

A Curriculum Guide to

Lion Island: Cuba's Warrior of Words

By Margarita Engle

About the Book

In a haunting yet hopeful novel in verse, award-winning author Margarita Engle tells the story of Antonio Chuffat, a young man of African, Chinese, and Cuban descent who became a champion of civil rights.

Asia, Africa, Europe—Antonio Chuffat's ancestors had clashed and blended on the beautiful island of Cuba. Yet for most Cubans in the nineteenth century, life is anything but beautiful. The country is fighting for freedom from Spain. Enslaved Africans and nearly enslaved Chinese indentured servants are forced to work long, backbreaking hours in the fields.

So Antonio feels lucky to have found a good job as a messenger, where his richly blended cultural background is an asset. Through his work he meets Wing, a young Chinese fruit seller who barely escaped the anti-Asian riots in Los Angeles, and his sister Fan, a talented singer. With injustice all around them, the three friends are determined that violence will not be the only way to gain liberty.

Background Building

To set the stage for reading this novel in verse, identify the time frame (1871 – 78) for the story's setting as well as the place and geographical location on a map (Cuba). Talk about what was going on in the world at this time (immediately after the Civil War in the US). Look for historical photos and documents that help provide a context for understanding the area. Engle provides a helpful list of resources in the back matter of the book:

- FIU Cuban Research Institute
- Smithsonian Latino Center
- Chinese American Museum of Northern California
- cubaheritage.org
- yeefowmuseum.org
- californiahistoricalociety.org

Characters

The following activities particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (RL.5–10.3) (RL.5.6)

As students read or listen to this novel in verse, encourage them to visualize each of the main characters and talk about what they look like, their cultural background, the language they speak, how they feel about the events in the story, and what dreams or

goals they each have. Work together to draw character sketches or find magazine or web-based images for these characters to help make them real and personal.

- Antonio, age 12 (initially), of African and Chinese descent
- Wing, age 14 (initially), originally from California, with ancestors from China
- Fan, age 14 (initially), twin sister of Wing, also originally from California, with ancestors from China
- Perfecto SOA, runaway slave befriended by Fan, Wing, and Antonio
- Many other various characters also speak in the section entitled “Listeners”

Structure

The following activities particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (RL.6.6) (RL.7–10.5) (SL.5–6.1d) (SL.7–10.1)

Engle organizes all the poems in this book in seven distinct sections each with its own section title.

- *Running with Words*
- *The Beast of Hope*
- *Free Songs*
- *The Shadow Path*
- *Dangerous Flames*
- *Listeners*
- *Voices Heard across the Sea*

This novel in verse unfolds one poem at a time, told from various points of view. Once students are familiar with each of the major characters and their roles in the story, talk about what each point of view contributes to the narrative, particularly the perspectives of Antonio, Wing, and Fan.

Talk about how the poet uses the titles for each poem. If you only read the titles, what do you surmise about the story before having read the book? How do the titles contribute to the story *after* having read the book? Read *only* the titles as a group by passing the book around the class. How do the titles alone set the stage or move the story along? Note how often “word” or “words” are used in the poem titles and how pivotal that is to the entire story.

The Chinese Zodiac

The following activities particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (RL.5.5) (RL.6–10.3)

In addition, Engle notes the year for the setting of each section and where it falls in the Chinese zodiac, a classification that ascribes an animal to each and every year in a repeating twelve-year cycle. Here they are:

- Year of the Goat, 1871
- Year of the Monkey, 1872
- Year of the Rooster, 1873

- Year of the Dog, 1874
- Year of the Tiger, 1878

Students can choose a section for a group focus and research the attributes of their zodiac animal and then consider how those might influence their interpretation of the poems in their section. (Note: Some animals are repeated.) They can create a chart or poster for their section and note key words from the poems as they read and review them. Then challenge them to create a “found” poem from those words to create a theme poem for their section at the end of their study.

Discussion Questions

The following questions particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (RL.5.3) (RL.6–10.1)

As students read or listen to *Lion Island*, invite them to consider the characters, relationships, conflicts, and surprises in the story. Ask open-ended questions that motivate them to dig deep and challenge them to find poems or passages that support their opinions or analysis.

