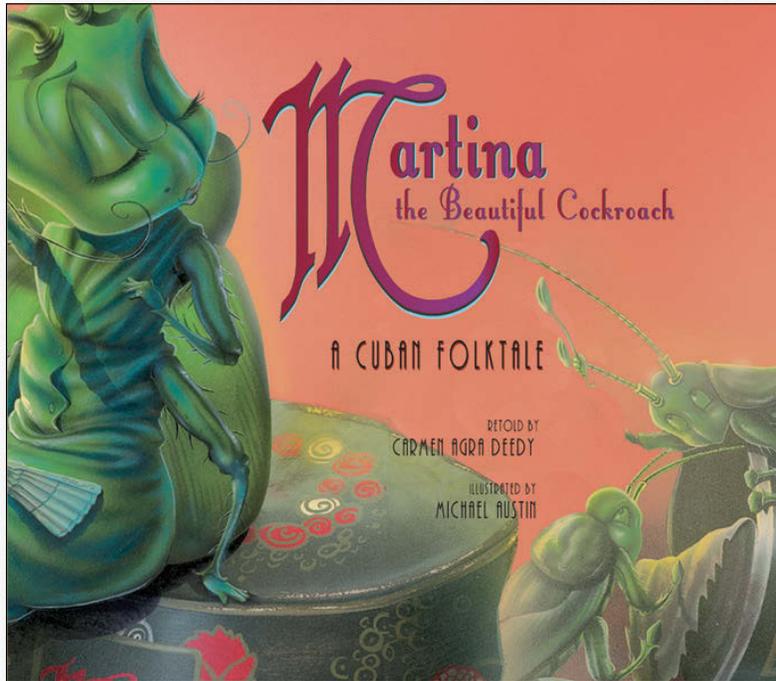


# Folktale Origins to *Martina the Beautiful Cockroach*



The story of *Martina the Cockroach* and *Perez the Mouse* is one of the best known in Latin America, but there are many variants on this popular folktale. The basic tale type is recognizable across all versions and retellings, while the motifs may vary.

*Martina the Beautiful Cockroach* is the story of a little cockroach who marries a mouse, and according to the internationally accepted Aarne-Thompson Classification System, it is labeled as tale type 2023. This tale type is known as “Little Ant Marries” or “Little Ant Finds a Penny.” Folktales are often shared orally, and with every retelling

comes a new element that slightly alters the story over time. The stories often reflect elements of the culture it is shared in. The Aarne-Thompson Index helps storytellers, teachers, librarians, and scholars identify and trace a tale through its many different titles in different languages. Within this tale are a bundle of motifs, or tale elements, that can vary according to the culture.

Carmen Agra Deedy’s picture book weaves together many of the traditional motifs that show up time and time again in retellings around the world. Below is a chart of some examples and the cultures they can be traced back to.

Perhaps Pura Belpré's 1932 picture book is the most familiar variant of this 2023 Tale Type. *Pérez and Martina: A Portorican Folk Tale* was Belpré's first book, which she wrote as a response to hearing the tale from her grandmother long ago in Puerto Rico. Her work as a librarian, storyteller, and author celebrated the Latino cultural experience by honoring and creating outstanding works of literature for children and youth. The Pura Belpré Award, established in 1996, is presented to a Latino/Latina writer and illustrator who also preserves and disseminates Puerto Rican folklore. In 2008, Deedy's *Martina the Beautiful Cockroach* was nominated as a Pura Belpré Honor Book for narrative.

Deedy's tale differs significantly from Belpré's telling and traditional tellings, especially in her decision to omit the second part of the tale where Mousie Perez leans too far into the soup pot, falls in, and drowns. The Iraqi versions typically do not end happily either, Mousie Perez falls in a pot of honey. From there, the story often becomes a cumulative tale of characters meeting the tearful Martina and joining in her mourning ritual. Like Belpré, Deedy grew up hearing the story from a

family member as a young girl and was inspired to tell her own version. In her story, poor Perez does not suffer such a dreadful end so soon after finding his perfect match!

Although the specific types change from version to version, the romance usually develops between two animals, often household pests. Mice and cockroaches are widely considered pests in the United States, but within the Latin American countries, tellers of this story see them as necessary evils and even have a little affection for these critters. No matter the animal, this tale type is always a story about compatibility and finding a mate (that the family approves of!) Sometimes the test of compatibility requires the suitor to sing, and if the song is pleasing, the cockroach will accept his proposal. Sometimes it's a just a question of size. But the humorous Spilled-Coffee-Compatibility-Test comes from a real life joke Deedy's own mother played on one of her young suitors.

Despite all the plot twists, childhood memories, and specifically Cuban references, this 2023 Tale fits right in with the other tellings from around the world!

Motif Number	Motif	Originating Culture	Book Example (if applicable)
B281.2.2	Wedding of mouse and cockroach	India	<i>The Oral Tales of India</i>
B211.1.8	Speaking mouse	India	---
B211.4	Speaking insects	India	---
Z32.3	Little Ant finds a penny, buys new clothes with it, and sits in doorway. Wedding of Mouse and Cockroach.		
Z32.3.4	Ms. Cockroach finds coin and sits in doorway. Asks passing suitors how they would sing to her if they were married. She rejects cock, frog and marries the rat. Leave husband to stir onion soup and he falls in.	Cuba	<i>Senor Cat's Romance</i>
Z32.3.5	Ms. Cricket seeks suitor. Camel and Bull are too big. Mouse is just right. Ms. Cricket falls in a puddle, and Mouse rescues her.	Palestine	<i>Look Back and See</i>
Z32.3.1.1	Cockroach seeks Husband- marries mouse for his singing voice. Falls in soup, she mourns. Why cockroach is black.	Puerto Rico	<i>Perez and Martina: A Portorican Folk Tale</i>