

# VAMOS A LEER

*teaching latin america through literacy*



# VAMOS A LEER

## Educator's Guide

### **Serafina's Promise**

Written by Ann E. Burg

Published by Scholastic Press, 2013

ISBN: 9780545535649

Age Level: 10 and up



### **BOOK SUMMARY**

Serafina has // a secret dream.

She wants to go to school // and become a doctor // with her best friend, Julie Marie.

But in their rural village // outside Port-au-Prince, Haiti, // many obstacles // stand in Serafina's way-- // little money, // never-ending chores, // and Manman's worries.

More powerful even // than all of these // are the heavy rains // and the shaking earth // that test // Serafina's resolve // in ways she never dreamed.

At once heartbreaking and hopeful, // this exquisitely // crafted story // will leave a lasting impression // on your heart

### **AWARDS & RECOGNITIONS:**

- 2014 Américas Award Commended Title
- Kirkus Reviews Best Children's Books of 2013
- ALA 2014 Notable Children's Books
- Junior Reading Guild Selection
- School Library Journal Starred Review/Best Books, 2013
- NYPL Children's Books 100 Books Worth Reading and Sharing, 2013
- NAACP Image Award Nominee
- Cybils Award Finalist for Middle Grade Fiction
- ALA Notable Book 2013

## AUTHOR'S CORNER

### About Ann E Burg:

This month we are featuring Ann E. Burg and her YA novel-in-verse, [\*Serafina's Promise\*](#) (ages 10 and up). This is her second novel-in-verse after the highly acclaimed *All the Broken Pieces*.

Burg's parents were artists, thus her childhood was enriched with music and poetry, setting up a foundation for her creative form of writing. She started exploring her local libraries at a young age, and knew that she wanted to write books since she was four years old. Burg worked as an English teacher for ten years before shifting the majority of her attention to writing novels, though she wrote many poems and stories before her first publication in 2003.



Burg wrote *Serafina's Promise* after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. She was inspired to write this story after coming across a picture of a small girl crying during the aftermath of the earthquake. She wanted to explore the reality for people in Haiti. As she states in an [article](#) by *The Combined Book Exhibit* "I was saddened and also disappointed in myself to know that I knew so little about Haiti and so like most Americans I was glued to the television screen and found myself reading lots of articles, discovering what a beautiful place, and what a beautiful people the Haitian people are."

Burg has expressed that Serafina's story and the impoverished conditions of her setting were "so much different than anything that I've ever been exposed to." The strength and resilience that she saw in Haitian children inspired her to portray a protagonist who fights for her dream of becoming a doctor, in spite of all the obstacles she faces.

In a [guest post](#) for Cynthia Leitich Smith's blog Cynsations, Burg describes how she collects her research in the form of stories, objects, and images in an old pot of hers that represents a recipe for her writing. For *Serafina's Promise* she included the following "You beat the drums and you dance again is my favorite Haitian proverb, one that best captures the spirit of the Haitian people. It's a proverb which continually rose to the top of my simmering pot and became the defining ingredient in my verse novel, *Serafina's Promise*."

Check out [Ann E Burg's](#) website for more information about the author.

## USING *Serafina's Promise* IN THE CLASSROOM

Burg's novel-in-verse is perfect for younger students. As we've said with almost every novel-in-verse we've read for *Vamos a Leer*, this is a great format for developing, struggling, or hesitant readers. All of the white space on each page keeps readers from being overwhelmed. The dialogue is simple which minimizes any frustration for a reader trying to track who is talking. But it's not just the genre that makes it a good choice for younger students. Haiti's history is both traumatic and violent, some of which continues to manifest in the present. For those of you familiar with other young adult novels like [Krik? Krak!](#) and [In Darkness](#), *Serafina's Promise* may seem like a fairy tale version of life in Haiti. While Burg alludes to the

traumatic history, it's not nearly as explicit as in some of the other above-mentioned young adult novels. While this can certainly be a critique of the book, I also think that this is one of the reasons it can be useful in the classroom. Novels like *In Darkness* and *Krik? Krak!* are excellent resources for both the teaching of quality writing and realistic portrayals of life in Haiti. But we can't use these books with our elementary school students. For most of these students, even if the reading level isn't too advanced or the books are used as read alouds, the themes aren't appropriate. Burg provides a novel about Haiti that we can use with younger students. She allows us to introduce these students to Haiti so that they can learn about a country rarely mentioned in our classrooms and begin to think about what life might be like there.

