

ISSN 2577-0527



WOW REVIEW

READING ACROSS CULTURES
VOLUME IV, ISSUE 3

Spring 2012
Open Theme

Worlds
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wowlit.org

WOW Review: Volume IV, Issue 3
Spring 2012
Open Theme

Table of Contents

Introduction and Editor's Note	2-3
<i>Beneath a Meth Moon: An Elegy</i>	4-5
<i>Diego Rivera, His World and Ours</i>	6-7
<i>The Great Wall of Lucy Wu</i>	8-11
<i>In Darkness</i>	12-13
<i>Inside Out and Back Again</i>	14-15
<i>Pulelehua and Mamaki</i>	16-17
<i>Queen of Hearts</i>	18-19
<i>Saving Zasha</i>	20-21
<i>The Scorpio Races</i>	22-23
<i>The Wild Book</i>	24-25

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Introduction

The reviews in this issue highlight books with strong, spirited characters whose existence depends on the resiliency they bring to problematic situations. This resiliency is complicated by the complexity of sociocultural factors that constrain or sustain the efforts of each individual. Such complexities are often beyond the control of the characters and reflect the realities of life while providing many points of connection for readers across countries and eras.

Inside Out and Back Again shares the story of a young Vietnamese immigrant who in the 1970's begins a new life in Alabama. Delicate poetic text shares a story of endurance and resilience through cultural tensions. Likewise, cultural complexities mount in *The Great Wall of Lucy Wu* as this American adolescent pursues a course not often sought by a young Chinese-American girl—captain of her basketball team—and struggles with what it means to be both Chinese and American. Determination and strong family influences support her efforts to be resilient while mindful of her cultural heritages. In *Queen of Hearts* and *The Wild Book*, physical challenges become obstacles that call for strength and spirit. *Queen of Hearts* takes readers to WWII Canada where a young girl contracts tuberculosis and must remain in a sanatorium. *The Wild Book*, another book written in poetic text, tells the story of a young girl in Cuba's turbulent early 20th century struggling with dyslexia.

In a more contemporary setting, *Beneath a Meth Moon: An Elegy* and *In Darkness* tell the dark stories of youth whose situations seem to spiral out of control due to a natural disaster. The former shares a young girl's story who, after losing her mother and grandmother to Hurricane Katrina, discovers meth and begins the journey from the false sense of power that meth offers to the personal struggle to overcome its control. *In Darkness* takes readers to Haiti where a young man must survive being trapped within the rubble created by an earthquake as well as the socio-political climate—a situation demanding both physical and mental fortitude. Both books end with the potential for hopeful futures that lie within the resiliency that the reader observes in the making.

For those who find personal connections in the reciprocal support between animals and people, two titles add new perspectives to such powerful relationships. *Saving Zasha* takes readers to post WWII Russia and an action filled, suspenseful story of a boy who demonstrates a heightened sense of agency when his family harbors a German shepherd dog for fear it will be killed in the political climate of the time. *The Scorpio Races*, a fantasy novel, involves readers in the seemingly realistic portrayal of wild horses coming ashore where the attempt to leash their power is a dangerous but fulfilling ritual.

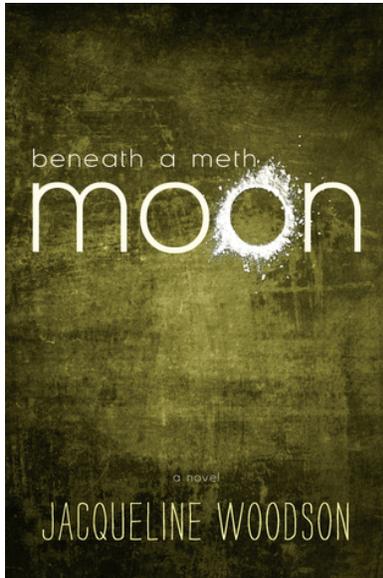
The two picture books in this issue provide other ways of considering resiliency. The name Diego Rivera brings to mind an artist whose life was filled with personal and social conflict. However, *Diego Rivera: His World and Ours*, focuses on his efforts to share the history and plight of the common citizen of Mexico in his extravagant murals. One other title is a reminder of the complexity of the natural world within which its inhabitants survive and continue each day. The cyclical pattern of the Kamehameha butterfly is shared in *Pulelehua and Mamaki*, a fantasy story framed authentically in its author's knowledge of gardening in Hawaii. This picture book not only relates the resiliency of the natural world but it also is a reminder that

beyond resiliency lies transformation—a thought that creates hope within each of the contexts of the books in this issue.

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Beneath a Meth Moon: An Elegy

Written by Jacqueline Woodson

Penguin, 2012, 192 pp.

ISBN: 978-0399252501

“You told me I have to listen if I want to tell stories. Told me the best stories come from other people’s stories” (p. 24).

Laurel’s family has been devastated by Hurricane Katrina, killing her mother and grandmother while she, her father, and her little brother were safe at her aunt’s home in Jackson. Her mother had stayed behind with Laurel’s grandmother who had refused to leave her home. Laurel and the remaining members of her family stay in Jackson for two years and then move to Galilee, Iowa when her father gets a new job. Laurel almost immediately meets Kaylee and a deep friendship develops. She begins her new school, makes the cheerleading team with Kaylee, and hooks up with the star basketball player, T-Bone. It is here where Laurel’s story again takes a turn for the worse.

T-Bone introduces Laurel to “moon” (meth) and she is immediately hooked. Perhaps she is particularly susceptible because of her fragile emotional state, but “moon” doesn’t care; it’s an equal opportunity wrecking ball, destroying anyone in its path. Kaylee tries to intervene and even T-Bone tells Laurel she is in way too deep, but Laurel is immune to their warnings. Moon takes Laurel away from her losses and gives her peace in return.

When Laurel’s father discovers her Moon stash, she tells him it is Kaylee’s. He goes to Kaylee’s house and there he discovers it is actually Laurel’s. Devastated, he returns home; but Laurel is resistant to his desperate pleas. She decides to leave home where she can do as she pleases. At first, T-Bone keeps her supplied, but as she spirals out of control and deeper into the possessive power of Moon, T-Bone cuts off her supply. She finds herself sitting on a street curb in the next town begging for money to buy more Moon.

There, she meets Moses, a painter, who paints the images of those who have died on building walls. Moses tells Laurel he and his sister lost their mother to Meth and he tries to help her in spite of his sister’s warning, “You can’t save that girl, Moses. You don’t have magic powers” (p. 128). He tells Laurel he does not want to end up painting her image on a wall. During a rain storm, a police officer stops to help Laurel and when he realizes he knows who she is, he takes her to a rehab center and notifies her father. The day before she is to be released, Laurel runs away again, returning to the same street. This time she overdoses, but Moses finds her, calls an ambulance, and she is taken to the hospital. She enters a second rehab facility, and after 90 days clean, there is hope she will make it. “It’s a long walk away from Meth’, my counselor said to me. It’s a slow walk, it’s a hard walk, but I put one foot in front of the other. And I keep on moving” (p. 182).

