

ALEXIS CASTELLANOS

ISLA to ISLAND

READING GROUP GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK



At the beginning of the 1960s in Cuba, after the revolution, Marisol's parents send her to safety in Brooklyn, New York, for fear of losing her to violence. Her foster parents are welcoming, but Marisol feels trapped by the depth of her loneliness in a colorless and cold foreign land where she doesn't understand the language and is bullied for her differences. As time passes, Marisol discovers the school library, where books and stories help her to establish roots in her new home. Through visits to the botanical garden with her host family, cooking Cuban food, and reading letters from her biological parents, Marisol's life regains color.





DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Isla to Island* is historical fiction in the medium of a graphic novel. As a class, describe the images and context clues that establish setting and passage of time. What other events in history do you think would make an interesting graphic novel?
2. This book is nearly wordless. Why do you think the author chose not to include dialogue? How would the story be different if it did have words? What is the impact of the few words and sounds that are included? Share with the class.
3. Two songs play from a car radio at different moments. The first when Marisol and her parents are driving to the Soledad Botanical Garden and the second when Marisol is traveling from the airport to her new home in Brooklyn. How do the lyrics add to the story and what do they mean? You may use an online translation platform for the first song's lyrics, if you wish. Use clues from the images to support your answer.
4. Compare and contrast the experiences of Marisol and her family while living in 1958 Cuba and 1961 Cuba. How have their lives changed, and why have these changes occurred? Provide examples.
5. During the revolution, a teacher in soldier's fatigues speaks to Marisol's class, and posters appear calling for young people to join Castro's regime. At the time, she is only ten or eleven years old. Do you think she has the power to say yes or no? Do you think children and young people should become involved in revolution and war? First, freewrite for five minutes with your answers, then share with a partner before coming back to discuss this as a class.
6. Marisol wakes up in fear to a broken window and a fire outside her home in Cuba. Have you or anyone you know ever experienced a similar sense of fear in your own home? Share with the class if you'd like. How does this fear affect the time spent at home and other aspects of life? Who deserves to feel safe? Where should people feel safe? Explain your answers.
7. Consider the times that dialogue is used in the story. What is the significance, and why did the author choose those words? How do they demonstrate character development?
8. Graphic novels have panels to display illustrations and dialogue, but can also include full-page spreads without panels. Study the full-page spreads, and discuss as a class the purpose of including them.





9. When does the book begin losing color and why? Why is the red flower Marisol's father tucked in her hair the only thing that stays colored? Explain your answers.
10. Think of a time when you were in a language class, where you were taking a test and didn't understand the directions. Imagine how you would feel if every class you took was like that, and your teacher couldn't help you in your own language. Discuss how Marisol might have felt in her new school and classes, where she didn't understand the textbooks or teacher's lessons, and how you would feel in a similar situation. What could you do now to improve your situation?
11. Why do you think the author included the scene of Marisol menstruating for the first time? What is significant about this moment? How does the interaction between Marisol and her foster mom develop their relationship? Strengthen your claim with examples from the book.
12. What emotions is Marisol feeling on her first day of school in the US? How can you tell she is feeling this way? Have you ever had similar feelings?
13. Though it isn't shown on the page, do you think anyone at school tried to befriend Marisol? Why or why not? Why is she bullied? In pairs, discuss how you would react if you witnessed your classmate(s) bullying another student. As a class, share your thoughts; then, with your teacher's help, come up with a plan to intervene if you witness bullying.
14. Read the vocabulary words on the blackboard after Marisol's first day at school in Brooklyn. Using specific examples, describe how they act as foreshadowing.
15. What is the first sign of joy for Marisol in Brooklyn? How do you know?
16. Plants serve as a point of connection to home and people for Marisol, especially when her host mom finds the white mariposa, Cuba's national flower, in the greenhouse. What is something that connects you to home, friends, or family when you feel lonely?
17. Why do the host mom's eyes appear in color when she and Marisol are in the greenhouse? Explain your answer.





