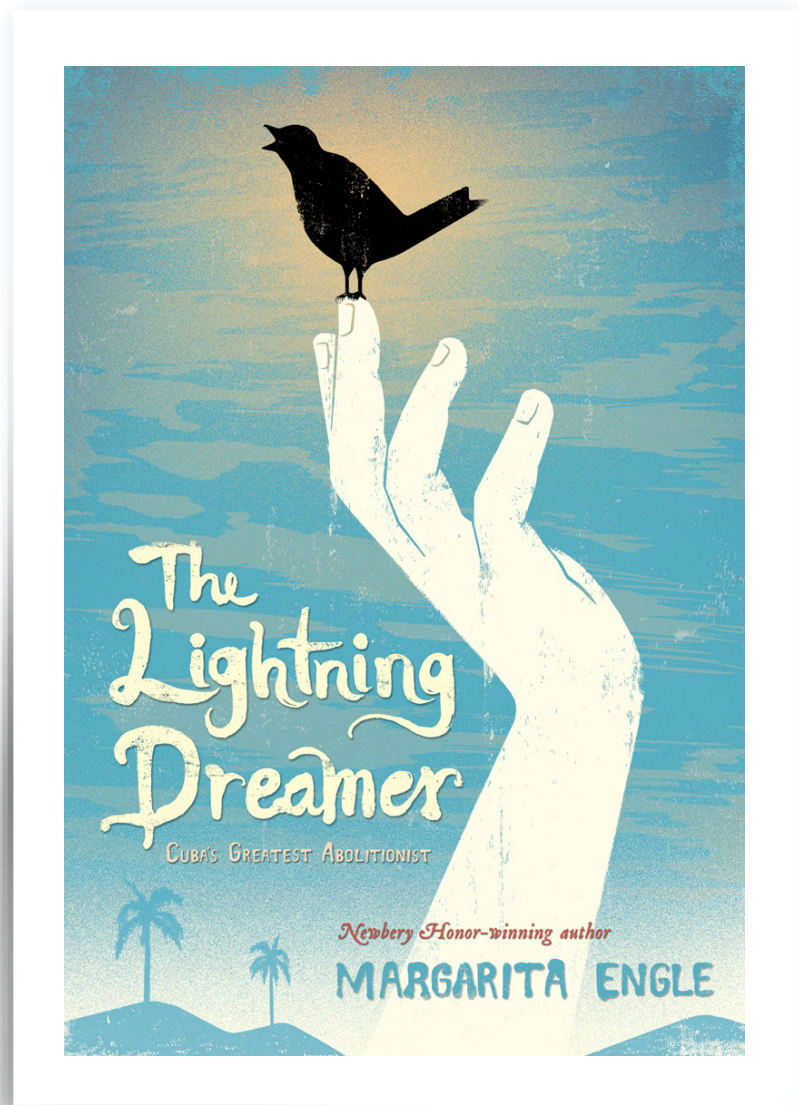


VAMOS A LEER

teaching latin america through literacy



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Educator's Guide

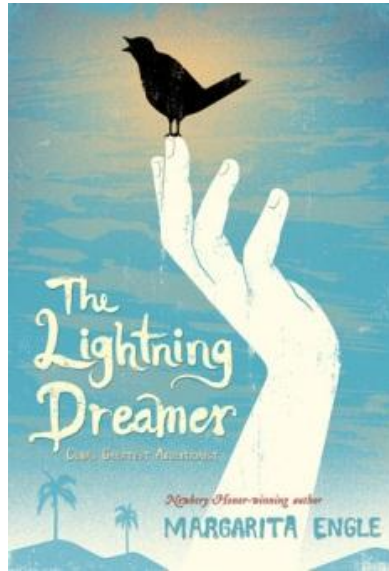
The Lightning Dreamer

Written by Margarita Engle

Published by HMH Books for Young Readers,
2013

ISBN: 9780547807430

Age Level: 12 and up



BOOK SUMMARY

“I find it so easy to forget / that I’m just a girl who is expected / to live / without thoughts.” Opposing slavery in Cuba in the nineteenth century was dangerous. The most daring abolitionists were poets who veiled their work in metaphor. Of these, the boldest was Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, nicknamed Tula. In passionate, accessible verses of her own, Engle evokes the voice of this book-loving feminist and abolitionist who bravely resisted an arranged marriage at the age of fourteen, and was ultimately courageous enough to fight against injustice. Historical notes, excerpts, and source notes round out this exceptional tribute.

