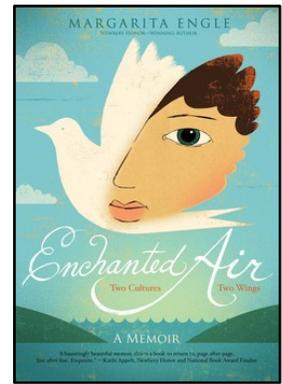


A Curriculum Guide for

***Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings: A Memoir***

By Margarita Engle



**About the Book**

In this poetic memoir, Margarita Engle, the first Latino to receive a Newbery Honor, tells of growing up as a child of two cultures during the Cold War.

Margarita is a girl from two worlds. Her heart lies in Cuba, her mother’s tropical island country, a place so lush with vibrant life that it seems like a fairy-tale kingdom. But most of the time she lives in Los Angeles, lonely in the noisy city and dreaming of the summers when she can take a plane through the enchanted air to her beloved island. Words and images are her constant companions, friendly and comforting when the children at school are not.

Then a revolution breaks out in Cuba. Margarita fears for her faraway family. When the hostility between Cuba and the United States erupts at the Bay of Pigs Invasion, Margarita’s worlds collide in the worst way possible. How can the two countries she loves hate each other so much? And will she ever get to visit her beautiful island again?

**Set the Stage**

Before exploring this book, talk with students about what a memoir is. Invite them to look back on their young lives and consider one or two pivotal memories they have of events or people who have helped shaped them. How do these intersect with stories their families tell them about their arrival and early childhood? How might we capture those in words on the page? This book is Margarita Engle’s attempt to share some of her memories about growing up, particularly as a person who comes from two different cultures. She begins briefly with her parents’ meeting, but focuses primarily on her life in California and her travel back and forth to Cuba, until political conflicts bring that to a halt. Here are some open-ended questions to prompt discussion for each major section of the book. Encourage students to cite specific poems and poem lines and stanzas as they consider their responses, when relevant.

**Strategies**

These activities align with the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (RL.7–12.1, 4)

- Use the title of the poem to encourage students to guess what the poem will be about *before* reading it.
- Be alert to Engle’s use of the word “wing” or “wings” throughout the book. Challenge half the students to keep a list of these mentions with page number references for discussion later.
- Another important aspect of this memoir is the duality that Engle describes while contrasting two different things throughout the book. For example, she contrasts her American-born father and his family with her Cuban-born mother and her family. Challenge the other half of the students to make a chart with two columns

and keep a list of things that are compared in the text along with page number references.

### **Discussion Questions**

These questions align with the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (SL.7–12.1)

#### **I. Love at First Sight (Valentine’s Day, 1947)**

- Do you believe in “love at first sight”?
- How can you know that someone cares about you if they don’t speak the same language?
- When does love or kindness require courage?

#### **II. Magical Travels (1951 – 59)**

- Can you fall in “love at first sight” with a place?
- What makes a place magical? When does a place feel scary or threatening?
- What is it like to feel at home in two completely different places? To feel that we are two different people in two different places? Like having an invisible twin?
- The concept of cultural identity is an important one woven throughout this memoir. Why is it so important to parse our personal cultural history? How far back do we go? Who are we if we don’t do that?
- Does our language affect our way of thinking? Do words shape our thoughts just as thoughts shape our words? If you speak more than one language, does that foster more than one way of thinking?
- Engle grew up hearing her extended family speak English, Spanish, Russian, and Yiddish. What language(s) are you exposed to and how does that affect or shape you?
- Engle considers the role of language in her developing sense of self and how things are phrased differently in English or Spanish. What are the pros and cons of speaking more than one language?
- What are the difficulties and rewards in moving with your family?
- Everyone generally experiences some anxiety or possibly trauma in childhood. For Engle, key events included her sister’s bout with polio and her childhood home in the California forest burning down. Notice how both of these poems are associated with fire. Why is that? What is bad and good about fire?
- In “Hidden,” Engle describes the use of photo cards, like baseball cards, to inform Cuban farmers who don’t know how to read. How does the media use visuals to inform or shape our understanding or point of view today?
- Encourage students to share pet adoption stories. How did you find or get your pet(s)? How did you decide on a name?
- What is the most unusual pet you have had? (Any insects?) What was your family’s response to that pet?
- How would you describe your parents if they were not your parents?
- When you watch or read news about war or political conflicts, how does it feel when you actually know people who live there or are affected by those events?

Why is it easier to handle bad news when we don't know people there personally?  
Should it be easier?

