

VAMOS A LEER

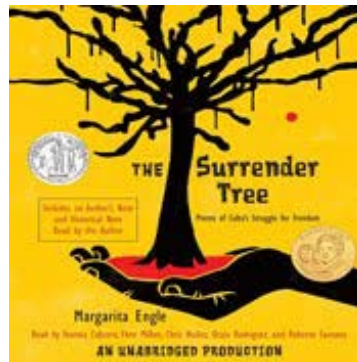
teaching latin america through literacy



VAMOS A LEER

Educator's Guide

THE SURRENDER TREE:
POEMS OF CUBA'S STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM
Written by Margarita Engle
Published by Square Fish, Holt, 2008
ISBN: 0312608713



BOOK SUMMARY

It is 1896. Cuba has fought three wars for independence and still is not free. People have been rounded up in concentration camps with too little food and too much illness. Rosa is a nurse, but with a price on her head for helping the rebels, she dares not go to the camps. Instead, she turns hidden caves into hospitals for those who know how to find her. Black, white, Cuban, Spanish—Rosa does her best for everyone. Yet who can heal a country so torn apart by war?

AWARDS & RECOGNITIONS

- Newbery Honor
- Pura Belpré Award
- Américas Award
- Jane Addams Award
- Claudia Lewis Poetry Award
(among many others)

AUTHOR'S CORNER

Margarita Engle's own thoughts on writing, novels-in-verse, and the influence of her family's history:

"Writing a historical novel in verse feels like time travel, a dreamlike blend of imagination and reality. It is an exploration. It is also a chance to communicate with the future, through young readers.

I love to write about young people who made hopeful choices in situations that seemed hopeless. My own hope is that tales of courage and compassion will ring true for youthful readers as they make their own difficult decisions in modern times.



My connection to the history of Cuba is personal. My American father traveled to the island after seeing National Geographic pictures of my Cuban mother's hometown, Trinidad. Even though they did not speak the same language, they fell in love and got married. I was born and raised in my father's hometown of Los Angeles, California, but we spent summers in Cuba, where I developed a deep bond with my extended family. I also developed a lifelong passion for tropical nature, which led me to study agronomy and botany, along with creative writing" (<http://margaritaengle.com/about.html>).

"When I wrote *The Poet Slave of Cuba* and *The Surrender Tree* as historical novels in free verse, I hoped that the form would appeal to young adult readers who want a full-length book with mature topics, but may be intimidated by the more crowded pages of traditional prose. Personally, I am in love with the novel in verse form. Poetry allows me to distill a complex story down to its emotional essence. I think students focus on the challenges characters face. The one comment I consistently get when teenagers write to me is: "I thought my own life was hard, but now I really appreciate all that I have." (<http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com/article/CA6640331.html>)

Check out [Margarita Engle's website](#) for more information.

USING *THE SURRENDER TREE* IN THE CLASSROOM

The Surrender Tree is a unique novel, both for its content and its style. It tells the story of an often overlooked or overshadowed period in early Cuban history when the country was embroiled in three different wars for independence between 1868-1898. In an unexpected move, the author, Margarita Engle, chooses to tell the story in verse form. Now, I have to admit to some hesitancy and a little bit of dread when I realized the novel

was written in free verse. Yet, I was captivated by the story almost immediately, finishing it in an afternoon.

Part of my initial hesitancy stemmed from the difficulty I imagined would present itself for a teacher using a verse novel in the classroom—unfortunately, for many students poetry can be difficult and intimidating. Yet, I soon realized that Engle’s use of verse to tell the story was actually quite brilliant. The verse form serves to make the story much more accessible to young adult readers. For one, the pages aren’t visually overwhelming. Each page is devoted to one poem told from one person’s point of view. This also makes the story easy to follow and the characters easy to track, students always know who is speaking. All of this creates a superficial simplicity that allows students to become easily engaged in a more complex narrative experience. Once engaged, students can take in the story of Rosa, the freed slave who worked to heal the injured in all three of Cuba’s wars for independence. They see everything unfold as Engle’s writing paints vibrant pictures of what life was like during this historical period. They are introduced to Cuban slavery, pre World War II concentration camps, and early U.S. involvement in Cuba.

Some have critiqued the novel for leaving the reader feeling incomplete, others for the seeming fading in and out of characters, with no real closure or explanation. While, I didn’t particularly feel that way, I have to wonder if any sense of incompleteness was intentional. It’s a story of a country torn apart by three different wars for independence over a period of 30 years. Lives are lost and people disappear, uprooted by the fighting and war, often times closure is never found. And, in fact, I don’t think Cuba found closure at the end of the last war. Despite 30 years of war, the Cuban flag could still not be flown. In the words of José—“We can only watch from far away/ as the Spanish flag is lowered/ and the American flag glides upward./ Our Cuban flag/ is still forbidden” (p. 156).