AWARDS & RECOGNITIONS:

- 2014 YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults
- School Library Journal's Top Ten Latino-themed Books for 2013
- Teaching for Change 2013 Favorite
- Center for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature selection as a Best Multicultural Book of 2013
- 2014 Pura Belpré Honor Book
- International Reading Association Top Chapter Book for 2013

AUTHOR'S CORNER

About Margarita Engle:



Margarita Engle is a Cuban-American who is the first Latina/o to win a Newbery Honor award in 2008 for *The Surrender Tree: Poems of Cuba's Struggle for Freedom*. Engle describes her love of Cuba, its history and countryside as deeply personal. Her father, a Ukrainian immigrant to the US, whose family fled the pogroms, saw a picture of Trinidad, Cuba and decided he needed to go there. He went and fell in love with Margarita's mother. For a while, Engle and her family visited Cuba during the summers where she formed deep relationships with her grandparents, cousins, the countryside and the culture. In 1960, when the political climate between Cuba and the US became very strained, Engle and her

family had to stop these visits and indeed much of the correspondence between her Cuban family and herself. (US policy at the time would not allow letters/mail to enter into Cuba and Cuban policy would not allow the reverse).

Engle describes her love for Cuba as stemming not only from her personal connection to the island and its people, but also because of her relationship with her great grandmother who grew up in the 1800s on the island. Engle says, "If a child would go to the oldest person in their family and start asking questions. And if the oldest person also remembered conversations and stories told by their grandparents or even great grandparents, you really can go back an amazing length of time and it comes to life" ([Colorín Colorado interview](#)). This ability to learn and travel back in time comes to vivid life in Engle's books. She says, "Writing a historical novel in verse feels like time travel, a dreamlike blend of imagination and reality. It is an exploration" ([author's web site](#)).

Engle has a special ability to bring to life the outdoor landscape so important to her books, in addition to the wonderful characters she bases off real life, or creates. Her appreciation and connection with the outdoors even inspires her to write her poetry in the wilderness, free from distractions of the modern world. "I spend a good deal of time outdoors, allowing the words to inhale fresh air, letting them move to the rhythm of my gait. The process feels like time travel, an exploration, the journey of a seeker; I'm discovering the flow of my characters' thoughts and feelings" ([interview Teaching Books Blog](#)). This flow she gathers from writing outdoors, solidly and beautifully comes through in her writing about

historical characters from Holocaust refugees in Cuba to Cuban suffragettes, to rescue dogs. Engle's free verse books lend a unique element of freedom and discovery to her writing, almost as if the words are truly being carried on the wind through the pages, to the reader's ears.

Engle's award list is exhaustive and deserved, from multiple Pura Belpré Awards, Américas Awards and ALA book awards to countless others, Margarita Engle has a unique ability to transport her readers, young and old, to various points in Cuban history. Her deep affection for the island's nature, people and the myriad of stories this small island holds, are gently placed in the reader's hands and hearts.

For up to date information, please visit Margarita Engle's [website](#).

**USING *The
Lightning
Dreamer*
IN THE
CLASSROOM**

I have never been disappointed by one of Margarita Engle's books and *The Lightning Dreamer* is no exception. It's the fascinating true story of a Cuban woman who worked both for the abolition of slavery and equal rights for women. My guess is that many of you have never heard of Gertrudis Gómez de Avellanda, I certainly hadn't. Engle's ability to bring to life these lesser known but incredibly important historical characters is part of what makes her work so significant. Her novels in verse make historical characters like Tula accessible and real to younger readers.

In writing this review, I was reminded of my obsession with biographies when I was in elementary school. When I was eight years old I decided that I was going to read every biography in my school's library. Our biographies were shelved alphabetically by the name of the person the book was about. When I think about the books that I read then, I remember a number of books about Davy Crockett, Grover Cleveland and Amelia Earhart. Obviously, I didn't make it all the way through, it would seem I stopped somewhere around E. But in thinking back, I'm struck by the lack of diversity in the people represented on my library's shelves. I can only hope that with the availability of books like that of Engle things aren't the same now. If books such as *The Lightning Dreamer*, *The Surrender Tree*, or *Hurricane Dancers* had been available to me then, I may have made it past E in my quest to read all those biographies.

