

Dear Students,

Thank you for the wonderful letters. It must have been hard work to write in a second language, but you all did an excellent job, expressing yourselves clearly. Also, each one of you wrote such interesting questions. I wish every one of you great success in all your reading and writing, as well as your college and career plans. To those who are far from family members, I hope you have a chance to visit and receive visits, so that the separation is not permanent.

Here are my answers to your questions:

What kind of books do you read?

---I read all different sorts of books, but I especially love poetry.

When do your best ideas come to you?

---I am a "morning person." I like to wake up early, and do my writing in the mornings.

Can you tell me some methods to improve writing skills?

---Practice! Just as dancers, musicians, and athletes have to rehearse and train, writers also need practice. Don't expect perfection. That way you won't get discouraged, and it will be creative and fun.

What inspired you to write *The Poet Slave of Cuba*?

---I was inspired by the courage of the real "poet slave," Juan Francisco Manzano. He said he wanted to write a book about his life, but he never had a chance, so now at least there is a book to help us remember his courage.

My question is what inspired you to write *The Surrender Tree*?

---I was inspired by the courage and kindness of Rosa la Bayamesa, who chose to heal the soldiers from both sides of a war, instead of just the soldiers she agreed with.

Do you have any children?

---Yes, I have a grown son and daughter. Both are married, and I have grandchildren.

Who is your role model?

---My mentor was Tomás Rivera, who worked his way up from a migrant farmworker childhood to become the first Latino Chancellor of a University of California campus. He was also a great poet, and my creative writing professor.

How do the media react when any of your books are published or rejected?

---No one knows about rejected books. They remain in a drawer in the writer's desk, like secret books. Sometimes we take them out after a few years, and try to find a publisher, just in case editors' interests have changed. For the books that have been published, many of mine have had wonderful reviews, but not every review is good. Authors have to learn to be happy about the good ones, and forget about the bad ones, just as athletes have to think about the games they won, not the ones they lost. Otherwise we would get too discouraged. One of my picture books, *Summer Birds, the Butterflies of Maria Merian*, sat in a drawer for 25 years before it got published. Now it is used in schools to teach young children about butterfly life cycles, and about the life of a woman who became a scientist and explorer long before it was considered acceptable for women to do those things.

Do you prefer to go to a library or use the computer while you're doing the research?

---I go to local libraries, and I also use a process called "interlibrary loan" to borrow books from libraries at Universities and the Library of Congress. I also do computer searches. The combination is very helpful.

I was wondering if you ever gave up on a book because you thought it wouldn't be good enough, or people wouldn't get interested in it?

---I only give up on a story if I decide that it would not have a hopeful ending. No matter how interesting a story is, I don't want anyone to read it unless it leaves them feeling hopeful.

Do you get much fan mail, and if so, what do some letters say?

---I don't get the amount of fan mail that a movie actor would receive, but I do get some treasured letters from students like yourself, and your classmates. Many of the letters ask where writers get ideas. One of the

most encouraging letters was from a 16 year old girl who told me that The Poet Slave of Cuba was the first book she had ever finished.

¿Cuándo vas a hacer tu último libro? (When will you write your last book?)

---I am always working on one more book, so I don't plan to stop. Writing is not the kind of job I would want to retire from, because I enjoy it so much. If I live to be 103, como mi abuelita (like my grandma), I hope I am still writing, just as she was still telling stories about her childhood. (You can read those stories in The Wild Book.)

How do you manage your daily routine with your busy schedule?

---I set mornings aside for writing quietly. That way I don't get upset if the afternoon is busy or noisy.

Where does inspiration come from?

---Ideas come from a combination of reading about history, remembering my own experiences, wondering about the lives of others, and imagining any "scene" that catches my interest. I picture the scene in my mind, as if I am watching a movie. In other words: daydreaming.

Best Wishes,

Margarita Engle