One of the more powerful pieces of the novel is in the experience the reader can have in comparing his or her life with that of Serafina. Serafina's circumstances are so different from what many of our students are familiar with in the U.S. Things that many of us take for granted in our daily lives in the U.S., are not remotely available to Serafina, her family, or her neighbors. While our education system in the U.S. is anything but perfect, schooling is available for everyone. It's important for our students to realize that education is not a guarantee in other countries. In Haiti the cost of an education is something that many cannot afford. Students need to reflect on what the ramifications are when a country doesn't provide education for its entire population. What does it mean if many are left illiterate? How does the lack of an education affect the quality of one's life? Would our students work as hard as Serafina does in order for the chance to go to school? While Serafina's childhood will be difficult, if not impossible, for many of our students to truly grasp, it's important that they try. They need to imagine a life without TVs, video games, cell phones, electricity, or even running water.

A more universal theme in the novel may be the family dynamics and relationships. While Serafina is close to both her father and her grandmother, she struggles to connect with her mother. Relationships, especially those with family members, can be complex. As Serafina realizes, some of her inability to understand her mother is related to her mother's fearfulness and anxiety that comes from her own traumatic childhood experiences. A discussion around the nature of the family's relationships in the novel can provide the space for students to think about and possibly share connections that they see to their own lives. I also really appreciated the way Burg wove in explicit discussions of emotions. As I've talked about before, emotions are something that we discuss far too little in our classrooms, especially when we consider how much they influence the ways in which we process our experiences. Serafina experiences a wide range of emotions. Burg addresses not only the positive ones such as happiness, joy, and hopefulness, but also the ones we are less likely to address in classroom discussions such as anger, frustration, and jealousy. I found her use of "angry bees" to be a potentially powerful way to model for students one way to process emotions through creating a metaphor to describe the

way their emotions make them feel.

While Burg may not explicitly address the more violent aspects of historical and contemporary life in Haiti, she does allude to these things, which provides the teacher the opportunity to delve deeper. Serafina's struggle to understand why they learn French instead of Creole in school is one example of this. Serafina knows that the French conquered Haiti, and she questions why they continue to learn in the language of their conquerors instead of Creole, the language the majority of people speak. This creates a way to open up a discussion about conquest and colonization and the contemporary ways in which people continue to be colonized.

While it may not be as realistic as other young adult novels set in Haiti, it's still a novel I'd recommend for the classroom. Not only does it provide an age appropriate introduction to Haiti, but it does this through a strong protagonist who is a female of color, something that is sadly still lacking in much of our classroom literature. In the end, *Serafina's Promise* is a message of hope in contrast to the harsh reality of life in Haiti.

If you'd like to read what others have thought about the book, check out the links to other reviews below:

- [Publisher's Weekly](#)
- [Kirkus Reviews](#)
- [School Library Journal](#)

If you're interested in hearing what the author herself has to say about the book, check out the following guest post:

- [Ann. E. Burg on Serafina's Promise](#)

Lastly, there's a video to accompany the novel:

- [Serafina's Promise Book Trailer](#)

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## **LESSON PLANS & ACTIVITIES**

The following lesson plans are comprised of two sections:

- A short section of suggested activities that can be used before, during or after the reading of the novel which are organized thematically by different subject areas
- Guided reading questions organized by parts of the book and extended response writing prompts. These questions have been written to support the types of reading and critical thinking skills required in standardized reading comprehension tests. The following key words and skills are highlighted: analyze, infer, evaluate, describe, support, explain, summarize, compare, contrast and predict.

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

For teaching *Serafina's Promise*:

- [Scholastic's Discussion Guide with an Interview with author Ann](#)

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- [Burg](#)
  - [Scholastic's Discussion Questions](#)
  - [Common Core Curriculum for Serafina's Promise created by Ann Burg](#)

**For teaching about Haiti:**

- [Haitian Historical and Cultural Legacy: A Resource Guide for Teachers](#) is an extensive guide for teaching about Haiti created by The Haitian Bilingual/ESL Technical Assistance Center at Brooklyn College.
- [Teaching About Haiti](#) includes both a curriculum unit and additional resources on Haiti created by Teaching for Change.