1. Who is Antonio Chuffat and what is revealed about him and his background as the story begins?
2. Where does this story take place and why is that important to the story?
3. What is the historical time frame for this story?
4. Which languages are important to the characters in this story?
5. Why are words so important to Antonio?
6. Why did Wing and Fan (and their family) leave California for Cuba?
7. What jobs or roles do each of the main characters have in this story?
8. How do their jobs help them cope with their place in society?
9. What is life like for slaves in Cuba during this time?
10. How do Antonio, Wing, and Fan help the slaves they encounter?
11. Why is letter writing so important in this story?
12. Why is the title of this book “Lion Island”?

Discussion Prompts

The following questions particularly address the Common Core State Standards: (RL.5.3) (RL.6–10.1)

In this particular novel in verse, Engle incorporates many crucial questions within the poems themselves. These can be excellent prompts for discussion and include the below questions. Students can consider these questions in the context of the poems and the story of *Lion Island*, as well as in the more general context of their own lives and personal situations.

1. “Will anyone ever / listen / to me?” and “What would I say if they did?” (p. 8)
2. “Will I grow up to be a roaring lion-soldier / or a calmly speaking / diplomat-bird?” (p. 8)
3. “How can so much suffering result / from attacks by men who believe in voting / and independence?” (p. 25)
4. “What is the difference between execution / and murder?” (p. 42)
5. “What good can it do, sending thoughts / to strangers?” (p. 44)
6. “Where is the POWER in words / that aren’t heard?” (p. 45)
7. “Do relatives in heaven see poems / written in mud?” (p. 56)
8. “The last thing you said to me was *fight*, / but did you mean that I should battle sadness, / or struggle—like Wing—against rage?” (p. 57)
9. “But what can we do to protect ourselves?” (p. 63)
10. “Can I change my own life?” (p. 66)
11. “Do I stand a chance?” (p. 67)
12. “Can you understand how hard it was / to listen all day to that silent sorrow?” (p. 76)
13. “Can a voice be used up?” (p. 87)
14. “Will I run out of words?” (p. 87)
15. “How can a hopeful poet ever know / what is true?” (p. 108)
16. “Should I dare to take my petition / to an official?” (p. 140)

Readers Theater

The following activities particularly address the Common Core State Standards:

(RL.5–8.7) (RL.6–8.6)

With novels in verse presented through multiple characters, oral reading or presentation can be especially powerful, since hearing the words read aloud gives a physical voice and point of view to the personal text. This can begin with the teacher or adult reading aloud, of course. But we can also involve students in presenting excerpts aloud using readers' theater with each student reading the poems for one of the characters in the book. Because *Lion Island* is rich with the perspectives of three distinct characters, it begs to be performed "readers theater" style with individual students or small groups of students taking on a persona and reading those poems aloud as that character.

Students can wear a simple sign with their character's name, and if simple props are available (hats, necklace, etc.), those can be fun visual aids too. For an even more ambitious presentation, display a slideshow of images as a backdrop for the reading (and student volunteers can research images from that time period or that suit their characters). Hearing actual voices reading can assist in discussing the concept of "voice" in poetry. Who is speaking? Whose point of view is represented? Why is it so important to be heard? How are the concepts of justice and voice linked? How would this book be different if told from a single point of view? As a concluding activity, students can choose their favorite poem, read it aloud, and record that reading and create a simple Vimeo, Animoto, or Powtoon video. This could be shared during an Open House or other open event.

English Language Arts

Capitalization

The following activity particularly addresses the Common Core State Standards: (L.5–10.2)

Engle uses all capital letters for greater emphasis throughout the book (e.g. POWER, POWERFUL, FEARS [p. 9]). Talk about why she might have chosen these words for special emphasis and invite students to identify examples of this throughout the book.

Triplets

The following activity particularly addresses the Common Core State Standards: (RL.5.4) (RL.7–10.4) (RL.6.5)

Engle also uses one-word lines for emphasis throughout the poems, particularly in threes or triplets. For example:

- "Freedom.
Liberty.
Hope." (p. 4)
- "watch
listen
learn" (p. 11)
- "School.