While it may not be a book most students would pick up on their own, I think many students would really like it if it was used in the classroom. For teachers, it’s an opportunity to introduce students to novels written in verse. It allows students a more sustained period of time to get comfortable reading in verse that poems often don’t. The novel could quite easily be converted to a Reader’s Theatre activity, having individual students ‘act out’ the parts by reading a specific character’s poems. The content is engaging—at times the descriptions offered are gruesome—all the more interesting to students because it is a story based upon real events and real people.

LESSON
PLANS
& ACTIVITIES

In addition to the lesson plans and activities included here, check out the other resources below:

- [The Surrender Tree’s Publisher’s website](#) for a discussion guide to to use with your students.
- [Teacher’s Guide for *The Surrender Tree* for middle school students](#)

Literary
Interpretation:
Guided
Reading
Questions and
Writing
Prompts

- [An interview with Engle on *The Surrender Tree*](#)
- [A reader's guide created by graduate student Layota T. Colley found in the Lee Bennett Hopkins Teaching Toolbox](#)

The following lesson plans include detailed Guided Reading Questions organized by the chapter they pertain to in *The Surrender Tree*. This section also includes accompanying writing prompts to conclude each of the five parts of the book.

Common Core Standards Addressed:

K-12

Reading

Key Ideas and Details

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure

- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
- Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

Part One: The Names of the Flowers 1850-1851

Pages 1-22

1. Why would those on the 'outside' (slave hunters, plantation owners) call Rosa a witch?
2. Who are the *cimarrones*? (p. 4)
3. What is a barracoon? (p. 7)
4. Why does Lt. Death's father tell him to just call Rosa 'little witch' instead of 'little witch girl'? (p. 9)

5. How does Rosa contrast the slave and the rich man? (p. 10)
6. There are more than just Africans enslaved in Cuba. What are the other nationalities or ethnicities of slaves in Cuba?
7. What does Rosa mean when she says that hatred must be a hard thing to learn? (p. 22)

Writing Prompt:

1. On page 4 Rosa writes that the runaway slaves and their hidden villages are “protected by words—tales of guardian angels, mermaids, witches, giants, ghosts”. What does she mean by “protected by words”? How do these words protect the runaway slaves or *cimarrones*? Think about how Lt. Death describes the runaway slaves and their hideouts. Re-read pages 3 and 15 to help you answer the question.

Part Two: The Ten Years War 1868-1878

Pages 23-66

1. Why do the plantation owners burn their fields and free their slaves? (p. 26).
2. What does Rosa mean when she says, “Can it be true that freedom only exists when it is a treasure, shared by all?” (p. 26).
3. What is Rosa’s war? What is she fighting against? How does she fight? What does she fight with? (p. 26).
4. What does Rosa’s nickname become? Why? (p. 28).
5. What is the sad, confusing fragrance? Why is it sad and confusing? (p. 28).
6. On page 33 Rosa contrasts how the Spanish soldiers look and move with how the rebels look and move. What is the difference between the two? (p. 33). Why do you think they are so different?
7. According to Lt. Death and Lt.-Gen. Valeriano Wegler, why won’t Spain recognize freed slaves? (p. 37-38).
8. What types of injuries and illnesses do Rosa and Jose treat? (p. 44-45).
9. What is the one thing that Rosa wishes for? Why do you think she wishes for this? (p. 47).
10. Rosa remembers Lt. Death, but does it seem like he remembers her from the time that she treated his wounds? (p. 58).
11. Would you have healed Lt. Death? Why or why not?
12. Why does Rosa heal him? (p. 58).
13. Did anything change when the war ended? (p. 66).

Writing Prompts:

1. What do you think it would be like to be Rosa? What do you think would be the most difficult part of her life? What do you think would be the best part of her life?
2. Think about what Rosa and Jose wish for (p. 47 and p. 50). Compare what they wish for to the things that people typically wish for today, or even the things that you wish for. How are our wishes different from theirs? Does it make you think any differently about the things we wish for today when we compare them to Jose and Rosa's wishes?
3. Compare and Contrast how Rosa and Jose describe the island with how Lt. General Valerian Weylar y Nicolau and Lt. Death describe it.