Woodson did a great deal of research in preparing for this book. Her attention to detail and the crafting of story is celebrated in the numerous awards she has won, including ALA Best Book for Young Adults, ALA Notable, Caldecott Honor, Coretta Scott King Award, Margaret A. Edwards Award for Lifetime Achievement, National Book Award Finalist, and Newbery Honor Medal. In *Beneath a Meth Moon*, Woodson once again shares her love of story and the well-penned word.

In addition to Woodson's ability to tell a good story, I read this new novel for another reason. I recently read *Crank* by Ellen Hopkins (2004) and was completely pulled into Kristina's world of meth addiction. Hopkins, whose daughter was addicted to meth, writes with a force and realism that chilled me to the bone. From almost the beginning of Kristina's addiction, while I really hoped she would beat meth, I knew she would not. *Crank* is more than a warning—it is a manifesto—a creed for allegiance to meth—an all or nothing seductive proposition; and unlike *Beneath a Meth Moon*, there is no hopeful ending. Woodson comments about this typical devastating ending to meth users' lives, "I think the hardest part was doing the research on people trying to get clean and seeing how often they ended up coming back to it [meth]....I think I started researching, trying to find the happy ending to it and finding that I needed to write my own happy endings because so many of them were not" (Woodson, J. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=871qCwT7ry4>). By the end of *Beneath a Meth Moon*, we have hope that Laurel will beat her addiction.

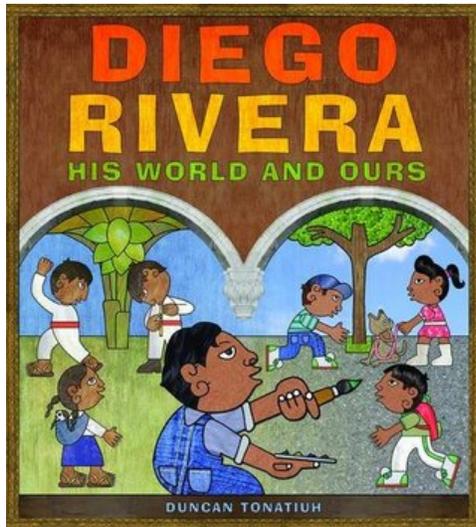
The juxtaposition of *Beneath a Meth Moon* and *Crank* reveals an epidemic among many young people today who seem to live faster and more dangerously than those of the past. In Laurel's and Kristina's stories, we see two very different teenagers who have succumbed to the seductive allure of meth and nearly lose their life, a situation Woodson compares to the prevalence of heroin addiction during the time of her childhood. For those of you, who are both captivated and devastated by the stories of addiction, you might want to read two non-fiction titles: In *Tweak: Growing Up on Methamphetamines*, Nic Sheff (2009) tells the story of his own meth addiction and recovery; while in *Beautiful Boy: A Father's Journey through his Son's Addiction*, David Sheff (2009), Nic's father, tells what he and his family endured throughout Nic's addition.

T. Gail Pritchard, University of Arizona

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Diego Rivera, His World and Ours

Written and Illustrated by Duncan Tonatiuh

Abrams, 2011, pp. 33

ISBN: 978-0810997318

Diego Rivera, His World and Ours, is the winner of the 2012 Pure Belpre Award for illustration given by the American Library Association. In only a few pages, the book describes Rivera's love of drawing as a child and his travels to Spain, where he studied classical realistic art form, and to France, where he studied new methods such as cubism. This book for young readers focuses on Rivera's paintings, especially his murals, and the influences and significance of his work. Tonatiuh uses his own unique style, a mixed media collage form that employs ancient Mexican motifs and blocky figures, to interpret some of the major works of Rivera for young readers. His focus on Rivera's love of Mexican culture, enhanced by travels within his country, is found in Tonatiuh's interpretation of paintings such as *The History of Mexico*, *La Zandunga*, or *The Ribbon Dance*. Tonatiuh's continuous important question of what would Diego paint if he were alive today asks readers to make connections between the artistry and intent of Rivera and their own communities. Possible examples in response to this question are illustrations of the big city, street vendors, or the luchadores wrestling in their costumes. Spanish names and terms are integrated throughout the book. Information provided at the end of the story includes a glossary, author's note with further Rivera history, places to find Rivera's paintings, a bibliography and inspirations (listing of the actual paintings and their locations that inspired the illustrations within the book).

While the book shares the importance of Rivera's work as representations of the culture and history of Mexican people, it is the realization of the potential of purposeful art for young readers that makes this book an outstanding resource. Themes of art, creating socially just communities, and a call for action are evident and accessible for the young as shown in this text from the final pages:

Diego's murals teach us about the past. But they also show a better future for common people. Diego imagined everyone—men and women, boys and girls, of all ages and nationalities—living together and caring for one another. Today Diego is not around to make this happen. So it is up to us to make our own murals and bring them to life (p. 28-29).

Duncan Tonatiuh was born in Mexico City and grew up in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. Graduating from the Parsons New School for Design in New York City, he spends time both there and in Mexico. Inspired by Ancient Mexican art of the Mixtec codex, he states his aim is "to create images that address contemporary issues that affect people of Mexican origin on both sides of the border" (<http://www.duncantonatiuh.com/about.html>). It appears only natural that he would be influenced by the social commentary murals of Rivera.

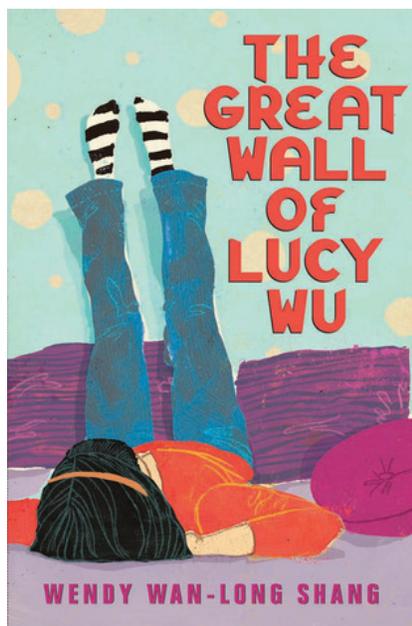
Diego Rivera, His World and Ours can be read with other biographies of this well-known artist as readers learn about perspective and different ways to tell the story of a life. Titles such as *Diego* (Jonah Winter, 2007), *Diego: Bigger than Life* (Carmen T. Bernier-Grand, 2009), and *Diego Rivera* (Mike Venezia, 1994) offer young readers insights to Rivera's life. This book might also be used to nurture the arts as a semiotic form as young learners consider ways that art has been instrumental in people's cultures. Books to help support this purpose might be *In Her Hands, the Story of Sculptor Augusta Savage* (Alan Schroeder, 2009), *The Secret to Freedom* (Marcia Vaughn, 2001), *Dave the Potter: Artist, Poet, Slave* (Laban C. Hill, 2010), and *Woody Guthrie, Poet of the People* (Bonnie Christensen, 2001).

