

## A Curriculum Guide for

### ***Soaring Earth***

By Margarita Engle

#### **About the Book**

In this powerful companion to her award-winning memoir, *Enchanted Air*, Young People’s Poet Laureate Margarita Engle recounts her teenage years during the turbulent 1960s. Margarita Engle’s childhood straddles two worlds: the lush, welcoming island of Cuba and the lonely, dream-soaked reality of Los Angeles. But the revolution transforms Cuba into a mystery of impossibility, no longer reachable in real life. Teenage Margarita longs to travel the world, yet before she can become independent, she’ll have to start high school. Then the shock waves of war reach America, rippling Margarita’s plans in their wake. Cast into uncertainty, she must grapple with the philosophies of peace, civil rights, freedom of expression, and environmental protection. Despite overwhelming circumstances, she finds solace and empowerment through her education. Amid the challenges of adolescence and a world steeped in conflict, Margarita finds hope beyond the struggle and love in the most unexpected of places.

#### **Set the Stage**

Before exploring this book, talk with students about memoirs. How is a memoir similar or different from an autobiography? If any students have read Engle’s earlier memoir in verse, *Enchanted Air*, invite them to share what they remember to set the stage for *Soaring Earth*. In *Soaring Earth*, Engle moves from her childhood divided between Cuba and California to young adulthood; the focus is on her high school years, attempts at attending college, and her travels and relationships as she tries to figure out who she is and what she wants to be. She is beautifully introspective and surprisingly honest about many things, including relationships with teenage boyfriends, the effects of drug use, being witness to a murder, suffering abuse and death threats, guilt about shoplifting, being homeless, her academic failures, and much more. All of this is revealed in free verse poems from a first person point of view.

It might also be helpful to talk about life in the US during this time period (1966–1973), particularly relating to the Vietnam War. Engle references important as well as notorious figures such as Che Guevara, César Chávez, Charles Manson, and Jane Goodall; students could work together to retrieve photos and basic information about these individuals to provide context. Also during this time, Cuba became off limits to travelers from the US; this has a powerful impact on Engle and her family. Invite students to think about how childhoods connect with teenage years, and how our cultural roots shape our growing up. Finally, as you read together or independently, encourage students to note Engle’s use of the words *earth*, *air*, and *enchanted*, and how she employs that imagery to shape her story and connect with her previous memoir. They’ll even find this book’s title embedded in a poem near the end of the book, called “Moon Landing.”

## **Craft and Structure**

The author organizes the poems in this book into several distinctive sections, each with its own section title:

- Epigraph: excerpt from “Poema 53” by Antonio Machado
- “Earthbound” prologue
- Wide Air 1966–1968
- Wild Air 1968–1969
- Drifting 1969–1970
- Green Earth 1970–1971
- Enchanted Earth 1973
- Author’s Note

Talk about how Engle uses these section headings to set the tone, and also about the titles for each poem within each section. If you read only the titles, what would you surmise about what’s happening? Have students try it both before and after reading the book. As a group, read aloud only the poem and section titles by passing the book around the class and inviting students to read only the titles, round-robin style. How do the titles alone set the stage or move the story along?

## **Discussion Questions**

The questions in these sections address the following Common Core State Standards: (RL.7-8.2, 4) (RL.9-10.4) (RL.11-12.9) (SL.7-8.1.A, C) (SL.9-10.1.A, C) (SL.11-12.1, C) (L.7-8.3.A, 5.A) (L.9-10.5) (L.11-12.5) (W.7-8.1.B) (W.9-10.1) (W.11-12.1)

As students read or listen to *Soaring Earth*, invite them to consider the characters, relationships, conflicts, and surprises in the story. Ask open-ended questions that motivate them to dig deeply and challenge them to find poems or passages that support their opinions or analysis. In this particular memoir in verse, Engle incorporates many crucial questions and observations within the poems themselves. These can be excellent prompts for discussion, including the following questions.