Part Three: The Little War 1878-1880

Pages 67-75

1. What do you think of Rosa's question "How can there be a little war?" What does she mean by this? (p. 76).

Part Four: The War of Independence 1895-1898

Pages 77-138

1. Who does Lt. Death hunt now that slavery is outlawed? (p. 82).
2. Where do peasants have to report? (p. 83).
3. What is the difference between the young and the old according to Rosa? (p. 113).
4. How does the 2nd stanza on pg. 120 describe or represent Lt. Death? (p. 120).
5. Contrast Captain General Valerian Weylar y Nicolau's life with that of the rebels in this war. How are they different? Are there any similarities? (p. 130).
6. Why does Rosa think the U.S. is interested in Cuba? (p. 131).
7. What happens to Lt. General Valerian Weylar y Nicolau? (p. 138).
8. How does the U.S. get involved in Cuba? What major event happens? (p. 141).

Writing Prompts:

1. Describe the events that transpire in Silvia's life from the beginning of part IV to when she escapes the reconcentration camp. How has her life changed?

Part Five: The Surrender Tree 1898-1899

Pages 139-158

1. What does Rosa notice about the U.S. troops? (p. 147).
2. Who are the members of the Rough Riders?(p. 146).
3. How does the 3rd War end? (p. 154-155).
4. Are the Cubans free now? (p. 154-155).
5. Who cedes power to the U.S.? Does he really have that power? (p. 154-155).
6. What flag now flies in Cuba? Why is this significant? (p. 154-155).
7. How does the U.S. involvement change things? (p. 139-158).

Writing Prompts:

1. Is peace what Rosa and Silvia thought it would be? What is peace like in Cuba at the end of the book? How is it different from what Rosa and Silvia imagined?

HISTORY

Common Core Standards Addressed:

K-12

Reading

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

Writing

Text Types and Purposes

- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Production and Distribution of Writing

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital

sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Timeline of Early Cuban History

Create an initial timeline of early Cuban History using the text of *The Surrender Tree*. Then, using appropriate print and online resources, research early Cuban History in greater detail. Create a timeline of early Cuban History with descriptions and illustrations of important events. *The Surrender Tree* also includes a timeline at the end of the book under *Chronology*.

Important People

In the section “Historical Note” at the end of the book, Engle writes that the majority of the characters are historical figures. Choose one character to research. Choose from the following: Rosario Castellanos Castellanos or Rosa la Bayamesa, Jose Francisco Varona, El Grillo, or El Joven.

Slavery

Compare slavery in Cuba, based upon Rosa’s descriptions in the beginning of the book, to slavery in the U.S

Concentration Camps

The words “concentration camp” are often associated with The Holocaust in World War II, but there have been other significant uses of concentration camps that are often overlooked. The use of concentration camps in Cuba as referred to in *The Surrender Tree* is just one example. They were also used in the western United States during World War II. Research these and other examples of the use of concentration camps during wars. Pick two examples and write an essay that compares and contrasts them. What do they have in common? Why were they used? Did the majority of people at the time accept their use? Was there any political resistance to their implementation?

SCIENCE

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K-12

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the text.

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Medicinal Plants

Research the use of medicinal plants, perhaps those specific to Cuba or the Caribbean. Write a paper about one or more of these plants, their use, and any interesting historical facts or stories.

RESOURCES

Vamos A Leer blog

<http://teachinglatinamericathroughliterature.wordpress.com/>

The online accompaniment to the LAII's Vamos a Leer teacher-oriented book group, this blog provides a space for exploring how to use literature to teach about Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latinos in the United States. In addition to promoting discussion, the blog also shares relevant resources and curriculum materials.

Latin American & Iberian Institute

<http://laii.unm.edu/outreach>

The Latin American & Iberian Institute (LAI) receives resources from the U.S. Department of Education to support K-12 teachers teaching about Latin America. Our goal is to provide a supportive environment for teachers across grade levels and subject areas so they can bring regional and linguistic knowledge of Latin America into their classrooms. As such we provide curriculum materials, professional development works, and many more resources - nearly all of which are available on our website.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE



Written by staff at the UNM Latin American & Iberian Institute (LAI), **Vamos a Leer Educator's Guides** provide an excellent way to teach about Latin America through literacy. Each guide is based upon a book featured in the Vamos a Leer book group. For more on Vamos a Leer, visit our blog at bit.ly/vamosaleer. For more materials that support teaching about Latin America in the classroom, visit the LAII online at <http://laii.unm.edu/outreach>. This guide was prepared 04/ 2012 by Katrina Dillon, LAII Project Assistant, and Kathryn Peters, LAII Graduate Assistant.