- Work.
Hope.” (p. 3, 80)
- “Meditate.
Contemplate.
Remember.” (p. 92)

Encourage students to find examples of this pattern of three and discuss Engle’s choice of words and of her placement of them in one-word lines. They almost form a “mini-poem” or motto and students can create their own using key words from the book.

Writing “petition” poems

The following activity particularly addresses the Common Core State Standards:
(W.5–10.1)

Testimonies in the “Listeners” section are “inspired by real pleas for freedom, presented during China’s official investigation of abuses of the contract servitude system” (p. 159). Engle writes, “Many of the original pleas were written in verse [in Chinese], in what may be one of the largest and most successful collections of petitions for liberty ever filed in any archive” (p. 159). The character of Antonio speaks the following words near the end of the book:

“Stories, letters, translations. / Reports, articles, petitions. / These are the most POWERFUL ways / for me to help / slaves.” (p. 143)

Challenge students to create “petition poems” in support of a cause they feel strongly about (e.g., writing the principal about a school campus issue, a corporation about a product complaint, a politician about a civic issue, a newspaper editor about a community concern, etc.). Draft, revise, share, and send these “petition poems” to their intended sources and watch for responses.

Animal Metaphors

The following activity particularly addresses the Common Core State Standards:
(RL.5–10.4)

Engle often parallels the behavior of people with the attributes of animals, beginning with the title of the book, *Lion Island*, and including “lion men” and “bird men,” “dragon fury” and “tired horse,” among many others. The source of animal metaphors is often military and diplomatic insignia embroidered on the robes of imperial Chinese officials. Discuss these parallels, and challenge students to find more examples from the poems in the book.

Language

The following activity particularly addresses the Common Core State Standards:
(L.9–10.3)

Another important component in this verse novel is the role of language. Several poems explicitly reference language—whether one speaks English or Spanish or Cantonese (or another language) and how that affects one’s place in society, including the very names they are given. Discuss the place of language in the power dynamic in this story and in our own place and time in society. Is speaking a language other than English an advantage or a disadvantage? When and why and how? Invite students to find poems or excerpts that address the importance of language, for example:

- “These not-quite-Cantonese / but not truly English / double-meaning names” (p. 60)
- “Chinese characters, the English alphabet, / Spanish phrases, ancient poems and modern songs, / Borrowed images mixed with her own . . .” (Fan’s poems, p. 54)

Writing Cantonese

Finally, for the truly ambitious, explore the Chinese characters referenced in the poem, and if possible, invite a guest expert to demonstrate how they are made. These include: roof (p. 63), flame, tree, sun, person, mouth, door, mountain, girl (all on p. 53). The same written characters are used for both Cantonese and Mandarin. Characters have changed (been simplified) since the time of this story’s setting. In Cuba there was also a great deal of blending of Cantonese with Spanish at the time of this story.

Words of Wisdom

The following activity particularly addresses the Common Core State Standards: (RL.6–10.2) (RL.6.4)

Challenge students to identify a line, phrase, or passage that is pivotal to the story, conveys a theme of the book, or is particularly meaningful to them and talk about why. Possible examples include:

- “When it comes to cruelty, all nations / are equal.” (p. 133)
- “Am I a man, or a contract?” (p. 132)
- “Voices grow fangs. / Stories have claws.” (p. 124)
- “Imagine having choices / instead of / FEARS.” (p. 9)
- “Liberty is the beast that is never tamed; it breaks the chains that bind it with blood and fire, to reclaim its rights.” (a quote that opens the book)

Journalism

Engle notes that Antonio Chuffat went on to establish Cuba’s first Chinese language newspaper. The importance of journalism and the power of reporting are frequently occurring topics throughout the poems from the beginning when Antonio is told he would make a good newspaper reporter (“Written Words” p. 11) to this excerpt from the end of the book:

Now, finally—first in *La Gaceta de Madrid*, then in *El Diario de la Marina*—bold reporters publish a complicated two-empire declaration that sets all indentured Chinese laborers

free. (p. 147)

If possible, collaborate with a journalism teacher or with a representative from a local newspaper to inform students about this special form of writing and publication.