**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.

**Integration of Knowledge and Ideas**

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

**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.

## Social Studies and History

## Guided Reading Questions

- 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.

In addition to the resources listed above from Brooklyn College and Teaching for Change, have students research the topics below for a more expansive understanding of some of the socio-political issues alluded to in the book.

1. Research what languages are spoken in Haiti. Why do you think the principle behind learning in French is problematic for some people like it is for Serafina and Antoinette Solaine.
2. Research the Haitian flag. What does it look like? What is its history? What do the different parts represent or symbolize? How does Gogo explain what the colors of the flag mean? Once you've researched the flag, explain Gogo's statement "The flag remembers what they would forget. We were slaves, but now we're free." (p. 28)

### Part One | Pages 1-98

1. What jobs does Serafina do each day? Do you have jobs or chores that have to do every day? What are they? How do they compare to Serafina's? (p. 1-3)
2. Make an inference: Manman is pregnant now, but what happened to the baby before this one? (p. 2)
3. Who are Serafina's best friends? What are they doing? Why can't Serafina join them? (p. 3)
4. Who is Banza? Why does Serafina like him? (p. 5)
5. Why is Sunday Serafina's favorite day? What does she do? Make a personal connection: What is your favorite day? Why?
6. Explain what Gogo means when she says "Weeds are flowers too poor for fancy clothes." (p. 8)

7. What is Gogo's message when she says "A kind heart is the fanciest dress of all"? (p. 8)
8. What simile does Serafina use to describe the bad feelings she has inside of her? What simile would you use to describe what it feels like when you have bad feelings? (p. 8)
9. What is Serafina's secret? What do Serafina and Julie Marie dream of doing? (p. 9)
10. Why can't Serafina go to school? (p. 9)
11. Make an inference: How does Serafina feel when Nadia talks about school? Do you think Julie Marie can tell how Serafina feels? How does Julie Marie respond to Nadia? (p. 11-12)
12. How would you define the word wisdom? Based on this, what does it mean to say, "The only real wisdom is kindness"? Do you agree? Explain. (p. 13)
13. Who is Antoinette Solaine? Why does Serafina meet her?
14. How do we learn that Serafina's family struggles with poverty? What questions does the doctor ask that reveal this? (p. 16-17)
15. What does Serafina worry about after the doctor's visit? (p. 17)
16. What happens to Pierre? How does Serafina describe losing him? (p. 19) Have you ever lost someone? Do Serafina's words describe your feelings?
17. Describe Serafina's home. How does it compare to where you live? (p. 22-23)
18. What does Papa want to do for Flay Day? What does Manman think? (p. 25-28).
19. How does Gogo describe Granpé? How did Granpé die? (p. 30-33)
20. Who were the Tonton Macoutes?
21. Do you think that seeing the Tonton Macoutes take away her father still affects Manman today? How? (p. 33-35)
22. Granpé said "Education is the road to freedom" (p. 30). Do you agree with this? Where would you be without education? Do you think that we take education for granted in the United States? What if you couldn't afford to go to school or learn to read, what would your life be like? What kind of job would you be able to get?
23. How do Manman and Gogo earn money for the family? (p. 38)
24. How does Serafina help Banza? What does it say about Serafina that Banza trusts her, even when he's in pain? (p. 42)
25. What does Serafina decide she'll do on Flay Day? (. 46)
26. What kind of friend do you think Julie Marie is? Do you have a friend like her? (p. 50)
27. Have you ever had a day or an event that you were as excited as Serafina is for Flay Day? What was it? (p. 52-53)
28. What all do Serafina and Papa pass as they walk to the store where Papa works? (p. 58-64)
29. What is Mr. Pétion's home like? (p. 68)
30. Why do you think Serafina pretends she doesn't see Nadia? What feeling is she struggling with? (p. 71)
31. What do you think it means to be the master of one's own soil? (p. 71)
32. Have you ever wanted anything as badly as Serafina wants to go to



school? What was it? How are Serafina's feelings about school different from the average student in the U.S.? Do you think many students in the U.S. are grateful that they get to go to school? Or, do you think students tend to think of it as a chore, something they have to do, but don't want to do? (p. 74)