### **III. Winged Summer (1960)**

- What changes have occurred in society in terms of race relations since Engle's childhood (e.g., "colored" and "white" drinking fountains)? What still rings true today and what would you like to see changed in the future?
- What is it that makes a summer especially memorable? Being with family or being separated from family? Exploring new hobbies and interests or finding time for favorite activities? Engle describes each of these (visiting Cuba, trying horseback riding). Why might this summer in particular stand out in her life?
- What hobby or activity would you like to try, but which might be scary or difficult? Why is it appealing to you?
- Who has it better—boys or girls—and why? Or when?
- What are the pros and cons of spending time in the city versus spending time in the country or on a farm?
- Engle clearly loves horses and riding, which she calls feeling "winged." It provides a connection, an outlet, and a challenge for herself. What hobbies and activities make you feel "winged"?
- Would you rather read a book alone or listen to a storyteller? Why?

### **IV. Strange Sky (1961 – 64)**

- What do you call your parents (e.g., Mami, Mom, Dad)? What does that reflect about you, about them, or about family traditions or expectations?
- What would it be like if you were not allowed to visit your extended family or friends? How could you stay connected?
- What are you willing to do to "fit in" (e.g., hair, clothes, glasses)? How do those choices affect us? Why can't we be accepted just the way we are?
- What is it like to have "disappearing friends," who make choices so different from your own that your friendship with them disappears?
- What does it mean to be "stateless"?
- How are "poetic metaphors" like writing in code?

### **V. Two Wings (1965)**

- What can young people teach their parents?
- Author Mark Twain wrote, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness." Why is that true?
- In the poem, "Cave Paintings," Engle writes that "Certain longings / are shared / by all." What might she be referring to?
- What would it be like to live in a place where you are not allowed to speak your opinions openly?
- Why do oppressive governments try to control communication as Engle mentions in "Secret Languages"?
- What are the differences between being an immigrant, refugee, stateless person, or expatriate?

- Why does laughter help people feel united? When does it provide a bond and when does it create barriers?
- How is speaking or writing openly almost like having wings?
- What is the difference between “country” and “culture”?
- How does our family shape us? How does our culture of origin shape us? How is that the same or different?

### **Themes**

These activities align with the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (RL.7–12.1, 2, 4)

1. As the reading comes to a close, invite students to consider the themes that emerge in this memoir, particularly regarding the importance of family and the struggle to establish an individual identity and how both of those intersect with notions of culture and language. For example, Engle writes about what it’s like to feel at home in two completely different places, like having an invisible twin (e.g., “No Place on the Map,” “Other Journeys,” “*Realidad/Reality*,” “Escape,” “The Faraway Gift,” “Strays,” “Invisible”).

2. The word “wing” or “wings” is used often in the book with multiple meanings (including in the subtitle of the book). Why might this be an important thread throughout her memoir? Invite students to share the multiple references to wing(s) they have found and discuss the meaning and symbolism of each.

3. Engle juxtaposes many pairs of things to emphasize the contrast between them (like her Cuban mother and her American father, Cuba and California, books and storytelling, English and Spanish). Invite students to share the charts they created with two columns and the list of things they identified to compare and contrast. How does Engle emphasize their difference *and* their sameness?

### **Activities**

#### **Presentation**

This activity aligns with the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (SL.7–10.5, 6) (SL.11–12.6)

With poem memoirs, 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 reader’s theater with volunteers taking various excerpts. With a bit of preparation we can seek out minimal props or images (via Google, iStock, and other sources) to show in the background and provide context. Then we can record that reading and incorporate those images, creating a simple PowerPoint presentation or iMovie, Vimeo, Animoto, or Powtoon video. This could be shared in October for Family History Month or to celebrate National Family Literacy Day (November 1).

## Writing

These activities align with the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (WHST.6–12.2, 4) (RL.7–12.5)

1. Engle describes writing short wall-poems (e.g., “Life Goes On,” “Learning,” “Cave Paintings”) as a way of expressing her young self. Provide large Post-it notes and encourage students to share their favorite haiku or Emily Dickinson poem (two of Engle’s favorites) or write and share their own original short wall-poem and allow them to place it where they prefer (in a public or private place on the wall).
2. The roots of our future dreams and plans are deep. Engle’s future career as a botanist is foreshadowed in “The Dancing Plants of Cuba” and her future as a writer is referenced in “Turtle Came to See Me” and “My Library Life.” Talk about how our interests, hobbies, and passions shape our lives and our work and how that can also change over time. Encourage students to think about their interests, hobbies, travels, and experiences and write about one that might emerge with potential for future career possibilities. They can save it as a “time capsule” for future reference to see how that vision might change or evolve.
3. Students can try writing and creating their own mini-memoirs (individually, in pairs, or as a collective group). To begin, try the popular bio-poem form. There are several variations, but the National Council of Teachers of English website, ReadWriteThink, offers step-by-step guidelines for creating one simple version. (What would you write about yourself in ten lines? What words describe you?). For some students, visuals and drawings are a preferred mode of expression, so they can gather or create images or draw a graphic novel interpretation of special memories.

