he always was between the end of school and getting home and how lucky his cousin was, even if it was just because of the sandwich. Poor Antonio only had to hear food mentioned for his mouth to start watering. Right then! I'm sure that weight is one thing that I'm ahead of you with.

—How much do you weigh? —he asked his cousin.

—That's just so rude —she said in righteous indignation.

—Why? I just wanted to know if I weighed more than you.

—I really hope I do —he said while looking his cousin up and down—. Look here, young Toni —she said, fully aware of the hurtful tone of her voice—, you don't ask girls those kind of things, in the same way that you don't go asking



them if they have a boyfriend.

—Have you got one?

—Let's see if you ever grow up —she said, getting up from her chair and walking off down the length of the hallway in a most peculiar way.

After this entire conversation —the one that Vicky had more or less had with herself— Antonio was left with another query about his cousin: did she still use a booster seat in the car? But he didn't ask as he assumed that this was yet another thing you weren't supposed to ask about.

Time passed and the twenty-second of April came round, the day that Antonio reached his eighth birthday. “And so we meet again”, he thought from the perspective of the cake. Sure enough, punctual for its annual appointment, the day arrived —which day? The super day— the one that saw the start of the six months, one week and two days that Vicky and Antonio would be the same age. Also, just lately Antonio had started shooting up in height, and though he continued eating like a horse, his body just kept getting taller and slimmer, which is why he would have liked to ask his cousin how tall she was, but as you don't ask such things, he wasn't quite sure if he had caught up with her. “You have to see how things change when you get older” —he thought while remembering how his grandmother used to put them against a wall and make a mark against each one— “And now it's top secret!”.

When the school year finished, it was then official: he still didn't have the

figures but the comments spoke for themselves.

—My goodness, Antonio! What have you been up to lately to make you grow so quickly?—Vicky asked him one day at the municipal pool.

—Just the usual: eating, sleeping...

—And eating again, no? What an appetite you've got!

—Yeah... It's just that before I used to get wider and now I'm getting taller.

—Listen, do you know anything about a camp?

—Summer camp? What about it?

—Nothing, it's just that Mum is saying that maybe they'll send me there with you in August. She says that maybe there they can stop me being so silly. What are you laughing about?

—Nothing. It's just that, if they send you to summer camp you can forget about nail polish, little skirts and your hair hanging loose.

—At the end of the day, nobody knows me there...

—So, do you want to come?

—No way! I'd prefer to cover myself in sunscreen here in the shade and take a dip in the pool. Remind me, if I do go, that I need to take some cream so I don't get sunburn.

—And a cap and a canteen.

—And mosquito repellent.

—But, are you going to come?

—Absolutely not... It's just supposing...

At last the day came round when the camp was starting. On the tenth of August at eight thirty in the morning, Antonio was already sat on the bus. As he had arrived in plenty of time, he has stowed his luggage and, as an expert in bus travel, he had chosen his favorite seat: the window seat, four rows back. Vicky, however, had not yet arrived. There were just ten minutes to go before the bus set off and the monitor started checking her watch while murmuring: "They should all be here by now".

At nine on the dot, the scheduled departure time, the last passenger arrived: his cousin. She had her Barbie case, her hair was down and she wore sunglasses that made it hard for her to find her cousin. Not that he made much effort to be found, as by then the whole busload was moaning about having to wait for a "silly little latecomer" for half an hour or more, as most of them had been in their seats thirty minutes in advance as per the instruction leaflet. That's why Antonio had been squirming in his seat because the delay would have consequences. Talk about getting off on the right foot!

—I didn't see you —said Vicky without having removed her sunglasses yet.

—You're late.

—I overslept... Sorry! —she said in answer to the general reproaches—. Come on, be a pal and let me sit next to the window.

—You should have got here earlier.

—Please, pretty please...

And she went on and on like this until she got Antonio to give up his seat based on the promise that she would change round half way there. Meanwhile, as his cousin wasn't used to traveling by bus, the journey turned into a nightmare, in that she never stopped bothering him through ignorance or just plain selfishness. For example, no sooner had she arrived then she felt tired and decided to close the curtains when the kids were still all waving their goodbyes, something that sparked off the “curtain war”, in which the monitor had to intervene. Next, it occurred to her that she needed to stretch her legs, and seeing that lying them across Antonio's lap wasn't working, she decided to poke them through the gap in the seats in front - and with bare feet! The poor girl in the seat in front—a very pretty one, by the way, called Sara— didn't know whether to laugh or cry. And not content with having virtually put her feet into Sara's mouth, Vicky then began to push her feet and knees into the seat back until Sara had no alternative but to call the monitor over to teach Vicky how to behave herself.

