



Américas Award Books about Cuba

Baila, Nana, Baila / Dance, Nana, Dance: Cuban Folktales in English and Spanish, Joe Hayes. Illustrated by Mauricio Trenard Sayago.

Joe Hayes presents a rich, soulful collection of Cuban short stories. His retelling of these classic folktales will have readers of all ages tasting the flavors and moving to the beat of the Spanish, African, and Caribbean cultures that blend together in the oral tradition of this Caribbean island. Working with Cuban author Martha Esquenazi, Hayes added his literary touch to each piece, maintaining cultural integrity as he introduces these folktales to U.S. children. Each story is presented in both Spanish and English, with additional endnotes for each, as well as rich, colorful illustrations. 2008. 128 pages. (Grades 4-8) **2009 Commended Title.**

The Bossy Gallito: A Traditional Cuban Folktale, Lucia M. Gonzalez. Illustrated by Lulu Delacre.

In this bilingual cumulative folktale from Cuba, a chain of events results in the cleaning of a rooster's beak in time for his uncle's wedding. The setting of the illustrations is Little Havana in Miami. The book provides extensive author and illustrator comments; the narrative should be fun for out-loud activities. 1994. 32 pages. (Grades K-5) **1994 Commended Title.**

Cuba 15, Nancy Osa.

Fifteen-year old Violet Paz is less than thrilled when her Cuban grandmother proclaims that her granddaughter must celebrate her quinceañera with a traditional ceremony. Violet, who speaks only a smattering of Spanish and more closely resembles her blonde, blue-eyed Polish-American mom than her Cuban dad, has her doubts. She can hardly imagine anything less appealing than dancing in front of a roomful of guests especially while wearing a ruffled pink dress with a tiara on her head. Before long, however, Violet's naturally upbeat personality and curiosity, as well as her desire to please her adored grandparents, win over, and she begins to explore not only the meaning of the event, but also her own identity and family history. 2003. 277 pages. (Grades 6-8) **2003 Honorable Mention.**

Cuba: After the Revolution, written and photographed by Bernard Wolf.

In this ground-breaking book, photojournalist Bernard Wolf offers a glimpse of contemporary life in Havana that few people living in the United States have ever seen. He documents his recent trip to Cuba's capital city in color photographs accompanying brief descriptions of what he saw and learned about the lives of people there. While he



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doesn't avoid pointing out the poverty and challenges faced by most Cuban citizens today, he balances this with the positive aspects of life in Havana: racial tolerance, a low crime rate, a high literacy rate, and an appreciation for the arts. 1999. 64 pages. (Grades 4-9) **1999 Honorable Mention.**

Cuban Kids, George Ancona.

In his trademark photo-documentary style, Ancona combines outstanding color photographs of contemporary Cuban children with an inviting narrative that describes their lives at school, at home and at play. 2000. 40 pages. (Grades 3-6) **2000 Commended Title.**

Dalia's Wondrous Hair / El cabello maravillosa de Dalia, Laura Lacamara.

In *Dalia's Wondrous Hair*, readers watch as the young protagonist embraces her luxurious, untamed hair by turning it into a refuge for Cuban flora and fauna. Just as the plants and animals flourish, so too does Dalia. In an era when young children rarely see positive depictions of people of color, this book offers a welcome contrast. Whimsical descriptions show the lovely protagonist filled with wonder as she self-confidently discovers and explores her surroundings, and her loving relationship with her mother supports her as she embarks on each new day. Richly-saturated illustrations span each page, transporting young readers to a bright, sun-filled landscape where Cuba's natural resources abound. Spanish and English texts lie side by side on each page, so readers of either language can delight equally in the story. An author's note at the end offers more information about the Cuban plants and animals in the book, and suggests ways to bring the book to life, so to speak, by creating a butterfly garden at home. This beautiful book by Cuban-born artist and illustrator Laura Lacámara lends itself to classroom instruction in foreign languages, arts, natural sciences, and language arts. Above and beyond academic learning, however, young readers will benefit from witnessing Dalia's enthusiastic and empowered ability to see beauty everywhere she goes. (Grades K-2) **2015 Commended Title.**

Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl's Courage Changed Music, by Margarita Engle and illustrated by Rafael López.

