

Jazz Owls: A Novel of the Zoot Suit Riots by: Margarita Engle (Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2018)

Who?

Main Family of Jazz Owls:

Marisela: 16; works at the cannery; Mexican-American (born in US); got job at airplane manufacturer and had to do a beauty contest; started studying to be a lawyer after losing job at airplane manufacturer

Lorena: 14; quit school at 12; works at the cannery; Mexican-American (born in US); becomes very involved with unions and fighting for equal pay & safe working conditions

Nicolas: currently serving in the Navy; Mexican-American (born in US); is reported MIA; was a POW and returned home to receive purple heart; used GI Bill to study law

Little Ray: 12; brother of Marisela and Lorena; Zooter; Mexican-American (born in US); expelled from school but Abuela got him back in on a 4-4 program with half classes and half working in a factory—Abuela wants him to be the first high school grad of family

Papa: has the “best” packing job; Mexican-American, born in California; enlisted to try to find Nico; returned home before Nico did

Mami: from Mexico; worries about Ray getting into trouble and being targeted; worries about the safety of Marisela and Lorena

Manolito: 16; Cuban; musician; has lived in many major cities around the U.S. because of Jazz; love-interest of Lorena

Reporters: found a murder at the swimming hole; seem to be antagonizing current situation and egging on the portrayal of Latino youth being the problem through their biased articles and titles

Policemen: say that cops were told to crack down on “Eastside boys...Mexicans;” seem suspicious of Mexican kids planning “to attack the rest of us;”

Military men & Sailors: free of persecution and got away with attacking Latino youth in L.A.

Patriotic girls: dancers for USO (United Service Organization): club where Navy boys go before shipping off.

Where? When?

L.A., August of 1942. *Jazz Owls* takes place during World War II and while racial tensions were growing in L.A. leading to the Riots.

Who are the “Jazz Owls” of the novel?

The Cuban (-Americans) and Mexican (-Americans), boys & girls, who frequented/ performed at LA Jazz clubs.

What are “Zoot Suits?” *(see picture)* **(1) What do they represent to Ray?**



(2) What did they represent to white cops and to white military men and sailors?

(1) Jazz—happiness, freedom, joy, dancing, an escape when Nico (his brother) is reported MIA

(2) Disrespect for rations & wartime efforts, challenge to authority as they were viewed as wasteful and showy, “danger” as the Hispanic population was growing

What are the key themes throughout the text?

Racism / Prejudice against Spanish-speakers / Racial-profiling:

- (1) Lorena's teacher washed her mouth out with soap for speaking Spanish
- (2) Checkers will fire workers for speaking Spanish
- (3) "Mexicanos" are only allowed in the public pool right before the water is about to be dumped out at the end of the week because "their skin is dirty"
- (4) According to Policeman 1, the governor instructed cops to crack down on "Eastside boys. Mexicans, in other words"
- (5) Police Lieutenant described "Aztecs as wildcats that must be caged"
- (6) Newspaper headline encouraging the white people "to fear and hate all of us"
- (7) California Civil Code of 1941 that banned and nullified intermarriage
- (8) Military seeking out "Mexican kids" to beat up "hunting like packs of predators"
- (9) Cops won't arrest sailors aka "heroes" despite what they've done to the Latino youth
- (10) Segregation of military

History:

- (1) Pancho Villa mentioned by Abuela
- (2) Reference to KKK
- (3) After Great Depression, during World War II
- (4) Zoot Suits and why they were frowned upon and then outlawed
- (5) Sleepy Lagoon murder/ trial
- (6) Zoot Suit Riots—"Sailor Riots" according to Lorena
- (7) Fighting for equal pay and safe workplace conditions
- (8) California Civil Code of 1941 that banned and nullified intermarriage

Gender roles:

- (1) Marisela and Lorena can't go places on their own without their brother escorting them
- (2) Ray refusing to help Abuela with stitching and embroidering because "it's girls' work"
- (3) Lorena going to work at an airplane manufacturer place to push back on gender norms and being talked into joining a beauty contest as a token minority

Other resources to facilitate the use of Engle's *Jazz Owls* in the classroom:

Use this short YouTube video from the History Channel to explain the historical context in which *Jazz Owls* takes place (1940s, LA, WWII, racial tensions): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KxtThBTf0sl>

Use the resources included on Simon & Schuster, under the "Reading Group Guide" tab, to prime students for the text before reading and to further extend the key themes present in *Jazz Owls* after reading: <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Jazz-Owls/Margarita-Engle/9781534409446>

Use the Discussion Questions created by Sharon Haupt, District Librarian of San Luis Coastal Unified School District. They are included at the end of the book and ask students to consider the historical context of *Jazz Owls* and why Engle chose to write in the way that *Jazz Owls* was written.