It didn't end there. Antonio couldn't believe it when there was a repeat of what had happened in the beginning: hunkered down in his seat waiting for his cousin so that the bus could set off after the rest stop. Then, he had to watch as she got on board as cool as a cucumber, pretending that she hadn't realized how late it was, chewing gum and holding a bag of French fries.

—Do you want one? —she said as she held the bag out to Antonio with one hand while she stuck her gum on the window with the other.

—Honestly, it's just incredible how bad your manners are!

—And what do you expect me to do if there's no ash tray?



—Well, find a scrap of paper, wrap it in that and hold onto it until you get off.

Vicky looked around and couldn't see any paper but, when Antonio produced a piece from his pocket she decided to do what her cousin had “suggested”.

—And please, show more consideration for others or this could turn into a nightmare—warned the boy.

—¿Consideration?

—Yes. You're not in you Daddy's car now, so follow the rules and don't bother everybody else.

—What rules?

—Well the basic one is to sit still in your seat with the seat belt fastened. And put your shoes on because your feet smell!

—Yes, put them on —said Sara from her seat.

—OK, done. Anything else? —she said while throwing the now empty bag of French fries on the floor. Although, seeing the look on her cousin's face, she picked it up and put it together with the chewing gum.

—Now that you're in the aisle seat, it'll better not to stretch your legs out towards the seat opposite or leave your backpack on the floor where someone could trip over it.

—Understood. And no distracting the driver; that much I do know.

—Yes; so far I think he's the only one you haven't upset.



When they arrived at the camp, all of the children formed a scrum in the aisle of the bus and Vicky realized that she wasn't the only ‘savage’ in the group. Therefore the monitor made them all go back to their seats and begin to get off in an orderly fashion.

Once there, Vicky had endless problems with the other kids, especially the girls she was sharing a room with, who had to put up with her toothpaste all over the washbasin and her stuff left lying all over the place. Not to mention her lack of solidarity with the others, always preventing activities from starting by being

late. However, all these problems of coexistence were gradually sorted out as the others picked her up on them each time, which gave Antonio a certain amount of satisfaction but also pity in that he saw how nobody got on with his cousin and how she was either alone or with him.

—Why don't you want to make friends? —asked Antonio without being entirely sure if that was a question you could ask girls.

—They don't like me. I know I don't manage to do anything right, but I do try.

—I know you do. But it's just that...

—Making friends doesn't come easily to me. With the usual crowd it's different in that I don't remember having had to try to gain their friendship. How do you do it?

—When I'm next to someone I say something and, generally speaking, they reply.

Vicky sighed in the shade while all the others were swimming. They had gone by bike to spend the day at a reservoir near the camp and, although it was only a short distance, all of them were well equipped with their helmets.

—Was the princess on time today? —asked Sara as she passed by.

She had started off on the wrong foot and poor Vicky didn't now know how to sort it out. She was turning it over in her mind when suddenly everybody





started to gather around the monitor who seemed to have hurt her foot when she had gone over to scold some children who were throwing rocks at each other. They waited a good long time but her ankle was swelling more and more. They therefore decided that somebody would have to go back to the camp to ask for help and Vicky saw her opportunity to do something for the group and change everyone's opinion of her.

—I'll go —she called out.

—And I'm going with you —said Sara immediately—. I don't trust you, little miss princess.

There were two reflective vests in the monitor's first aid box, so they each put one on as it would soon be getting dark. Vicky realized that and checked to make sure that both bikes had white lights at the front and red ones at the back along with a reflector.

When they got to the track, Vicky told Sara that it would be better to forget taking it, in that even if it was the shortest route, she had noticed the number of detours there were, making it easier to get lost Sara thought that made sense and they tried to go back along the road. However, no sooner were they on it than Sara began to panic as night was falling and she kept saying that they were going to be run over by a car.