In telling the story of Tula, Engle's book opens up a number of relevant topics for classroom discussion. As Tula becomes increasingly aware of the disparities in society, she begins to both ponder and write about things such as slavery, interracial marriage, and women's rights. Tula grapples with these moral and ethical dilemmas in a language that invites students to question and struggle with her. She provides a way to teach our younger students about times when equal rights for people of color and women were explicitly denied. While it's important to continue to discuss the ways in which equality is still not a reality for all people today, it's just as important to discuss the historical contexts that our contemporary

struggles for equality come from.

Engle gives us a strong female protagonist who fights to remain authentic to the things she believes in, but in doing this, Engle also shows how hard it is to be that kind of person. It's never easy to go against main stream society or to be the outcast among one's friends or family. Through Tula, Engle gives voice to what it feels like to be alienated or exiled for one's beliefs. These are powerful ideas for our students to think about—both those who can identify with Tula's loneliness and those who realize they may be like the people who mocked Tula for being different. Tula is a powerful character, not just because of what she believed, but because of how she chose to stand up for those beliefs. She fought for equality and human rights through her stories and her poetry. She used the power of words as a means to change the minds of those around her. How valuable a lesson for the students in our classrooms—that our words are one of the most powerful tools we have for fighting against the things that try to hold us back. I'll leave you with the words from Gertrudis Gómez de Avellanda that inspired the title of the book—

“The slave let his mind fly free, and his thoughts soared higher than the clouds where lightning forms.”

To learn more about Margarita Engle and her writing process watch her interview with Colorin Colorado [here](#) or at <http://www.colorincolorado.org/read/meet/engle/>. Or, read Engle's guest blog post on the topic of courage [here](#) or at <http://campbele.wordpress.com/2013/12/24/about-courage-3-margarita-engle/>.

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

- [School Library Review](#)
- [Repeating Islands](#)
- [Kirkus Review](#)
- [In Bed With Books](#)
- [Lost In Books](#)

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 curricula:

- [School Library Journal Review and Activities](#)
- [Houghton-Mifflin's Poetry Kit 2013](#)

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.
- 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

Guided Reading Questions

- 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.

Part One: Suns and Rays | Pages 1-35

1. What is an abolitionist? If you're unsure look up the term.
2. Have you ever read a book that make you feel like Tula describes when she writes, "Books are door-shaped/portals/ carrying me/across oceans/and centuries,/ helping me feel/ less alone"? What book was it? Where did it take you? How can a book make you feel less alone? (p. 3)
3. How would the world be different if societies' beliefs about women had not changed and women weren't encouraged to read, to write, or to go to school? How would your life be different? Think about the roles your mother, sister, grandmother or other female figures have played in your life. Would it be the same if they'd never been able to go to school? (p. 3-5)
4. What does it mean to be a "smuggler of words"? (p. 7)
5. What is Mamá's idea of the perfect woman? According to Mamá, what makes a female attractive to men? (p. 9)
6. How is Tula's description of the horse a metaphor for her own situation? (p. 10)
7. What does Mamá think will give them power? Is she correct—does wealth bring power? What else could make a person powerful? (p. 12)
8. Describe Tula's father. What kind of man does he seem to be? How did he feel about slavery? (p. 14-15)
9. What visible burdens do the slave girls carry? What invisible burdens does Tula carry? (p. 17)
10. What does Tula do with her anger and sorrow? (p. 18)
11. Who allows Tula to read? (p. 19)
12. How do Tula's poems make Caridad feel? Why do you think they have this effect? (p. 20-23)
13. What will Tula have to do if she wants unlimited access to books later in life? What would you do if this was your choice? (p. 21)
14. Who was José María Heredia? What did he believe? Why do you

- think his books were banned—what did he write about? (p. 22, 24)
15. Why do you think Tula and Caridad are so moved by his poetry? (p. 22-28)
 16. What was los Soles y Rayos or the Suns and Rays? What did its members believe? (p. 24)
 17. What do you think Caridad means “Heredia is pale/ and has always been free,/ just like Tula”? (p. 26)
 18. What does Tula mean when she says that her grandfather’s plantation is “so lovely/ and so sorrowful/ all at the same time”? (p. 33)
 19. What is ironic about Mamá’s belief that she should be able to order Tula to marry a man for wealth? (p. 34)
 20. What is cruel about her grandfather’s gift? Do you think the gift could symbolize Tula’s life? How? (p. 35)