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The Great Wall of Lucy Wu

Written by Wendy Wan-Long Shang

Scholastic, 2011, pp. 312

ISBN: 978-0545162159

“The Chinese part of my life just doesn’t make sense sometimes” (p.21).

This contemporary realistic fiction tells the story of eleven-year-old Lucy Wu and her journey to becoming the captain of a sixth-grade basketball team and leading her team to victory. Lucy is the baby in her family. Her big sister, Regina, is moving out to enter college and major in Chinese culture. Lucy’s big brother is known as a math geek, but often his knowledge in

history impresses Lucy more than his math skills. One day Lucy’s father goes on a business trip to China and returns with a lost aunt, a sister of Lucy’s grandmother, Po Po. The news about the unexpected guest is devastating to Lucy because she was looking forward to having her own room after Regina leaves. While the “new” roommate brings new tension to Lucy at home, Lucy is also facing bullying at school. Another sixth grader, Sloane Conners, is the head of a group, the Amazons, so named by Lucy and her best friend, Madison. “The Amazons can make your life miserable about a thousand different ways” (p.115).

The bullying against Lucy grows harsher and more irritating as the contest for the position of captain of the sixth grade basketball team is getting close. Sloane and Lucy are in the position of competitors for the captain candidates. “Listen, Lucy, if this were for something like, I don’t know, math team, you’d get my vote in a heartbeat. But think about it. If you make captain, the team loses, everyone is going to blame you, ‘cause who ever heard of basketball team lead by some short Chinese girl?” (p. 117). The layers of Lucy’s network such as friends, family, Chinese school community, and even competitors help Lucy to become a strong candidate for captain in spite of her doubts and insecurity. Yi Po, the new aunt, also gradually encourages Lucy to be strong and confident within herself, despite Lucy’s resistance. Eventually Lucy learns to embrace her Chinese heritage and improves her Chinese language skills through her relationship with Yi Po.

The Great Wall of Lucy Wu provides a diverse portrayal of Chinese-Americans. Lucy’s voice adds contemporary experiences to depictions of Asian-American children through the individual differences among Chinese-American and Taiwanese-American characters in this book. For example, Lucy is inquisitive about Chinese culture, yet she is shy and passive about being a “hyphenated” Chinese. Speaking the Chinese language is uncomfortable and going to a Chinese school is not as exciting as playing basketball. In comparison, her older siblings have stronger pride and interest in their heritage culture as does Lucy’s schoolmate, Talent Chang “Are you even fluent in Mandarin?” She [Talent] squinted, like she could tell by

looking at me. If she says that I need help on how to be Chinese, I am going to wrap those eight rolls of tape around her mouth” (p.57).

At the beginning of the story, Lucy’s cultural identity weighs heavier on her American side than on her Chinese side. The different perspectives on Chinese food between Regina and Lucy are a good example. “Regina claims, ‘You are CHINESE. You are supposed to like Chinese food,’ she hissed. Lucy replies, ‘I do like Chinese food. There are plenty of dishes from Panda Cafe that are just fine with me, like their egg drop soup and chicken fried rice.’ Regina rolled her eyes. ‘That’s not real Chinese food. Panda Cafe cannot even begin to compare with the Golden Lotus’” (p.16-17). Lucy’s voice illustrates what it is like to be an American kid who happens to have Chinese heritage. In the past, many Chinese-American protagonists’ experiences in children’s literature were often depicted within historical contexts and folklore (Cai, 1994). Also new immigrant experiences tend to perpetuate only certain Asian-American experiences in literature. Lucy’s voice reflects an 11-year-old child in a contemporary setting who is not of new immigrant status. Lucy is analytically picky about food and has a love-hate relationship with her older sister like many other children. “Plunk! The waiter dropped it on my plate with a soft thud. It was small and gray, no bigger than a deck of cards. It wasn’t pretty, either, like some of the other dishes. It looked like bits of meat tacked together in one lump. What was this?” (p.14). “At that moment, I really, really hated Regina and I really really wanted a plate of lasagna” (p.12).

The author invites us to think about the delicate boundaries between a collective perspective on cultural groups and stereotypes. “Who did Regina think she was, telling me how or how not to be Chinese? I am sure there are people, maybe lots of people, in China who do not love eating pig’s ears and other weird stuff, and no one ever calls them out and tells them that they are not Chinese enough” (p.19). The author also invites individualism through Lucy’s interaction with her Taiwanese-American friend, Talent. “Everyone seems to think we should be friends because we’re both Chinese, short and in the same grade. The resemblance ends there, though” (p. 28).

Lucy’s passion for playing basketball is free from gender stereotypes. The significance of basketball for Lucy is to get away from the typical Asian girls’ childhood cultural experiences. School curriculum and social emphasis on childhood may be similar globally but also differs. The combination of an 11-year-old girl and the popularity of basketball may be more common in an American childhood, and such illustrations of Lucy’s interest and personality reinforce her being an American child. The binary notion of Chinese or American is reflectively divided through her dialogue around her non-Chinese friend like Madison. “Madison doesn’t have surprise relatives from foreign countries. Her family practically came over on the Mayflower.” (p.27). Such symbolism about “genuine American-ness” shows the author’s thoughtful observation of Diasporas’ common perception of social hierarchy without offering arguments.

Although Lucy’s story is contemporary, her Chinese heritage is awakened, provoked, and enhanced by four major people through a range of cultural components in language arts,

history, tradition, and cultural ethos. Yi Po's story serves all of those cultural aspects reflecting her life experiences in China. Kenny, Harrison, and Talent help Lucy to get close to her Chinese heritage through different peer influences. Harrison is a biracial Chinese boy to whom Lucy is attracted and his interest in Chinese language learning reduces Lucy's resistance against Chinese school attendance. Yi Po tells family stories about how she was separated from Po Po, Lucy's grandmother, and how the Chinese Revolution changed her life. Lucy warms up to Yi Po and the boundaries separating them dissolve. Eventually Lucy appreciates her Chinese heritage. Kenny's insights and empathy for Yi Po's lost childhood informs Lucy, as well as readers, about the Chinese Cultural Revolution and its historical consequences. Readers are again invited to think about the danger of collective understandings as Lucy is reminded of her grandmother Po Po's suffering in the past due to her physical Asian appearance. This is a powerful validation of the Asian-American experience and their diasporic history in the United States. "I knew that my grandmother and mother had to work in a warehouse, cleaning, just to make some money. What I didn't know was that they had to go to dozens of places to look for work, because people refused to hire them, thinking they were Japanese. Some people spat on them, and called them 'dirty Japs'"(p. 39).