33. How does Papa respond when Serafina shares her desire to go to school? What does he tell her she'll have to do in order to attend school? Which do you think will be the hardest for her to accomplish? Why? (p. 75-77)
34. What are Serafina's ideas for how to earn money to go to school? (p. 78)
35. How does Manman respond when Serafina brings up Granpé during their conversation about school? Do you think that all of Manman's worries and what happened to Granpé are connected? (p. 88)
36. How does Serafina's conversation with Manman end? Is there any resolution? (p. 88-90)
37. What happens while Serafina is getting water for the day? (p. 92-97)
38. Why do you think that Manman doesn't let the man in the pink shirt carry Serafina? What do you think this tells us about Manman? (p. 96)
39. How do they know where to find Papa? (p. 97)

## Part 2 | Pages 99-218

1. What happened to Serafina's family's home after the flood? (p. 101-102)
2. Where do they go to after the storm? (p. 103)
3. What is Gogo's surprise? Why do you think she brought that particular item? (p. 104)
4. While they have to rebuild their home, there are some advantages to their new location. What are they? (p. 106-108)
5. What is weighing heavily on Serafina? What is she worried about the most after the storm? (p. 108-112)
6. Who does Serafina find when she goes to the ravine to get water? (p. 112-113)
7. How has the flood changed Serafina? (p. 115-116)
8. What are they building their new house out of? (p. 123)
9. Is Gregory delivered safely? How is this delivery different than most in the U.S.? (p. 128-130)
10. How successful is the garden? Make a prediction: Do you think it's going to earn the family enough for Serafina to attend school? (p. 133-137)
11. What does Julie Marie reveal to Serafina about going to school? Why didn't Julie Marie tell Serafina this earlier? (p. 135-136)
12. Why do you think Banza found Serafina? (p. 137-139)
13. Does Serafina convince her Manman to let her attend school? What does Manman base her decision on? (p. 146-147)
14. What good news does Julie Marie have to share with Serafina? (p.

149)

15. What does Serafina learn from Julie Marie's father? Why are they leaving? (p. 154)
16. What do Serafina and Gogo find in the garden? What would have happened if they hadn't discovered this soon enough? (p. 157-158)
17. How do the other students treat Serafina when she arrives at school the first day? (p. 164-166)
18. What things does Serafina learn her first day of school? (p. 167-172)
19. Who does she walk home with? (p. 173)
20. Why is Serafina upset with how Manman responds when she gets home from her first day of school? (p. 174-178)
21. Why do they speak French in Haiti? (p. 183)
22. What language does Serafina speak before and after school, when she's doing chores or singing to her brother? Where did this language come from? (p. 183)
23. What does Serafina learn about Christopher Columbus in school? Do you think this is an accurate account of Columbus? (p. 184)
24. What does Serafina celebrate on Jou Lèmò or Day of the Dead? (p. 186)
25. How did Serafina's family celebrate Christmas the year before? (p. 189) Does your family celebrate Christmas? Compare your celebration to Serafina's.
26. What does Serafina notice on Gregory's legs? What do you think is wrong with Gregory? How do you know that Manman is worried even if she doesn't show it? (p. 192)
27. Is Gregory any better by Christmas vacation? (p. 196-197)
28. How does Serafina's family celebrate Christmas this year? (p. 198-200)
29. Knowing the history of the French in Haiti that Serafina has learned, why do you think it makes her sad to find herself thinking in French and not Creole? (p. 205)
30. Why is Serafina struggling to her desire to be in school and learn? What has changed? (p. 206-208)
31. What does Serafina decide to do after school instead of going straight home? Do you think this is a good idea? (p. 212-214)

### Part Three | 219-295

1. Re-read the descriptions on page 217, 221, -223. What do you think is happening? (Hint: It's a type of natural disaster).
2. How do you think it would feel to find yourself outside in the middle of an earthquake? Describe the different sensations you think you would feel.
3. Where does Serafina decide to go once the earthquake has stopped and she can walk again? (p. 230)
4. What does Serafina see as she walks to the city? (p. 232-237)
5. What sayings from Manman and Gogo keep Serafina searching for her family? (p. 241)
6. Who finds Serafina in the city? (p. 244-245)