Engle and López weave word, color, and form to create a story that sambas and chachas and cumbias, blending rhythmic prose with lyric illustration to invite young readers to a dance of discovery. Students are swept away by a Chinese-African-Cuban girl, dauntless in her dream to be a drummer, and to simultaneously open the world of drumming to other Cubanas. What a wonderful opportunity to have a young girl demonstrate her courage and overcome a stereotype that had prevailed against girl drummers. The vivid colors and compelling prose invite teachers to encourage students to explore their dreams, to be courageous and to love books that inspire. (Grades 1-4) **2016 Commended Title.**



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Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings: A Memoir, by Margarita Engle and illustrated by Edel Rodriguez.

In Margarita Engle's latest offering, readers will be deeply stirred and swiftly transported to the author's childhood experiences of growing up in a bicultural Cuban and American family during the Cold War era. Engle begins her accessible memoir with a captivating portrayal of early family trips to her mother's beloved homeland, trips that clearly left a deep impression on the author. Engle's aptly constructed metaphor of a winged experience explores the challenging balance of living between two worlds. Her experience is further complicated by the looming backdrop of U.S. and Cuban relations in which critical events such as the Bay of Pigs and Cuban Missile Crisis bring the island nation painfully into the national spotlight. Yet Engle deftly weaves hope throughout the work, as she describes building a refuge consisting of the natural world, reading and libraries, and artistic expression, all of which are capable of lifting her away from gloom and providing consolation. *Enchanted Air* presents a rich assortment of classroom applications, as it would easily fit into a language arts or writing curriculum while also proving to be an enlightening historical read for the social sciences. Furthermore, this poetic novel lends itself to conversation surrounding timely topics of immigration, statelessness, and the role that our communities can play in welcoming those fleeing conflict in their homelands. Verses from Hispanic poets Antonio Machado and José Martí bookend the memoir, along with a timeline spanning from 1945 to 2014 and author's note, which all offer further contextualization for learning and understanding. (Grades 5-8) **2016 Commended Title.**

The Firefly Letters, Margarita Engle.

Beginning with a letter dated 1851 this book follows the historical visit of Swedish suffragette Frederika Bremer to Cuba. Written as poems from three different women of diverse backgrounds, this book explores the cultural history of Cuba and slavery as well as women's rights through three unique perspectives. The beautiful prose weaves an important account of Cuba in the mid-1800s. 2010. 151 pages. (Grades 6-12). **2011 Honorable Mention.**

Flight to Freedom, Ana Veciana-Suarez.

Ten-year-old Yara García narrates through her diary an eyewitness account of injustices following the Cuban revolution. Yara and her family are legally permitted to leave Cuba and arrive in Miami ready to start a new life. However, her bitter and disappointed father cannot let go of the past and consumes his every waking moment obsessed with a plot to overthrow Fidel Castro. This fictional account of a young immigrant girl coming of age in two worlds reflects the turbulence of national and international events that characterized the 1960s. 2002. 216 pages. (Grades 6-9) **2002 Commended Title.**



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Island Treasures , by Alma Flor Ada and illustrated by Antonio Martorell and Edel Rodriguez.

This gem of a book includes Ada's family stories of growing up in Cuba, illustrated with a wide variety of family pictures. Each story is distinctive for its beautiful writing and its lessons on topics such as respect for others and the goodness of humanity. One such story (originally from *Where the Flame Trees Bloom*) focuses on her great-grandmother Mina, who was illiterate but who "remembered the birth date and the exact age of seven children, thirty-four grandchildren, seventy-five great-grandchildren, and a few great-great grandchildren." She "knew how to add and subtract, how to accept and to give and to share so that the balance was always one of love." In similar moving fashion, the collection of stories from *Days at the La Quinta Simoni* begins with a colorful tale of all the street vendors who would call out their wares in the morning. Beyond being useful to learn about Cuba and its people, *Island Treasures* would be perfect for elementary read-alouds to discuss family relationships, the importance of learning from one's elders, and the need to look beyond appearances. This book includes Ada's previous collections *Where the Flame Trees Bloom* and *Under the Royal Palms*, but with the addition of 5 *Days at La Quinta Simoni*. Altogether it is a heartwarming, all-encompassing collection of "true tales." While its main audience is elementary, this book is so well written that any adult would appreciate it as well. (Grades 3-7) **2016 Commended Title.**

Letters from Heaven/Cartas del Cielo, Lydia Gil.