English and Mandarin code-switching are integrated throughout the book. This linguistic representation is unique and rare among recently published books that are multicultural. Children will benefit culturally from the code-switching and the short stories around proverbs. The use of Mandarin proverbs and symbolism and their life applications is one of the greatest features of the book. The sense of humor in this book manages sensitive social and cultural issues around stereotypical understandings in a constructive and positive way. For example, the father prioritizing math and engineering over history reminds us that the nature of stereotype is often associated with fact. At the same time the universal theme on parents' expectations and children's dilemma to honor their dreams and their parents' opinions are realistically illustrated through Kenny and Lucy as their parents disapprove of history and basketball for future careers.

The author's personal story about family photos, her correspondence with a genealogy researcher in China, and her reflection on "China's difficult history" are grounded in this book. Although this is the first book that Wendy Wan-Long Shang wrote, the literary quality and cultural authenticity are highly appreciated. Besides authenticity in portrayal of Chinese-American culture, the authenticity of an 11-year-old girl's childhood is thoughtfully considered based on Wendy Wang-Long Shang's experiences with children through her various positions in the community, such as juvenile justice attorney, literacy volunteer, tutor, and mother of three.

This story shows how history is connected to our present through the relation of Lucy's contemporary life in the United States and the surprising guest from the lost past in China. This book could be read alongside books about the Chinese Cultural Revolution, such as *Red Scarf Girl* (Ji-Li Jang, 1997), *Revolution Is Not A Dinner Party* (Ying Chang Compentine, 2007), *Little Green: Growing up During The Chinese Revolution* (Chun Yu 2005). These books portray young children's reflections on the Chinese Cultural Revolution similar to Yi Po's childhood story. Another set of books that can be read for the theme of contemporary Asian-American children learning their heritage culture is *Project Mulberry* (Linda Sue Park, 2005) and *Archers' Quest* (Linda Sue Park, 2006). Protagonists in both books have

strong American identities and gradually learn to be Korean as well through a range of journeys.

Reference

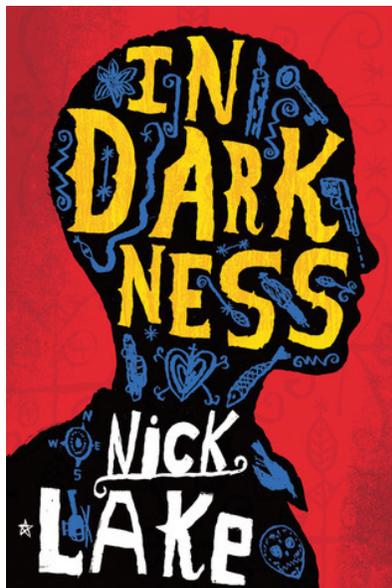
Cai, M. (1994). Images of Chinese and Chinese Americans mirrored in picture books. *Children's Literature in Education*, 25, 3, 169-191.

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In Darkness

Written by Nick Lake
Bloomsbury, 2012, 339 pp.
ISBN: 978-1599907437

This novel tells the story of Haiti – both past and present – by weaving together two historical eras through the life of a 15-year-old Haitian boy, Shorty, and that of Haiti’s great liberator, Toussaint L’Ouverture. They become joined spiritually while Shorty waits to be rescued from the goudougoudou, a creole word for earthquake, on January 12, 2010.

Shorty recounts events from the past six years of his young life and his longing to find his twin sister, Marguerite, who was snatched up by a rival gang in Cité Soleil, described as one of the poorest, most violent slums in the world. Twins are imbued with the power of the Marassa who are twin lwa or gods in the vodou pantheon. Meanwhile, Shorty remains trapped inside the collapsed l’Hôpital du Canape-Vert in Port-au-Prince where he was recovering from gunshot wounds – that is, until his world came tumbling down upon him. He describes his hospital room as so dark amid the fallen walls and human remains that his only hope for hanging onto life is to hang onto consciousness. He does this by engaging his mind in the recollection of the events of his life.

Shorty’s story tells the reader about the deep and despairing poverty that drives mothers to abandon their babies, that causes young men to seek protection through involvement with gangs, and leads to the toppling of Haiti’s internal security after the final days of Aristide’s presidency. Shorty reflects on his acquaintance with one of the most notorious gang leaders in the Cité, Dread Wilmè, revered by pro-Aristide supporters, including Shorty’s manman, until killed by the UN Peacekeeper. He recalls the day when Wilmè saved his life from the “peacekeepers” who randomly shot at anyone who could be a gangster or bandi.

After Shorty’s father is killed by armed thugs and his sister kidnapped, he adopts the lifestyle of two neighborhood bandi – Biggie and Tintin. The characterization of Biggie and Tintin appear to be based on two other real life characters, Bily and the Haitian Tupac, who are featured in the documentary, *The Ghosts of Cité Soleil* (2007), a controversial film by Asger Leth. Toussaint L’Ouverture, becomes a metaphor for Haiti’s rise and demise. He represents Haiti’s history and evolution out of slavery. For Shorty, Biggie, and Tintin, Toussaint is not just a hero, but one whose life is cut short when he is captured and imprisoned in the dark cell where he ultimately dies. Toussaint’s story is told along with Shorty’s. Both are trapped in darkness. However, both merge together spiritually and emerge into an uncertain future for Haiti.

Nick Lake provides an excellent realistic depiction of life in Haiti for a young man, Shorty, who must beat the odds to survive not only the street life of Cité Soleil and

grinding poverty but also the worst natural disaster in Haiti's history. Lake tells the story as though he had been an observer of Shorty's life. We know, though, that Shorty is not a real person and the story is fictional; however, what Lake knows is that there are young men like Shorty everywhere in the Cité with his life experiences and struggles. Lake accurately describes Toussaint L'Ouverture and Dread Wilmé, but takes creative license in their depiction in the story. Still, Lake maintains authenticity for both historical characters.