**Reflective  
Writing  
Questions**

7. Who does Serafina see while riding with Antoinette Solaine? (p. 251-253)
  8. Serafina has a number of questions about the usefulness of staying in school. What are they? How does Antoinette Solaine respond to Serafina? What does she share about her own schooling experience?
  9. Why does Antoinette Solaine believe that it's important for Serafina to stay in school? (p. 257)
  10. What does Julie Marie reveal to Serafina about her 'aunt'? How did this woman treat Julie Marie? (p. 261-262)
  11. Why do you think Serafina doesn't choose to tell Julie Marie about her family? (p. 262)
  12. How does Serafina find Papa? What has happened to him? Where is he? Who helps to rescue him? (p. 269-272)
  13. While Serafina knows she should have gone straight home to Manman, what happened as a result of her choice to try and find the clinic? (p. 279)
  14. How are people attempting to recover from the earthquake? What do Serafina, Papa and Julie Marie see on the first day of their walk home? Where do they sleep? (p. 284-285)
  15. How does Julie Marie react to Serafina's news that her family has moved away? (p. 287-288)
  16. What keeps Julie Marie from being jealous of her friends? How would you interpret what her Manman told her? Do you think this advice would change any of your feelings about other people? (p. 289)
- 
1. Compare Serafina's childhood with your own. How are they different? How are they the same? Compare Serafina's childhood with the average childhood of an American. Are there many similarities? How do you think Serafina would respond to learning about what life is like in the United States?
  2. Think about a path that you walk or take (maybe in the car, on a bus, or on a bike) on a daily basis (think about how you get to school, work, or home). Now, re-read Serafina's description of her walk on page one. Describe what it would feel like to walk your path barefoot. What different terrains would you walk over and/or through.
  3. Think about the many riddles that Gogo shares with Serafina. Which is your favorite? Why? Which do you think you could learn the most from? Why? You can find Gogo's riddles on pages: 6, 8, 13, 24, 29, 52, 55, 65, 91, 134, 154, 155, 194
  4. Serafina asks some tough questions: "What good is being brave if being brave gets you killed? Which is better, to tell the truth and die, or to give the bad people what they want and live?" How would you answer these questions? Historically change is often brought about by violent conflict—do you think that sometimes we have to be willing to make sacrifices in order to make the world a better and more just place? How do we decide who makes those sacrifices?
  5. Describe Serafina's relationship with her mother. Do you think

	<p>they love each other? How well do you think they understand each other? Are they more similar or different? Use examples from the novel to explain your answer.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Why do you think Antoinette Solaine has such an important impact on Serafina? How might Serafina’s life be different if she’d never met Antoinette Solaine? Can you think of someone who has impacted your life like that? Who was it? How did they impact you?</li> <li>7. What do you think of Serafina’s statement “The only unbreakable home is one made from love”? (p.285) Does this change the way you think of the word home? How would you define the word home based on Serafina’s statement? Explain your answer.</li> <li>8. How would you answer Serafina’s question: “There are so many lost and broken people. How can we help them all?” (p. 293). Explain your answer.</li> <li>9. Explain Manman’s philosophy on life: “Life is hard, but no matter what happens, we beat the drum and we dance again” (p. 293).</li> </ol>
<p><b>ABOUT US &amp; THIS GUIDE</b></p>	<p>The Latin American &amp; Iberian Institute (LAI) receives resources from the U.S. Department of Education to support K-12 teaching about Latin America. Our goal is to provide a supportive environment for teaching across grade levels and subject areas so educators can bring regional and linguistic knowledge of Latin America into their classrooms. For more information and materials that support teaching about Latin America in the classroom, visit our website at <a href="http://laii.unm.edu/outreach">http://laii.unm.edu/outreach</a></p> <p>Written by staff at the LAI, <b>Vamos a Leer Educator’s Guides</b> 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 <a href="http://bit.ly/vamosaleer">bit.ly/vamosaleer</a>. This guide was prepared by Katrina Dillon, LAI Project Assistant and Lorraine Archibald, LAI Graduate Assistant.</p> <p>To complement this guide, the LAI oversees the <b>Vamos a Leer blog</b>, which 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 shares relevant resources and curriculum materials. Visit the blog at the following address: <a href="http://bit.ly/vamosaleer">http://bit.ly/vamosaleer</a>.</p>