You can view the guidelines here:

[http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson\\_images/lesson398/biopoem.pdf](http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson398/biopoem.pdf)

4. Guide students in looking for the many examples of figurative language in Engle’s poetry such as similes (e.g., “No Place on the Map”), metaphors (e.g., “Revived”), alliteration (e.g., “Survival”), and sensory description (e.g., “Learning to Listen”). Discuss how Engle uses free verse in her poems and creates a distinctive rhythm through her structuring of stanzas and her word choice.
5. The poet José Martí is particularly influential in Margarita Engle’s family. He was her mother’s favorite poet. Look him up and learn more about his life and work. You’ll find one sample poem by him (in both Spanish and English) in the back of Engle’s memoir.

## Research

These activities align with the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (SL.7–12.1)

1. Family history is very important in Engle’s memoir, particularly her parents’ and grandparents’ stories. Have students ask their parents or other family members about their

courtship stories. How did they meet? When did they know they were in love? Where did previous generations come from or move to?

2. Travel is an essential element in Engle’s experiences growing up. Use a map to identify the many places mentioned in the book: Trinidad de Cuba and Havana in Cuba; Los Angeles, California; the California-Oregon border; Mexico (Guanajuato, Oaxaca, Michoacán); Kiev; New Orleans, Louisiana; Ireland; London, England; Paris, France; Italy; La Mancha, Spain.

3. Identify the time frame (1947 – 65) for the story’s setting. Talk about what was going on in the world at this time. Work together to research background information about the Bay of Pigs (“April, 1961”) and the Cuban Missile Crisis (“Out of Reach,” “Some Things Should Never Change,” “More Dangerous Air,” “Three Sides to Every Story,” “Invisible,” “Reality”). Refer to the Cold War Time Line provided by the author in the back matter.

### **Further Reading**

These activities align with the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (RL.7.9) (RL.8–12.1)

1. Margarita Engle is the Cuban-American winner of the first Newbery Honor ever awarded to a Latino/Latina. Look for more books by Engle set in Cuba:

- *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano*
- *The Surrender Tree: Poems of Cuba’s Struggle for Freedom*
- *Tropical Secrets: Holocaust Refugees in Cuba*
- *The Firefly Letters; A Suffragette’s Journey to Cuba*
- *Hurricane Dancers: The First Caribbean Pirate Shipwreck*
- *The Wild Book*
- *The Lightning Dreamer: Cuba’s Greatest Abolitionist*
- *Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal*

2. For further study, compare Engle’s memoir in verse with other works that offer a similar focus on Cuba such as:

- Ada, Alma Flor. *Under the Royal Palms: A Childhood in Cuba*
- Ada, Alma Flor. *Where the Flame Trees Bloom*

3. Connect poetry, fiction, and nonfiction by linking Engle’s memoir with fictional works set in the turbulent 1960s like *Countdown* and *Revolution* by Deborah Wiles (Sixties Trilogy), *The Revolution of Evelyn Serrano* by Sonia Manzano, *One Crazy Summer* and *P.S. Be Eleven* by Rita Williams-Garcia and with nonfiction books like *Marching for Freedom: Walk Together, Children, and Don’t You Grow Weary* by Elizabeth Partridge or *To the Mountaintop: My Journey Through the Civil Rights Movement* by Charlayne Hunter-Gault.

4. Relate *Enchanted Air* with other multicultural memoirs in poem form:

- Nelson, Marilyn. *How I Discovered Poetry*

- Lai, Thanhha. *Inside Out and Back Again*
- McCall, Guadalupe Garcia. *Under the Mesquite*
- Woodson, Jacqueline. *Brown Girl Dreaming*
- Yeung, Russell Ching. *Tofu Quilt*
- Yolen, Jane. *Ekaterinoslav: One Family's Passage to America: A Memoir in Verse*
- Yu, Chun. *Little Green: A Memoir of Growing Up During the Chinese Cultural Revolution*

And look for these poetry memoirs about coming of age:

- Appelt, Kathi. *My Father's Summers: A Daughter's Memoir*
- Corrigan, Eireann. *You Remind Me of You: A Poetry Memoir*
- Harrison, David L. *Connecting Dots: Poems of My Journey*
- Levy, Debbie. *The Year of Goodbyes: A True Story of Friendship, Family, and Farewells*

*Guide written in 2015 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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