One area of questionable authenticity is Lake's use of French and Haitian Creole. He interjects creole words such as anyen, which means both "anything" and "nothing," but it is unclear why he uses this and other insignificant words so often. Creole words like manman, meaning "mama," can be understood in the text and such words help to add authenticity to the language. For the average young adult reader, it would be beneficial to include a glossary and pronunciation key for the Creole words. Another area of questionable authenticity is the inclusion of French in everyday language and in vodou chants. Although French is one of Haiti's official languages, it is rarely spoken in everyday contexts and never spoken in vodou chants. At times Lake will mix up Creole and French in the same sentence or chant. However, language authenticity is present in Lake's use of colorful street language often heard by young men who live as gangsters on the street. Thus, the language in the book could be problematic for authenticity purposes.

I offer this critique as one who began traveling to Haiti in 2003 to provide professional development to Haitian teachers and investigate human rights abuses as a volunteer with AUHMOUD, a legal organization that advised those in the poorest sectors of the Haitian society. I have made multiple visits to Cité Soleil, both as a human rights volunteer and during the initial research for my dissertation.

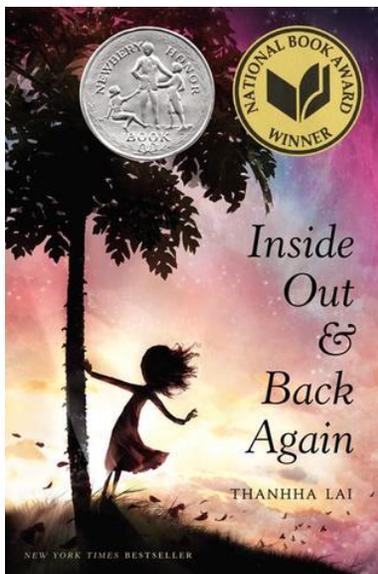
In Darkness is riveting and an excellent read for young adults of many backgrounds and interests. It may be a challenge for some readers to access if they do not know who Toussaint L'Ouverture is and why his story is relevant to Shorty's story. *Open the Door to Liberty* (Anne Rockwell, 2009) is a biography of Toussaint's life for children that might be useful. A brief introduction in the story could help give young readers the background knowledge they might need to understand the significance of the two characters, the historical periods in which they lived, and a brief explanation about the organization of the book.

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Inside Out and Back Again

Written by Thanhha Lai
HarperCollins, 2011, 272 pp.
ISBN: 978-0061962783

It is 1975 and the war between North and South Vietnam continues. Ha, her mother and her three brothers are celebrating Tet, the Vietnamese new year, and praying for the return of their father who has been missing in action for nine years. Life is becoming challenging as the war moves closer to their home. Ten-year-old Ha, however, is more concerned with her blossoming papaya tree and her upcoming birthday than she is with the increasing prices of food and fuel. With their lives in danger, the family escapes on a cramped navy ship just before the fall of Saigon, and end up in a refugee

camp on Guam. Accepted as immigrants to the United States, the family is sponsored by a used car salesman in Alabama who needs a mechanic and is impressed with the engineering background of Ha's oldest brother Quang. So begins Ha's journey and adjustment to American life. Her strong sense of self and place that was rooted in Vietnam is juxtaposed with her new and disorienting life in Alabama.

Based on the author's own experiences (although she was actually part of a family of 10), Thanhha Lai brilliantly takes the reader through the tough adjustment of learning English and adapting to American teenage life. For anyone who has ever been thrust into another culture as an adolescent, Lai's descriptions ring true as they relate Ha's teasing by classmates, bewilderment over customs that don't make sense, and struggles to communicate in another language. Right from the start, when classmates think Ha is laughing instead of saying her name, the story evokes a range of emotions familiar to immigrants especially that of feeling twisted inside out while struggling to discover one's identity in a new place and in a new language.

The pacing of this novel in verse draws the reader into the story. The taut narrative reflects the lyricism and pictorial nature of Vietnamese poetry. Embedded in Ha's reflections are her longing for Saigon, its people, foods, culture, and natural beauty, which challenges the view that all immigrants are happy to be in the U.S. and don't long for their home country. The strength of this novel is the brilliant use of space, fonts, and punctuation that give a sense of the disorientation Ha feels during her first year in the U.S. Lai poetically transcribes Ha's efforts to pronounce the difficult sounds in English (MiSSSiSS WaSSington) and her puzzlement over grammatical rules that do not make sense to her: "Brother Quang says / add a s to nouns / to mean more than one / even if there's / already an s / sitting there. / Glass/Glass-es / All day / I practice / squeezing hisses / thorough my teeth. / Whoever invented / English / must have loved / snakes" (p. 118). Her strong family ties help her negotiate new territory even as her mother and brothers struggle to create their own new identities and sense of self. While the story is serious, it is also humorous, reflecting the hilarity of Lai's real-life family. Whether it's

becoming a Baptist in order to fit into the neighborhood or learning martial arts to avoid bullies, Ha and her family are creative in figuring out how to carve a niche for themselves in their new home.

Inside Out and Back Again is an important addition to the body of literature dealing with immigration. As more and more immigrant children end up in American classrooms, this book can play an important role in helping teachers understand what some of their new students are experiencing as they learn English. Also, as noted immigration scholar Suarez-Orozco (2008) points out in *Learning a New Land*, meaningful positive relationships are important in the academic adaptation to school in another country. Missus Washington, Ha's tutor, could be looked at as a role model for caring professionals who seek to welcome immigrant children into their classrooms.

Books that would pair well with *Inside Out and Back Again* include *My Name is Sangoel* (Karen Lynn Williams, 2009) that addresses the issue of names. It would also pair well with books describing the difficulty of the immigrant experience, such as *La Linea* (Ann Jaramillo, 2006), *The Arrival* (Shaun Tan, 2007), and *The Lotus Seed* (Sherry Garland, 1997).

Reference

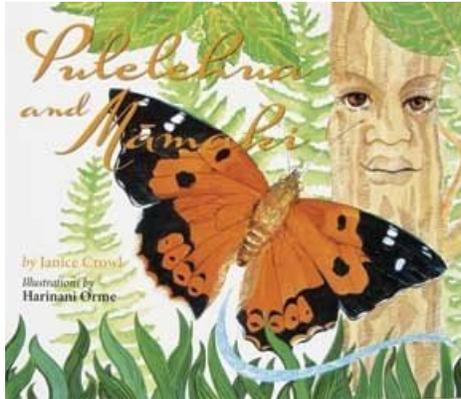
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Pulelehua and Mamaki

Written by Janice Crowl

Illustrated by Harinani Orme

Bishop Museum Press, 2009, np.

