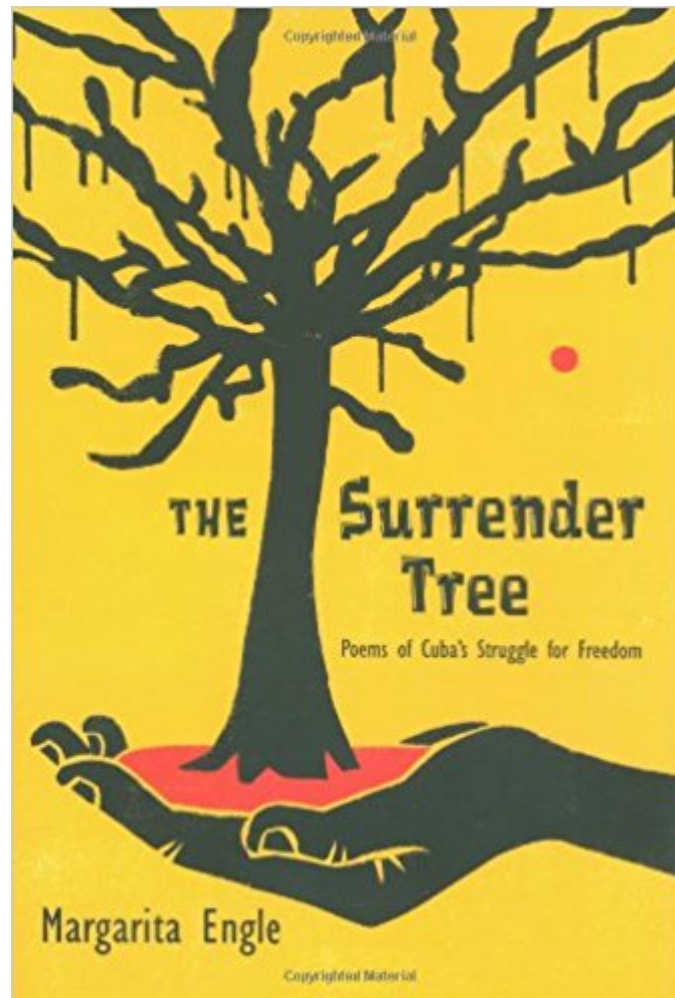


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# The Surrender Tree: Poems Of Cuba's Struggle For Freedom



## Synopsis

It is 1896. Cuba has fought three wars for independence and still is not free. People have been rounded up in reconcentration camps with too little food and too much illness. Rosa is a nurse, but she dares not go to the camps. So she turns hidden caves into hospitals for those who know how to find her. Black, white, Cuban, Spanish—Rosa does her best for everyone. Yet who can heal a country so torn apart by war? Acclaimed poet Margarita Engle has created another breathtaking portrait of Cuba. *The Surrender Tree* is a 2009 Newbery Honor Book, the winner of the 2009 Pura Belpre Medal for Narrative and the 2009 Bank Street - Claudia Lewis Award, and a 2009 Bank Street - Best Children's Book of the Year.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 176 pages

Publisher: Henry Holt and Co. (BYR); 1st edition (April 1, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0805086749

ASIN: B0046LUQIK

Product Dimensions: 6.2 x 0.7 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars 13 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #3,070,643 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #66 in Books > Teens > Education & Reference > History > Central & South America #193 in Books > Teens > Social Issues > Prejudice #195 in Books > Children's Books > Education & Reference > History > Central & South America

Age Range: 12 - 17 years

Grade Level: 7 and up

## Customer Reviews

Grade 9 Up—Often, popular knowledge of Cuba begins and ends with late-20th-century textbook fare: the Cuban Revolution, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Fidel Castro. *The Surrender Tree*, however, transports readers to another, though no less tumultuous, era. Spanning the years 1850–1899, Engle's poems construct a narrative woven around the nation's Wars for Independence. The poems are told in alternating voices, though predominantly by Rosa, a "freed" slave and natural healer destined to a life on the island's wild interior. Other narrators include Teniente Muerte, or Lieutenant Death, the son of a slave hunter turned ruthless soldier;

José, Rosa's husband and partner in healing; and Silvia, an escapee from one of Cuba's reconcentration camps. The Surrender Tree is hauntingly beautiful, revealing pieces of Cuba's troubled past through the poetry of hidden moments such as the glimpse of a woman shuttling children through a cave roof for Rosa's care or the snapshot of runaway Chinese slaves catching a crocodile to eat. Though the narrative feels somewhat repetitive in its first third, one comes to realize it is merely symbolic of the unending cycle of war and the necessity for Rosa and other freed slaves to flee domesticity each time a new conflict begins. Aside from its considerable stand-alone merit, this book, when paired with Engle's *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano* (Holt, 2006), delivers endless possibilities for discussion about poetry, colonialism, slavery, and American foreign policy.