After Celeste's grandmother dies, she is feeling lost and mournful – until she receives her first letter from ... her grandmother! How is this possible? In Lydia Gil's *Letters from Heaven/Cartas del Cielo*, part mystery, part coming-of-age book, Celeste receives a series of letters from her recently deceased grandmother that eases the pain of her mourning. The letters that reassure Celeste of how much she is loved also teach her to make her grandmother's Cuban recipes that Celeste remembers most fondly. With a dash of humor and pathos, Gil creates a sweet story that shows the trials of growing up – dealing with bullying at school and being alone more now that her mother's work schedule is more demanding – and how Celeste ultimately conquers these problems by relying on friends and family. This dual Spanish-English story is the perfect fit for a middle reader, or for students learning Spanish who are ready for chapter books. The recipes for *mariquitas* (plantain chips), *conгри* (rice and beans), *ropa vieja* (shredded beef), and three others hearken back to the traditional Cuban food of Celeste's grandmother, and all are easily reproduced. This short book of only 58 pages (116 total) reads quickly and provides an excellent introduction to Cuban culture for a middle school reader. (Grades 4-8). **2015 Commended Title.**

The Lightning Dreamer: Cuba's Greatest Abolitionist , Margarita Engle.

In light of severe persecution and censorship, many of 19th century Cuba's staunchest abolitionists were poets who proclaimed their message in metaphor. In *The Lightning Dreamer*, Engle tells the fictionalized biography of the poet, abolitionist and feminist Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda, also known as 'Tula'. The young protagonist resisted



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arranged marriage at the age of 14 and was henceforth sent away from home to live with extended family. The young girl defied the commonly held belief of the time that girls were 'expected to live without thoughts,' as she expressed herself skillfully in poetry. Engle captures the spirit of this budding young poet through verse which is at once light and lyrical, and heavy in references to the injustices of the era. In Engle's account, Tula writes 'I rise up out of a nightmare and grasp a feather pen, feeling winged.' Just as Tula found freedom in her poetry, Engle leaves the reader feeling hopeful, inspired and empowered by the story of this young brave girl who fought for justice for girls, women and slaves. (Grades 4-9) **2014 Commended Title.**

Lion Island, Margarita Engle.

This book of stories through first-person poems reveals an important part of Cuban history, that of the Chinese indentured servants brought to the island and other Chinese descendants who escaped to find refuge there in the late 19th century. Margarita Engle has used historical research and testimony to bring alive three main characters, Antonio Chuffat, Wing, and Fan. Their lives are shaped by love, loss, and the rare seized opportunity. Through these characters we see how Chinese identities and culture is maintained but also impacted by the burden of forced or low-wage labor and the need to resist. The poetic narratives also illustrate differences in mobility and opportunity for men and women. We hear through Fan's voice the perspective of a young woman who must find means of survival and expression that are distinct from her brother. The book raises simple but profound questions about resistance, its purpose and how it is effectively enacted; we see in the characters that some are called to violence, some to words, and others to art. Through the poetic testimonies of indentured and enslaved people in *Lion Island*, we see what it can mean to be a "warrior of words." We see the power of stories. The larger narrative that is told is about fighting for both personal and collective freedom. The concept of honoring the past while manifesting strength and endurance to create a better future runs throughout this compelling text. **2017 Commended Title.**

Mama Does the Mambo, Katherine Leiner. Illustrated by Edel Rodríguez.