ISBN: 978-1581780901

Deep within the Hawaiian rainforest, Pulelehua, the Kamehameha Butterfly, (*Vanessa Tameamea*), is beckoned by a mamaki tree, (*Pipturus Albidus*). At first Pulelehua does not seem to notice Mamaki but then Pulelehua

recalls how Mamaki had sheltered her as a young caterpillar. When the two reunite, Pulelehua expresses how grateful she is to Mamaki and Pulelehua knows that Mamaki is the best place to leave her newborn egg. The wise and nurturing Mamaki cares for Pulelehua's offspring, Ke Li'i, as he progresses through the stages of metamorphosis by warning him against danger and by providing the sustenance that he needs for growth. When Ke Li'i is transformed into a butterfly he must say aloha (goodbye) to Mamaki. Mamaki is saddened but comforted by the knowledge that she will someday take care of Ke Li'i's keiki (children) too.

In light fantasy form, *Pulelehua and Mamaki* is the simple story of the life cycle of a Kamehameha butterfly. It emphasizes the unique interplay between the butterfly and the mamaki tree, carefully depicting how the plants and animals of the Hawaiian ecosystem are closely intertwined in nature. At the end of the book, the author provides scientific information about the Kamehameha butterfly and the mamaki tree and their rainforest friends using a non-fiction format. This information is followed by a glossary of scientific words presented in the text, a glossary of Hawaiian words, and a reference list.

This book is a wonderful example of the intersection between culture and science. Author Janice Crowl and Illustrator Harinani Orme weave elements of culture in the text and illustrations. Hawaiian words are used throughout the story and the Hawaiian cultural sensitivity to plants and animals is apparent. Readers enjoy the poetic melody of the text, "Hapu`u and palapalai ferns nodded as a cool, moist breeze blew through the forest. 'Ohi`a trees swayed to and fro as if dancing a slow graceful hula" (pg. 9). At the same time they glean scientific facts. "Like all Kamehameha Butterfly caterpillars, he was a leaf roller. First he cut a piece of the leaf. Then he folded the leaf edge over his body. Finally he made silk and used it to close up the leaf around himself" (pg. 14). The author grew up in Hawai'i and is a master gardener who also authored a popular book on container gardening in Hawai'i. To write this story she spent many hours consulting with cultural advisors and with scientists from the Bishop Museum. The publisher of this book, Bishop Museum Press, is particularly committed to scientific and historical accuracy and cultural appropriateness.

Along with Crowl's text, Orme's exquisite illustrations lure readers into the Hawaiian rainforest. Readers can almost hear the whispers of the forest, feel the cool, moist breeze

and at the same time get a guided informational tour of the flora and fauna that live harmoniously within the forest. *Pulelehua and Mamaki* was the 2010 Ka Palapalapo`okela Award Winner for Children's Literature.

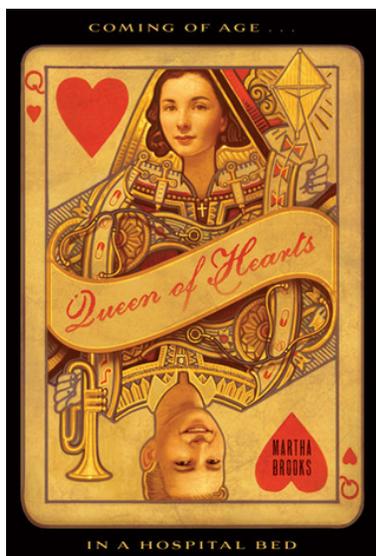
This book can be paired with other books on butterfly transformations, such as *Where Butterflies Grow* (Joanne Ryder & Lynne Cherry, 1989). Another possibility is pairing this text with other cultural/science books about Hawai'i that enhance children's understanding the natural and cultural world such as, *Naupaka* (Nona Beamer, 2008).

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Queen of Hearts

Written by Martha Brooks

Farrar Straus Giroux, 2010 Canada/2011 U.S., 211 pp.

ISBN: 978-0374342296

Set in Manitoba, Canada during World War II, *Queen of Hearts* is the first person narrative of Marie-Claire, a French-Canadian farm girl who spends her adolescence in a tuberculosis sanatorium. When Uncle Gérard comes to visit, the family assumes his broken health is the result of a drunken life. After staying with the family for a few months it is discovered that he has, in fact, a very advanced case of TB, which has spread to Marie-Claire and her younger siblings, Luc and Josée. The three children are placed in a sanatorium to recover.

For Marie-Claire, who has recently experienced her first kiss, this separation from her family is an opportunity to explore love and friendships, as well as a time to learn how to go on living with loss and grief. This is a potent brew, especially when combined with fighting TB, literally fighting for life.

True to the “sick lit” genre (a particular form of YA novels that focuses on teenage girls facing terrible diseases and developing friendships as a means of coping), the text revolves around Marie-Claire’s friendship with her roommate, Signy, a very ill girl who is also very much alone. Through Signy, Marie-Claire confronts her own demons and her own life. A novel about illness, this is also a book about the resilience of family, forgiveness, and, ultimately, the difficult and dangerous feat of growing up.

Martha Brooks is a famous, award-winning young adult author in Canada who sets her stories in her home country. In the preface to the novel, Brooks explains that much of the story is based on her own experiences living in a TB sanatorium in Manitoba due to her parents’ jobs. The author is writing about her own culture based on historical and personal experience.

The question that permeates is what makes this novel particularly Canadian, barring its setting. This is a tricky question to answer as Canadian culture seems, on the outside, to be very similar to U.S. culture. The only surface difference was a couple of French phrases and French names. To find out more about what Canadian culture is, according to Canadians, I did a web search and found an informative article from *The Globe and Mail* (<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/archives/article801204.ece>). The author of the article interviewed Canadians and found the following, “So that’s Canadian culture; it doesn’t exist, it’s regional, and it’s multicultural or any combination of the three. In many ways it’s all of those things. It is a complex culture, shaped by all the cultures that form it. Maybe it’s this complexity that causes it to defy definition. Or maybe its complexity is its definition” (S. Phipps, 2009).

In the case of *Queen of Hearts*, the setting is rural and on the prairie so this is the Canada that is portrayed. The characters are hard-working, the land is inhospitable, and farming is a dicey business. While the protagonist’s family is of French stock, the reader is not sure if the family

speaks French within the family, but it is clear in Marie-Claire's friendship with Signy, whose family is from Iceland, that she has no problem communicating with her roommate.

As an American reading this novel, I was struck by the egalitarian nature of the sanatorium as both rich and poor suffered together. Additionally impressive was the fact that Marie-Claire's family members were able to maintain their dignity despite not having the money to pay for their three children to heal.