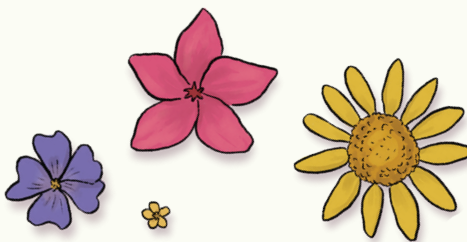
18. The second time Marisol visits church, words are beginning to form in the speech bubbles instead of scribbles. What does this mean? How does an illustration convey this message better than a traditional novel?
19. Think about the book's use of color to tell a story. What does each color mean? How are colors used to display emotions, build characters, and move the plot forward? Use examples to strengthen your answer.
20. What aspects of Cuban culture did you learn about from the graphic novel? Research present-day Cuba to understand how they may have changed.
21. When Marisol places the photo of her with her host family next to the photo of her parents, only the greenery is in color. Why do you think her photo from Cuba is still in black and white even though it also has flowers in it? Explain.
22. Marisol regains color when she touches a cherry blossom tree in spring. It was not the first time she had touched a plant, so what makes this instance different? How come she is the only person to gain color at first?
23. Describe some of the moments where Marisol's host family attempts to make her feel welcome. Could they have done more? How much of a role did they play in Marisol building a new home?
24. In the present time, many children and teens still immigrate to the United States for a variety of reasons and likely struggle as much, if not more, than Marisol. What resources did Marisol have available as she adjusted? With the class, find resources currently available for immigrants that may not have existed for Marisol in the 1960s, and brainstorm ideas. Is it easier to transition to a new country now? Why or why not?





EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

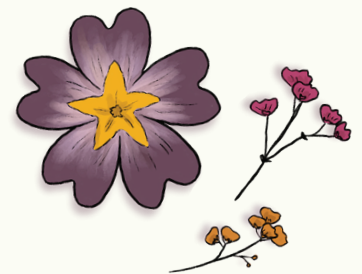
1. Once Marisol finds the book about trees, she develops ways to cope with the changes and challenges she faces. For example, when the boy behind her throws paper in her hair, Marisol ignores it, and instead uses the paper to draw trees. Share one way you cope with challenges. As a class, compile a zine with tips, coping strategies, and encouragement that you can share or reread during tough times.
2. In the author's note, Alexis Castellanos writes. "I wasn't raised on stories of mythical creatures or princesses in towers—I was raised on the stories of my family, their lives in Cuba, and, later, the lives they made for themselves in the United States. My picture books were the photo albums my family brought to the United States, one of the few precious items that made the journey." Considering this quote, choose one of the following projects:
 - a. Talk to a family member and ask them to share family photos that tell a story. Create a picture book digitally or using print copies of the photos to share the story with the class.
 - b. Visit an archive in person or virtually. You can try your school library, the public library, a historical society, or a museum to locate an archive. Piece together a picture book digitally or using print copies of the items you found to share the story with the class.
3. Operation Peter Pan, run by a Catholic charity in Miami and the US government, facilitated the exodus of more than fourteen thousand Cuban children and teens to the US from 1960 to 1962. If you look closely, there are only unaccompanied minors on Marisol's flight from Havana to Brooklyn, indicating that she most likely was a participant of Operation Peter Pan. Research more about Operation Peter Pan, and compare it to the separation of families and treatment of immigrant children and refugees in the present. There are unfortunately many situations to pull from, so only choose one current event to focus on: detained undocumented children from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean; refugees from Syria, South Sudan, and Afghanistan; and more.



What similarities and differences are there? Why do you think the US government was more willing to support Operation Peter Pan as compared to other events in history and why did it only offer refuge to children? Start with the additional resources listed at the end of the book and find 3–5 additional sources to strengthen your claims. You can present your findings and ideas in an essay format, a recorded speech using slides or other visual tools, or another approved format.



4. Divide into groups of four. Choose a moment from the book to write out as a scene in a play to perform for the class. Make sure to include dialogue. For example, what would Marisol's parents be saying when they argue in their room before sending Marisol away? Alternatively, you can script and act out a scene that is not shown in the graphic novel. For example, what if Marisol had tried to speak to the girl in the hallway carrying the books?
5. Color almost serves as a character of its own in *Isla to Island*. Think about a time in your life where you had to adjust to change. Draw a comic strip to depict the change and what helped you adapt. Think about how you will use color to tell your story.



Guide written by Cynthia Medrano, librarian and member of Rise: A Feminist Book Project Committee.

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