Curriculum Connections

History

The following activity particularly addresses the Common Core State Standards: (SL.6.1d) (SL.7.3) (SL.8–10.1d)

The historical backdrop for *Lion Island* is full of true events that shape the story, including an actual person, Antonio Chuffat, the Los Angeles riots (one of the largest mass lynchings in US history) that precipitated immigration to Cuba, the attack on the *Virginus* ship, and the three wars for independence that occurred during this period in Cuba. Older students may be able to dig deeper into the poetry that presents conflicts of the past. Collaborate with the history or social studies teacher to discuss the historical context for these poems and talk about how people of various backgrounds were treated, what role culture and gender played in their struggles, and how they were able to prevail and be heard.

Art and Music

The following activity particularly addresses the Common Core State Standards: (RI.5.9) (RI.6.7) (RI.7.9) (RI.8–10.3)

Students who are interested in the arts can find many references to artistic self-expression in the poems of *Lion Island*. They might enjoy learning more about Cuba's first *teatro chino*, where Fan sings and puppeteers use carved wooden birds (p. 66). Or they might want to explore how Fan “carves fragments of verses / in mud or on stone, tree bark, a wall...” (p. 54), much like Dave the Potter in the US (depicted in *Dave, the Potter: Artist, Poet, Slave* by Laban Carrick Hill or *Etched in Clay: The Life of Dave, Enslaved Potter and Poet* by Andrea Cheng). Or if they're musically inclined, they can research the “Chinese instruments, Taíno Indian *maracas*, African finger pianos, Spanish guitars” (p. 78) that create a blend of music in Cuba in this era. In addition, Engle showcases Fan's singing and the “healing power of music” (pp. 34, 50, 51) and notes: “Wing says Fan writes her own songs, / and reinvents others by changing / ancient Chinese poems” (p. 34).

Students can research the roots of these modes of expression and create their own blend of song, music, and poetry.

Food

The following activity particularly addresses the Common Core State Standards: (W.5.2a) (W.6–10.2d)

Food is also an important component of *Lion Island*, and Engle weaves in references to foods of many cultures that blend into the cuisine of Cuba. For example, in “The Feast” (p. 23), she notes:

“Forest-green cucumbers, olives, feathery herbs,
yucca, malanga, boniato, quimbombó, fufú
ginger, five-spice, bamboo shoots,
all the foods of Spain, Cuba, Africa,
and China
all mixed together
like music.”

In addition, Wing and Fan’s family owned a shop in LA that sold many fruits and vegetables; at the end of the story, Fan uses her earnings to help Wing buy a restaurant (*Oro Verde*, Green Gold) to provide food once again. Work together to make a list of the many foods mentioned throughout the poems, and if possible, obtain a sampling of them from a local grocery and bring them for students to try, to get a true “flavor” of Cuba. (Be cognizant of food allergies, of course.)

“Cuba Struggles” Series

The following activity particularly addresses the Common Core State Standards: (RL.5.9) (RL.6–10.2)

Engle notes (on p. 160) that *Lion Island: Cuba’s Warrior of Words* is the final volume in her group of “historical verse novels about the struggle against forced labor in nineteenth-century Cuba.” The others include:

The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano (published 2006)
(About Manzano, 1797–1854)

The Surrender Tree: Poems of Cuba’s Struggle for Freedom (published 2008) (1850-99)

The Firefly Letters; A Suffragette’s Journey to Cuba (published 2010) (Fredrika Bremer, 1801 – 1865)

The Lightning Dreamer: Cuba’s Greatest Abolitionist (published 2013) (Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda, 1814 – 1873)

[You could also consider including Engle’s novel in verse, *Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal*, since Wing and Fan’s family traveled through Panama and their mother died there, so it’s pivotal to the story, although set later in 1914. In addition, the subject of forced labor is critical to this historical verse novel.] For a more ambitious study, read all of these books together and look at the crossover themes related to war, independence, liberty, slavery, advocacy, and hope.

Visit MargaritaEngle.com for more information about the author and her work.

Guide written in 2016 by Sylvia Vardell, a professor in the School of Library and Information Studies at Texas Woman’s University, and the author of ALA’s popular

Poetry Aloud Here, poetry columnist for Book Links magazine, coeditor of the Poetry Friday series, and keeper of the acclaimed Poetry for Children blog.

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