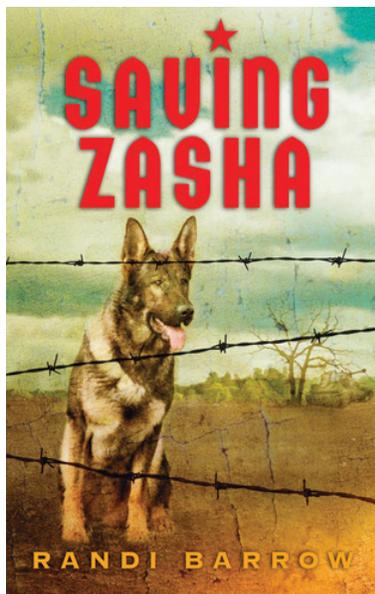
For greater insight to the Canadian culture as revealed in its literature for young adults, *Queen of Hearts* could be part of a text set that includes *Half Brother* (Kenneth Opel, 2011), a realistic fiction text set in 1970 Victoria that reveals concerns and interests around the scientific use of animals; *The Night Wanderer: A Native Gothic Novel* (Drew Hayden Taylor, 2007), a supernatural romance written by a Native Canadian that is set on a First Nations Reservation; and *Rough Magic* (Caryl Mullin, 2010), a fantasy novel uniquely retelling Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

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Saving Zasha

Written by Randi Barrow

Scholastic, 2011, 229 pp.

ISBN: 978-0545206327

This suspense-filled novel is set in post-World War II Russia with a plot that revolves around a family hiding and training a German shepherd dog. Devastated by Germany in WWII, anything German is hated in Russia, and so when Mikhail comes across a dying man and his dog, he believes that the dog will be killed if its presence becomes known in their rural community. The family's willingness to care for the pregnant dog despite the danger of being labeled traitors is set within the larger context of their struggle to survive and their search for Mikhail's father who is missing in action. Other elements of the plot include a

secret Russian program to breed a super dog, a classmate who spies on Mikhail, and canine thieves who steal dogs because of their scarcity after the war. The book is a page-turner with each new threat heightening the sense of danger. A historical note about the experiment to breed the Black Russian terrier is included.

Many readers will be drawn to this book as animal-lovers and because of the engaging suspense. Teachers will find the book of interest because so little is available for children about the aftermath of WWII in Russia. Reviews of the book are positive, calling it an engaging and hopeful animal story with a strong sense of time and place that provides readers with details and background information about 20th century Russian life and history. The one critique is that character development is sometimes sacrificed to action.

Because I was working with an educator from Russia, Sasha Kuchuk, on a project to create a Russian language and culture book kit, this book seemed like a perfect fit to engage kids through a dog story while also sneaking in Russian culture and history. Sasha's response was a strong sense of violation as a Russian due to inaccuracies and a lack of authenticity in the book. While the author was inspired by events that did occur in Russia, such as the super dog breeding program and the use of dogs on battlefields, Sasha felt that the author used Russia merely as a convenient setting for her message and story. The author's note indicates research on dogs and warfare, but this same research was not extended to a realistic representation of Russian life and culture. For example, Sasha pointed out that the lifestyle of the characters bears little resemblance to actual life in Russia after WWII. The family lives in their own farm house on their own farm land, but there was no such thing as private property in Russia during that time period. Having a newspaper published in a remote northern village at that time is another detail that is highly unlikely. Sasha indicated that the author did not understand how people lived in villages, the tremendous suffering in Russia after WWII, and the degree to which people's lives were in shambles. She also pointed out that while the threat of killing German shepherd dogs may have occurred, that was not a widespread sentiment or problem. The biggest issue for Sasha was the lack of authentic Russian setting to the point that she would not have recognized the book as Russian without the author's label. The one

aspect of the book that does appear Russian is the use of Russian names, but those seem to have been selected from a list of first and last names without research on patronymic names and how Russians actually address each other.

This book represents the problems that ensue when an author with a compelling story chooses a setting that fits the theme but then fails to research and understand the culture and setting. In this case, the setting is a backdrop for the author's message. Given the small number of books available for children with a Russian setting, the misinformation and lack of an authentic Russian context makes this book highly problematic, particularly since the book is represented as historical fiction. Also of concern is the lack of research by mainstream review journals, none of which note the major inaccuracies within the book. The author's web site indicates that Randi Barrow is an adoption attorney from California, but does not provide any information on her research or sources for the book related to Russian culture.

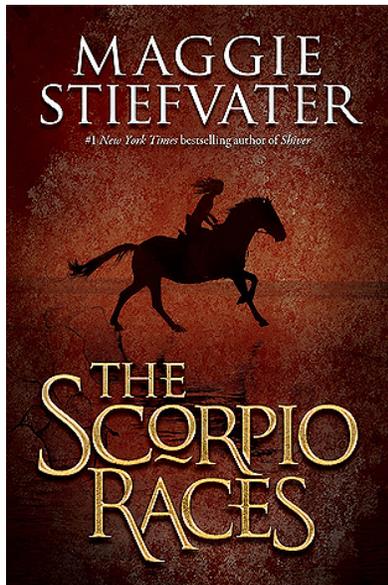
Few novels for teens and children on historical or contemporary Russia are currently in print in the U.S. One highly recommended book is *Breaking Stalin's Nose* (Eugene Yelchin, 2011), a recent award-winning novel that is well written and historically accurate about a dark period in Russian history when Stalin created a culture of fear and oppression. The problem is that there are not contemporary novels that provide more positive depictions of current life in Russia to balance the darkness and fear of this book. One book can never reflect the range of experiences within any culture. The lack of books with strong contemporary or historical representations creates the context for misperceptions and stereotypes and perpetuates a lack of understanding and knowledge about Russian life and culture.

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The Scorpio Races

Written by Maggie Stiefvater
Scholastic, 2011, 416 pp.
ISBN: 978-0545224901

“There is a girl on the beach” (p. 97).

Part mystery, part adventure, part romance, *The Scorpio Races* presents readers with Thisby Island in the Scorpio Sea where the male inhabitants harness the power of the capall uisce—horses from the sea—to race once a year for honor, for glory, for the economic change it can make in their lives. The horses are dangerous, striving to reenter the water, while their masters

attempt to keep them racing on the beach. Nineteen-year-old Sean Kendrick knows how dangerous they can be. He was ten when he watched his father lose not only the race, but his life to the horses. Yet as a child, Sean had begun his kinship with the capall uisce, and is considered by many on the island as a type of whisperer of the dangerous breed that must be captured and tamed when they come on land once a year. Sean is master of his own beloved Corr, the water horse that has been with him since he was a boy, yet the horse does not belong to him legally, and, thus, Sean races year after year to earn the money needed to make Corr his own. This year is different as now there is an island girl, Kate, willing and ready to race her own island pony against the water horses to keep her family and home intact. An adventure story that will appeal to both male and female readers, *The Scorpio Races* will keep you enthralled until the very end of the book.