—Don't worry. I might not know how to behave on a bus but I do know the rules that apply to riding bikes on the road. If we do everything the right way then nothing will happen to us. We're also going back using the cycle lane which neither cars nor lorries can use.

Sara wasn't exactly brimming over with confidence in her “non-friend”, but she was scared and Vicky seemed so confident that she decided to go along with her.

—OK... We're going to go very carefully: we need to keep to the edge of the road as far to the right as possible. I'll go first and you follow me in single file.

The girls set off. They pedaled slowly in spite of their hurry as the darkness could play tricks on them.

—Why are you stopping? —asked Sara when they got to a crossroads.



—You have to stop as a precaution. Also, another cyclist is coming who has right of way.

—What are you doing? —asked Sara again upon seeing Vicky put her arm out horizontally at shoulder height.

—I'm showing you that I'm setting off again. Don't you know the signals? You look to make sure there's no danger, do the signal and then join the traffic. Now you. When we get to the entrance to the camp, which is on the right-hand side, I'll signal with my left arm bent upwards at a right angle with an open palm. Do you see? —she said as she did it—. And then I turn.

—And if it had been on the left?

—Then you indicate with the same arm but stretching it out at shoulder level with your hand open.

—How come you know so much about all this?

—When I'm with my Dad in the car and we get bored, we go over all the traffic rules and the signals. My Dad says that way he feels safer and that it'll be very useful for me.

—And so it has been. It's got us this far —said Sara getting off her bike—. Sorry. The truth is that I didn't have much faith in you.

—The important thing is that you trusted me in the end. Come on, let's go and tell them what's happened.

They had fulfilled their mission perfectly. Upon arriving, starving hungry, the kids got off the bus and crowded into the dining room where the two girls were

already waiting. They began sitting in a circle around them, thanking them and asking them about their brave exploit: if they had been scared, if they had lost their way... Sara told them all how Vicky had kept calm and how she managed to get them back to the camp safe and sound. While listening to her, Antonio winked at his cousin to let her know that, at last, something good was about to begin. And that's just what happened...

That night Vicky realized that the game her father played based on traffic rules was his way of teaching her to be someone who knew what to do and how to do it. And even though at the time it seemed unthinkable, at the end of the summer camp she felt sad about not seeing any more of the friends she'd made, because she knew that, even though they exchanged phone numbers and email addresses, they would never see each other again. Only Sara stayed in contact with both cousins, becoming a really close friend, who now and again would sleep over at their house for the weekend and vice versa. Later on, when they were old enough to go out on their own, the difference in school years was unnoticeable in that all three of them belonged to the same gang of friends.

Apart from their friendship with Sara, that summer was important for many reasons. Vicky learned a lot about coexistence and peer support. It was much easier to make friends than she had imagined, although obviously she had to make an effort from her side as well: a little bit of friendliness here, another bit of cooperation there and, above all, getting over her initial shyness. It wasn't so hard for Antonio as he didn't feel that kind of barrier or fear of speaking up. Both of them were very different, for sure, but most importantly they

complemented each other well and, while sometimes they drifted apart, the each knew that they could always rely on each other's support.

THE END



Laura Gómez Lama, born in Madrid, has focused her career as a writer in the world of education. She has worked for the press although her initial university forays into journalism were in the form of talking about film classics on the radio. The magic of communication media and the power of words on the imagination not only managed to inspire but also hypnotize her to the point of feeling that she was “suspended in other worlds”.

She is interested in literature for children and adolescents, viewing it as “an ally for communicating the knowledge and experience of those adults who are prepared, just for a moment, to abandon their entrenched position to engage in talking with kids as equals, leaving lectures to one side and saying to them: this is as much as I know, the rest is up to you”.

She currently edits the magazine “Escuela Infantil”.

Sergio Bleda, born in Albacete, has been a professional cartoonist and illustrator for twenty years. His work has been published in several European countries and in the United States.

He began working as an illustrator and copywriter in 1991. His break into popularity came with his “Vampire Dance” series published by Planeta DeAgostini as part of their Labyrinth line, for which he was nominated as Best Revelation Author at the Barcelona International Comic Fair in 1998. This series and the trilogy “The Wednesday Conspiracy” have recently been republished by the United States publishing house Dark Horse.

He currently lives in Valencia where he continues with his work as a cartoonist and illustrator for both the Spanish and international markets.