

The Lightning Dreamer- Cuba's Greatest Abolitionist

By Margarita Engle

New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013.

Recommended by: Rose Reissman, Ditmas IS 62 Literacy Support, United Federation of Teachers

Suitable for Grades 6-8, ESL students as well

***“Thirteen is the age for dreams
of changing the world by freeing my own heart.
Thirteen is a barefoot rider
on a naturally graceful horse”***

Why I chose this book:

This is an extremely accessible middle school students /ESL learners, blank verse, historical fiction blank verse that immerses readers in 19th century abolitionist concerns from the perspective of a 13 year old living in Cuba as well as that of her brother, mother, nuns, a slave and others. The fact that this compelling Tula is struggling to write her poems and plays around period issues of abolition of Cuba's slavery as well as feminist freedom to write plus determine women's marriage options, makes her struggles immediately appealing to middle school peers. Her real connection to the Cuba's leading abolitionist – Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda called Tula validates the informational literacy connection between the Lightning Dreamer's fictive Tula poignant struggling voice, and Gertrudis's real Manuel supportive brother who distributed her verses and plays in Cuba and in Spain. This shared sister and brother collaboration in spite of real political dangers where such abolitionist writing was an act of treason in Cuba makes this all the more real and compelling for middle school student readers. Students can immediately relate to this age peer whose abolitionist verse and plays preceded the work of America's Harriet Beecher Stowe by 14 years! The work also uses its multiple perspective blank verse narratives to offer viewpoints on 19th century Cuban arranged marriages for financial gain rather than romantic love, which can immediately engage readers in argumentation using the points advanced by Tula's mother or Tula's arguments for romantic love.

What I like best:

Unlike the readers, Tula is the product of a Cuban society where she is supposed to be focused at thirteen on marrying for family profit. Tula is ironically focused on being a writer of poems which fold sorrow into words on a “tiny leaf of paper.” She writes plays for orphans who have been left with nuns because they are born of Spanish and African slave parents to advocate that

“people/ are all equal/and shall always be equally free.” She dares in the 19th century of expected arranged marriages for money to proclaim that “Marriage /without love/is just one more twisted form of slavery.” Beyond these highly provocative blank verse manifestos by Tula, very much in the voice of the contemporary coming of age middle school reader with his/her own ideas on social relationships and marriage, the image of Tula defying her mother’s attempting to keep her from her born passion to be a politically active poet voice is one that English teachers and social teachers will enjoy. Just as contemporary banning of books , makes those books best sellers and desired reads by students who do not read required books, so does Tula’s being forbidden to write openly heighten her passion to rush to the nuns’ library “my own book portal to an imaginary world /of freedom/and fairness.”

How teachers can use this work:

ESL students and visual learners on analyzing Tula’s poetry craft metaphors such “glowing coals instead of leaping flames,’ “a free dance /of birds in air/swooping /and dappling” and “sadness needs a papery home.’ They can explain and literally draw Tula’s definitions of poems and the craft of writing them, plus can argue and explain Tula’s statement after she is forced to burn the poems her mother forbid her to write: “I don’t know how to destroy /the invisible part /of a verse.” Using the references to the actual Avellaneda poems, some of the Spanish texts can be shared. Students can research the life of Gertrudis de Avellaneda and write an explanatory paper on what aspects of Lightning Dreamer are factual and which represent in Engle’s Historical Note “great liberties, imagining many details.” Students can also debate whether this blank verse historical fiction work would be more effective as a narrative text with no blank verse components or whether Engle should have written a factual history of the poet. Finally students can compare and contrast the ideas and efforts of the abolitionist movement in the United States in the mid 19th century with that political movement in Cuba. This will involve substantial history research and collaboration with the SS teachers. Another rich vein of discussion can be an exploration of contemporary cultures where marriages are still arranged – many extant and ongoing within student family circles in the US and back “home” in their native countries- and to what extent these marriages might be more than or as successful as romantic ones. Students could also research and enact a conversation between Harriet Beecher Stowe and Gertrudis on abolition or one between Gertrudis and Emily Dickinson on the nature of poetry as a craft.

This work nicely taps the Cuban aspect of an American history key theme using the devise of a 13 year old female Cuban poet. It offers a wonderful fictive poetry portal to cross cultural studies of abolition and feminist issues.

Margarita Engle is a Cuban American poet and novelist whose book *The Surrender Tree* was a Newbery Honor book.