Part Two: Orphan Theater 1827 | Pages 37-70

1. Why does Tula feel so hopeless now? (p. 39)
2. What does Tula have to apologize to her mother for? What does her mother call her?
3. Where do the nuns send Tula to heal? Why do you they send her there? (p. 43)
4. How does Tula describe the different kinds of poetry? (p. 45)
5. What does Tula do with her poems? Why do you think she does this? (p. 48)
6. What opportunity do the nuns give to Tula? (p. 49) Why do they think this will help her? (p. 49)
7. How is the convent orphanage different for Tula? How does she feel when she is there? (p. 50)
8. What reason does Caridad give Tula for continuing to stay at the house, even though she’s free?
9. How do Tula’s set of rules for the orphan theater represent the ideals she holds for life or society in general? (p. 56)
10. How is Heredia’s *El campesino espantado* (*The Frightened Country Boy*) a tale of injustice? Why do you think it would be banned? (p. 59-60)
11. How are Tula’s poems beginning to change Caridad? What do you think she’s considering doing? (p. 61)
12. How do the plays help to transform the orphans? (p. 63)
13. Why does the elegantly dressed woman abandon her baby? How does this knowledge affect Tula? (p. 67-69)
14. Explain Tula’s words “It is far more monstrous/ than any gruesome legend/ of vampires/ or werewolves”. What is she talking about here? What tale is more gruesome? Why? Do you agree with her? (p. 67-70)

Part Three: The Marriage Market 1828 | Pages 71-109

1. Do you think that Tula will be brave enough to reveal the secret of the abandoned orphans? Do you think readers will listen or care?

- Explain your answers. (p. 73)
2. Tula describes the upcoming marriage her mother and grandfather plan as an attempt “to auction me away/ to the highest –bidding/ rich man.” How is this similar to a slave’s experience? (p. 74)
 3. What does Tula have to do in order to keep peace with her mother? Have you ever had to pretend to be something you’re not in order to make someone else happy? (p. 76)
 4. How are the words that Caridad lists both sweet and sour? What do you think she means by calling them sour? (p. 78)
 5. How did Mamá feel when she was 14? How has this influenced the way in which she deals with Tula? (p. 79)
 6. Who has Tula’s grandfather chosen for Tula to marry? Do you think she’ll like him? What characteristics does Tula want her husband to have? (p. 81)
 7. What do you think the nuns mean when they say “But this rough world prefers/ laws soaked in dirt, not airy ones/ drenched in clear light”? Think about the difference between something covered in dirt or held up to the light. Which ones are more visible, more easily seen, or obvious? (p. 83)
 8. Why does Tula release her goldfinch? (p. 84)
 9. Where does Tula find people who have similar beliefs? Who accompanies her to these places? What are they risking in going to these places? (p. 88-89)
 10. While Tula finds people who agree with her about Cuban independence from a king and freedom for slaves, there is one thing no one agrees with her on. What is it? Why do you think no one believes this is as important as the other two causes? (p. 89-90)
 11. How does Tula hide her thoughts in her plays? What does she write about? (p. 91-92)
 12. Which of Tula’s tales is Caridad’s favorite? What does this tale inspire Caridad to do? How does Mamá punish Tula? (p. 95-97)
 13. What does Tula think of her fiancé when she finally meets him? (p. 100)
 14. What does Tula’s friend Lola do? Why do you think Lola does this? Would she have been allowed to marry the man she eloped with otherwise? (p. 103)
 15. Why do you think that Rosa turns on Tula? (p. 104)
 16. What does Mamá believe will be solved once Tula is married? (p. 107)
 17. Does Tula marry the rich merchant? (p. 109)

Part Four: See Me as I Am 1829 | Pages 111-152

1. What is Tula’s punishment for refusing to marry the rich merchant? (p. 113)
2. What happens to Tula’s grandfather? What does Mamá learn when they read his will? (p. 113-115)
3. Mamá thinks that Tula is crazy, but what does Tula think? How does she explain why she doesn’t seem to fit well with society? (p. 116)

4. How does Tula find freedom in the countryside? (p. 118-120)
5. What story does the old woman tell Tula? Why do you think she tells Tula this story? (p. 125-126)
6. Who is Sab? How did he get his scars? What is his relationship to Carlota? (p. 127-129)
7. Who does Tula become a messenger for? (p. 134-137)
8. Who does Tula fall in love with? (p. 139)
9. What solution does Sab decide will help him get Carlota to marry him? How does Tula respond to Sab's request? How do you think Tula felt when Sab asked her to marry Carlota's former fiancé? (p. 141-143)
10. How does the storyteller help Sab and Tula to better understand the situation? (p. 145-146)
11. How does Tula describe herself? (p. 148) Do you think this is really what she is like? How would you describe her?