The Scorpio Races is an atmospheric novel that draws readers into the island community, the myths of the water horses, and the “in-between place” where reality and fantasy dovetail so effortlessly that adolescents will wish such a place existed even as they realize that if it did, it would be a rugged and dangerous community. Sean and Kate are fully-developed and well-rounded characters who facilitate a lived-through and aesthetic experience for readers. Their growing relationship is questioned by many of the townspeople, but readers will know that it is a natural relationship of equals. This is a great text to be combined with other myths from across the world, and especially with myths from the British Isles about Selkies and mermaids. It could also be used as a way for students to discuss “women’s work” and how societies change (or don’t) when societal norms are challenged. Of course, it could also be used with stories of horses and racing, classics such as *National Velvet* (Enid Bagnold, 1965) or *The Black Stallion* (Walter Farley, 1941). In a unit on myths, this book could be paired with others such as *Selkie Girl* (Laurie Brooks, 2010), or *Sirena* (Donna Jo Napoli, 2000). If looking at how young people may fight for the survival of their communities, their families, or the larger society, then *The Scorpio Races* could be paired with *Make Lemonade* (Virginia Euwer Wolff, 2006), *The Last Book in the Universe* (Rodman Philbrick, 2002), or *Partials* (Dan Wells, 2012). While very different books, a study with these four novels would be great reads for most adolescents.

The Scorpio Races contains themes about the importance of family, the acknowledgement of geography and society's response to it, the need for others to grow as individuals and as a culture, and the beauty of myths. The story allows readers to live through a truly mesmerizing story where both males and females are instrumental to family and community—and this is done with an eye on adventure and danger! Readers will also be able to think about how taking a stand, and holding steady to their convictions and a work ethic are admirable traits to possess.

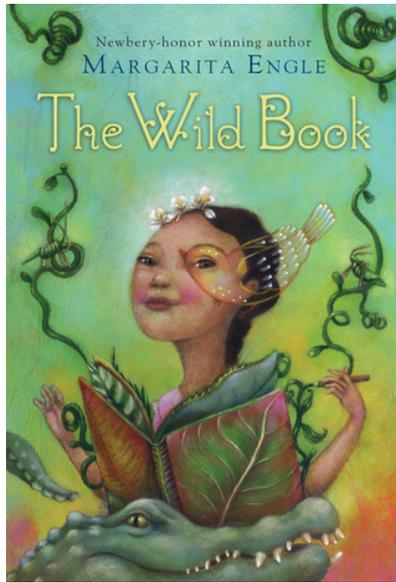
Author Maggie Stiefvater started her conception of the story with myths of water horses in mind, but took her own ideas and created what is now *The Scorpio Races*. More information about the book and the author can be found at http://www.amazon.com/Maggie-Stiefvater/e/B001JSBZZ6/ref=ntt_dp_epwbk_0 and <http://maggiestiefvater.com/the-scorpio-races/>. The book has recently been optioned for a movie. Information about water horse myths can be found at <http://fantasyhorses.homestead.com/water.html>.

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The Wild Book

Written By Margarita Engle
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012, 121pp.
ISBN: 978-0547581316

The story opens in the year of 1912 on a farm in Cuba with little Fefa and her Mamá leaving the doctor's office where the doctor has just declared that Fefa has "word blindness" and that she will never be able to read or write. Fefa is stunned and confused, while Mamá is determined not to let this diagnosis affect her daughter's determination to learn to read and write. She begins immediately with encouraging words of patience. Mamá gives Fefa a book, which alerts Fefa's fear of words moving around and slipping off the pages. But as Mamá gives her the book she tells Fefa to imagine the blank pages as a garden, and to spread wildflower seeds all over the pages and watch her words sprout and grow. Fefa is thrilled to learn the book is truly filled with blank pages and she wonders when or even if she will be able to fill it with words. Inspired by her mother's positive outlook, Fefa continually and patiently practices her writing in this wild diary throughout the novel.

As the novel continues daily family life, associations with siblings, a yearly family outing, and cultural traditions typical for Cuban girls and boys are described. Within each of the family insights there is an underlying fear of the dangers of kidnappers and family tragedies. Margarita Engle's word choice and elegant flow of language allows the reader to be aware of the dangers without turning this into a novel of terror, which mirrors the harmony of the paternal love in this story for the children. Engle has included in this personal family memoir brief glimpses of the times in Cuba's history she has accomplished so well in her award winning novels *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano* (2006) and *The Surrender Tree: Poems for Cuba's Struggle for Freedom* (2008).

Fefa's struggles with her school work continues as does her fear of reading OUT LOUD as the words slip and slide all over the pages. Yet, she continues to practice her handwriting which becomes beautiful, and she slowly begins to recognize written words. These skills ultimately help her entire family, as the reader will see in the end. Engle shares in the Author's Notes that her grandmother learned to read and write beautifully and wrote many letters to her family members during her lifetime.

The glimmer of hope that shines through troubled times in all of Margarita Engle's work beams once again in this charming memoir of her grandmother, filled with determination to press on no matter what the difficulty, knowing there is no obstacle that cannot be overcome. Engle's passion for both Cuba and her family is revealed throughout these pages of the struggles and ultimate triumph of her grandmother's struggle with dyslexia as a young girl growing up in Cuba.

Engle writes this personal novel in the same style of poetic prose found in her award winning historic novels, also based in Cuba. The story of Fefa, Margarita's grandmother, is told in first

person by her grandmother as a young girl growing up in a large family in Cuba at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the “Author Note” Engle shares that this book is fiction and is a re-telling of oral stories told to her by her maternal grandmother. While this book is not a historical fiction based on a nation’s history as Engle’s other novels, it does look at life in the Cuban countryside in 1912, thus revealing once again Engle’s passion for the past and her heritage in Cuba. She writes for and dedicates this book to an audience of “young readers who dread reading and for those who love blank pages.”

In personal communication with Margarita Engle, she explained to me that on a trip to Cuba with her grown children she shared these stories as she showed them various places where events had happened in their great-grandmother’s life. Engle’s daughter, in whose eyes I could see love and admiration for her mother and her work, asked her mother to write these stories down. This was all the inspiration Engle needed to write this most personal memoir. Within the pages of *The Wild Book*, Engle writes based on her own family history as opposed to the history of a nation as revealed in previous books.

Within the pages of this latest multicultural book, Engle has added focus to another group with her spotlight on “word blindness” as it was called in the early twentieth century; the term today is dyslexia. She has researched and sought professional expertise in this area, and she takes responsibility for any misinterpretations in the acknowledgements section of this book. As in her other books, Engle has done a splendid job of recognizing the possibilities of persistence, determination, and hope. In light of these themes within books of disabilities, *The Wild Book* could be paired with *The Alphabet War: A Story about Dyslexia* (Diane Burton Robb, 2004), *Out of My Mind* (Sharon Draper, 2010), and *Mockingbird* (Kathryn Erskine, 2011).

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