The pastel, gauche, and spray paint illustrations with wood block-ink linework expressively set the stage for Katherine Leiner's picture storybook placed in Havana, Cuba. First, we see a well-ordered room, filled with straight lines, a portrait of a man hung prominently between scenes of flowers, and a woman stiffly looking out from her wrought-iron balcony. On the next, as a young daughter tells us of her memories of her once happy and exuberant mother, we see curving cameo framed, lovely sketches of a woman full of life and motion as she dances through household chores. Through the voice of Sofía, who has lost her father, we learn of her concern about her mother's continuing grief and her inability to dance the way she did in the past. Even when a new sister appears on the scene, Mama still cannot seem to capture the rhythm that was once her hallmark. Sofía becomes an integral part of the story's resolution during the spring carnival, allowing children to see the important role even the youngest character can play in the face of grief. Spanish words and phrases as well as warm



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pictures evocative of past and peaceful Cuba combine to portray bittersweet memory that reaffirms hopefulness after heartbreak. 2002. 216 pages. (Grades K-4) **2001 Commended Title.**

Martina the Beautiful Cockroach: A Cuban Folktale/Marina una cucarachita muy linda: un cuento cubano, Carmen Agra Deedy. Illustrated by Michael Austin.

In this retelling of the Cuban folktale, Martina the beautiful cockroach does not know coffee beans about love and marriage. That is where her Cuban family comes in. While some of the Cucarachas offer her gifts to make her more attractive, only Abuela, her grandmother, gives her something really useful: un consejo increíble, some shocking advice. 2007. 32 pages (Grades 1-3). **2007 Commended Title.**

My Name is Celia/Me llamo Celia, Monica Brown. Illustrated by Rafael López.

Honoring the unique rhythms of Celia Cruz music, *My Name is Celia* pays tribute to the life and music of the famous Cuban singer. In combination with vivid illustrations this book is an exceptional picture book that will keep the memory of la reina de la salsa (the queen of salsa) alive, recognizing her legacy of artistic works and musical contributions. 2004. 32 pages. (Grades K-5) **2004 Américas Award Winner.**

The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano, Margarita Engle. Illustrated by Sean Qualls.

Born into the household of a wealthy slave owner in Cuba in 1797, Juan Francisco Manzano spent his early years by the side of a woman who made him call her Mama, even though he had a mama of his own. Denied an education, young Juan still showed an exceptional talent for poetry. His verses reflect the beauty of his world, but they also expose its hideous cruelty. Powerful, haunting poems and breathtaking illustrations create a portrait of a life in which even the pain of slavery could not extinguish the capacity for hope. 2006. 183 pages. (Grades 7-12) **2006 Américas Award Winner.**

The Surrender Tree: Poems of Cuba's Struggle for Freedom, Margarita Engle.

Written in breathtaking verse, *The Surrender Tree* portrays Cuba's three wars for independence spanning thirty years in the nineteenth century. Engle develops the story by presenting different points of view, especially from Rosa, a freed slave. Rosa, known in Cuba as Rosa la Bayomesa, healed the injured during the wars, turning caves into hospitals, using wild plants as her medicines. In a final proof of her humanity she treats the lieutenant who has sworn to kill her. The book describes the suffering and horrors during the wars, including the first systematic use of concentration camps, but the main message of the book is that freedom exists only when everyone shares it. 2008. 169 pages. (Grades 8-10) **2009 Américas Award Winner.**

Tropical Secrets: Holocaust Refugees in Cuba, Margarita Engle.

Told from the points of view of different characters, Engle's novel in verse explores the connections among different parts of the world during World War II. When Daniel



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escapes Nazi Germany and lands in Cuba, he must learn to adjust to life without his family in a new country. He befriends Paloma, a girl whose father (El Gordo) profits from shipping refugees to Cuba. David, an adult refugee who sells ice cream in Havana, also contributes his point of view to this gripping story. 2009. 212 pages. (Grades 6-9) **2010 Commended Title.**

Under the Royal Palms: A Childhood in Cuba, Alma Flor Ada.

Alma Flor Ada offers stories about Cuba that would not otherwise be available to those of us living in the United States. This collection provides the reader with a close look at an active and loving extended family. It chronicles events that would probably stand out for lots of children growing up throughout history and across geographical boundaries: living in different houses, in the city and in the country; the stormy and the cow following closely behind; and the tragic death of a beloved young uncle. This volume provides information on a prolific author that is accessible and helpful to readers studying Latino writers. 1998. 88 pages. (Grades 3-5) **1998 Commended Title.**