Part Five: The Hotel of Peace 1836 | Pages 153-167

1. What is "the swiftest medicine" for Tula? What do you think she means by this? (p. 155)
2. Where did Tula move to? How long has she been there? Why did she move? (p. 155)
3. What is life like for Tula in Havana? Do you think she's changed since moving? (p. 156-159)
4. Where is Caridad now? What is she doing now that she is free to live her own life? (p. 161)
5. What is Tula's novel going to be about? Does this surprise you? (p. 163-164)
6. What two storms is Tula living within during her travels to France? (p. 165)
7. What do you think Tula means in the last lines "All I know is that love/ is not the modern invention/ of rebellious young girls./ Love is ancient./ A legend./ The truth." Explain your answer. (p. 167)

1. Describe the relationship Tula had with her mother. Then, describe the relationship she had with Caridad. Who do you think was more like a mother to her? Why? In what ways did Mamá influence the person Tula became? In what ways did Caridad influence Tula? Explain your answers.
2. Think of the lives that Tula changed through the course of the novel. How did she make the world a different (hopefully better) place to live? What impact do you imagine she had on Cuba?
3. Imagine you are a teenage girl growing up in Cuba during Tula's lifetime. What would your life have been like? How would it have been different from the lives of teenage girls today? Do you think you would have been happy? Frustrated? Sad? Would you be willing to alienate and exile yourself for your beliefs the way Tula did?
4. Words are powerful things. How does *The Lightning Dreamer* demonstrate this? Think of the impact of Heredia's words on Tula, Manuel, and Caridad. How did Tula's words impact the people in

**Reflective
Writing
Questions**

**Extension
Activities**

her life? Have words ever had such an impact on you? Have you ever read a poem or story that changed the way you believed or the person you wanted to be? What was it? How did it change you?

5. Re-read the following quotation from Tula:

“So many people/ have not yet learned/ that souls have no color/ and can never/ be owned.”

What do you think Tula means by this in the context of Cuba in the 1800s? How would these words apply to the world today? Do you think people have learned this lesson yet? Why or why not?

The Surrender Tree

In the Surrender Tree, Margarita Engle writes about the period in Cuban history from 1868 to 1893 during which three different wars for independence were fought. Told from the point of view of Rosa, a freed slave who worked to heal the wounded in all three wars. Also a novel in verse, The Surrender Tree touches on many of the same themes, but told from an entirely different perspective, it would be an excellent book to use in conjunction with *The Lightning Dreamer*. The Educator’s Guide for The Surrender Tree can be found [here](#) or at <http://teachinglatinamericathroughliterature.wordpress.com/the-surrender-tree/>.

The Roles of Women in Society and the Fight for Equality:

An important theme in *The Lightning Dreamer* is the lack of equality between men and women. Included below are lesson plans to extend the classroom discussion of women’s rights and roles in society, the fight for gender equality, and the women’s suffrage movement.

- [Makers: Women who make America by PBS](#)
MAKERS: Women Who Make America tells the remarkable story of the most sweeping social revolution in American history, as women have asserted their rights to a full and fair share of political power, economic opportunity, and personal autonomy. It’s a revolution that has unfolded in public and private, in courts and Congress, in the boardroom and the bedroom, changing not only what the world expects from women, but what women expect from themselves. Lesson plans available [here](#).
- [Women’s Suffrage Teacher’s Guide by Scholastic](#)
Scholastic's Women's Suffrage unit allows students to learn about the quest by women around the world to win the right to vote. Students will read background information while building their vocabulary skills. Students will also explore and analyze maps and dates as well as have a chance to make a personal connection by reading a firsthand account of a woman who voted for the first time in 1920.
- [Women in the World Lesson Plan by New York Times Learning Network](#)
A compilation of lesson plans covering a variety of topics including women’s roles in society, gender stereotypes and women’s movements.

- [Women’s Suffrage by Teaching Tolerance](#)
In this unit plan students will understand that until the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified, many states denied women the right to vote, use primary and secondary sources to understand the ways that women advocated for the right to vote, and evaluate the importance of the federal government in securing women's right to vote

ABOUT US & THIS GUIDE

The Latin American & 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 <http://laii.unm.edu/outreach>

Written by staff at the 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. This guide was prepared by Katrina Dillon, LAI Project Assistant, and Neoshia Roemer and Ailesha Ringer, LAI Graduate Assistants.

To complement this guide, the LAI oversees the **Vamos a Leer blog**, 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: <http://bit.ly/vamosaleer>.