—Jill Heritage Maza, Greenwich High School, CT

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**\*Starred Review\*** As in *The Poet Slave of Cuba* (2006), Engle's new book is written in clear, short lines of stirring free verse. This time she draws on her own Cuban American roots, including stories from her grandmother, to describe those who fought in the nineteenth-century Cuban struggle for independence. At the center is Rosa, a traditional healer, who nurses runaway slaves and deserters in caves and other secret hideaways. Her husband, José, a freed slave, also speaks, and so does a refugee child, whom Rosa teaches to be a healer. Then there is the vicious slave hunter known as Lieutenant Death; his collection of ears is an unforgettable image of brutality ("shown as proof that the runaway slave / died fighting, resisting capture"). The switching perspectives personalize the dramatic political history, including the establishment of the world's first "reconcentration camps" to hold prisoners, as well as the role of slave owners who freed their slaves and joined the resistance against Spain. Many readers will be caught by the compelling narrative voices and want to pursue the historical accounts in Engle's bibliography. Grades 6-12. --Hazel Rochman

In *The Surrender Tree: Poems of Cuba's Struggle for Freedom*, which was the first novel by a Latinx to receive a Newbery Honor, Engle portrays almost 50 years of the life of Rosario Castellanos, known as Rosa la Bayamesa, who grows from a slave, a "witch-child" learning about nature as medicine, to an iconic herbalist war nurse who treated anyone a friend or enemy and never asked for money. Engle's novel in verse follows Rosa from 1850-1899, through the Ten Years War, the Little War, and the War of Independence. After all of that fighting,

the novel ends with Spain's surrender to the United States. With Cuba still not free, the characters are left with mixed feelings of disappointment and hopeful anticipation for a better future. Engle's poems alternate among five perspectives, those of Rosa, her husband Jos , a slavehunter known as Lieutenant Death, Captain-General Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau, Marquis of Tenerife, Empire of Spain, and a young girl named Silvia. By including these voices, Engle captures different war experiences and interesting intersections. For example, Rosa meets Lieutenant Death early on, heals him later, and then becomes his target, since Rosa has become a powerful, elusive wartime figure. Also, later in the novel Silvia, an eleven-year-old girl, leaves her farm with her ailing mother and young twin brothers because of the mandatory order for peasants to enter reconcentration camps. Silvia's grandmother had been healed by Rosa in a previous war, and now Silvia believes Rosa is her only hope for survival. As in *The Poet Slave of Cuba*, Engle does not shy away from the brutalities of slavery and war. She explains that the ear of a runaway slave, proof that the slave died resisting capture, earns the hunter four pesos. Later, Rosa notes that "some of the ears come from people whose names and faces I know." Other times, Engle captures the exhaustion, fear, loneliness, heartbreak, and confusion of the men, women, and children hiding in caves. For example, she writes through Rosa: "The Little War? How can there be a little war? Are some deaths smaller than others, leaving mothers who weep a little less? And yet, throughout the novel, the characters also express feelings of pride and hope and a constant sense of purpose that leads to perseverance. While reading, it was easy to see why *The Surrender Tree* is one of Engle's many highly-acclaimed and decorated novels.

This unique book is written in both English and Spanish, with each version combined into a single volume. The story is based on thirty years of almost continual war between the Cuban mambi' rebels and the soldiers of Spain. The story begins with a true heroine, Rosario Castellanos, known as Rosa la Bayamesa as an adult, as a young girl, Rosa is learning the art of healing with roots, herbs, and flowers from the older women. This book is written in poetry form, and starts as Rosa is thinking or writing her thoughts about learning to be a nurse, and dealing with the sadness of trying to doctor the sick, wounded, and dying people who surround her. Another character called Lieutenant Death, is introduced as a young boy who is working with his father to capture and return runaway or dead slaves for bounty. Their stories interweave with the years, as Rosa and her nurse husband Jose, become revered healers to the mambi' rebels and the poor who seek their aid. In 1896, when a decree is issued for Cuban peasants to leave their villages and farms to be placed in "reconcentration

camps" or be killed, thousands of people are moved into bases controlled with prison like precision and appalling conditions by the Spanish soldiers. As people begin to starve and die of disease, more and more people attempt to flee to the Cuban jungle to either join Rosa and her nurses, or fight with the mambi' rebels. At this time a fictional character named Silvia, is introduced as a young girl in the reconcentration camp who loses her whole family to starvation and illness. She escapes to flee to the mountains and jungle to accomplish her dream of working with Rosa to become a healer. As Rosa, Jose, Silvia, and the other nurses must constantly be moving to keep the Spaniards from capturing Rosa, the price on her head grows higher. She is constantly being stalked by Lieutenant Death. When the fighting gets most desperate, the Americans join with the mambi' rebels, after the American ship, Maine, is blown up by the Spanish soldiers in a Cuban harbor by the Spanish Army. As the Americans gain ground against the Spanish Army, will the Cubans at last be allowed their own country and the right to fly the Cuban flag under which they have fought? Margarita Engle, the author, writes a marvelous piece of historical fiction mixed with historical facts. In addition, she gleams much from the rich oral history of her grandmother and grandfather who survived interment in a reconcentration camp. This is a beautiful story that leaves a tender feeling in my heart for the Cuban people and the hardships they faced by the cruel reign of the Army of Spain.

I am not normally a poetry lover, but this is really a well-written book. It is an emotional and moving story that is written with such beautiful language even though it deals with such serious material. I only wish that I could read it to my students, but they are a little underage (5th grade).

**Plot summary**The story of Cuba's various wars for independence, told primarily through the eyes of Rosa, a former slave who becomes a gifted herbalist, dedicated to healing the wounds of enemy and friend alike.  
**Character empathy rating**I'd answer this question, but just thinking about it makes me reach for tissues, so I'll just move on to the next one while I can still see straight.  
**Tone: What's it Like to Read This Book?**When you read other people's reviews, the words that come up most often are "haunting" and "powerful." And yeah, that sums it up pretty perfectly  
**Other Shiny Stuff-** Most of the characters are taken from historical figures, including Rosa the healer.- Lieutenant Death's switch from being a sympathetic child to a dedicated Javert type figure is jarring and tragic, in the best way.- I swear I learned more about the Spanish-American war from these poems than any teacher ever taught me.  
**Content Warnings**You get to learn about the world's first concentration camps.

So yeah, there's violence here.

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