1. Engle is very honest about her first romantic relationships with boys; she struggles to maintain her identity throughout. She observes, “Without my first boyfriend / who am / I?” Additionally, she suffers abuse, neglect, and even death threats during some of these relationships. How does this impact this stage of her life? How does it affect her writing? Her goals?
2. Engle writes, “If only politicians could see these results. / Maybe they’d decide to conquer the world / with comedy instead of weapons.” What are the political issues that weigh on her in this memoir and shape her story? Consider war, racism, poverty, sexism, and other topics. Which of these issues are students still grappling with today?

Engle is driven to read literature and write poetry from a very young age, but then hits a terrible obstacle when she is forced to share her writing in high school honors creative

writing class, saying, “So I stop writing. I freeze. / Strangers are impossible to please.” What helps her begin to write again? What obstacles do students face in their writing?

3. Engle’s Cuban American identity is extremely important to her, but she is constantly ignored or lumped in with others who are not of Cuban descent, noting, “identity always such a personal blend / of inheritance / and surroundings.” Are people today more sensitive to these distinctions? Ask students to explain their answers. Invite them to consider which factors are most important to them in shaping their identities.

4. Engle identifies many characters, especially boyfriends, by initials only, such as “Army M.,” “Rebel M.,” “Bold B.,” “Actor N.,” and “Dr. H.” Why might she have chosen to do this? What impact does it have on the poem and the story?

5. The author reveals that her path during these young adult years is nonlinear and undirected. Nevertheless, she begins to find her way toward what she wants to pursue, stating, “Somehow, confusion often leads / toward clarity.” Some things seem to just happen to her and others she chooses, often making painful decisions in the process. How do these experiences help lead her to clarity?

Students can consider these questions in the context of the poems and the story, as well as in the more general context of their own lives and personal situations.

### **Themes**

Throughout this brave and introspective memoir in verse, Engle raises important questions related to political, cultural, and gender issues. Challenge students to identify a line, phrase, or passage that is pivotal to the story or especially meaningful to them, and talk about why. What is explicitly stated and what do they infer? How might some of these statements signal the book’s themes? Possible examples include:

- “Someday, maybe my poetry and stories / will learn how to alter language, creating / a timescape where past and future / can meet.”
- “My only courage / is inside my secret world / of imagination.”
- “Sometimes all you have to do is wish / out loud.”
- “All I want to do is travel and learn. / All I need is books, not boyfriends.”
- “Free speech can be / dangerous.”
- “So I don’t try to make sense of anything. / I just let myself be a stranger.”
- “No scars. / Just an absence of belief / in kindness.”
- “What do I crave more, rebellion / or communication?”

- “I’ve learned two real-life lessons: / patience / faith.”
- “Do I need to alter my own definition / of self?”
- “I thought I was brave, / but I’m scared.”
- “But I still believe that the miracle / we really need / is peace, not just technological / progress.”
- “When I witness a killing / in those beautiful green hills / it makes me feel like no place / will ever be safe.”
- “My life seems to swirl in circles, / always returning to similar mistakes.”
- “Is bravery / the same / as hope?”
- “Once an opportunity / has been abandoned, / can lost hope ever / be rediscovered?”
- “The line between militias and cults / is a fine one.”
- “So I leave / on a road trip, / exploring / quietness.”
- “It’s time to go back and try to find / courage.”
- “I need / to rediscover / my original self / before I share real life / with anyone / else.”
- “I’ll remember that they feel / such a deep sense / of belonging / nowhere.”
- “Now I need to start over, / learning all that I knew so well / when I was little.”
- “Hope follows / wherever / we go.”

### **Vocabulary**

In any work of literature, we can encounter new vocabulary or familiar words used in new ways. As they read this memoir in verse, students can keep their own lists of unfamiliar words and use context to guess at meaning, and/or consider those on the list below. Which of these words are new to students? Talk about these words, their use in context, and possible multiple meanings. How do these word choices impact the tone of the book? Challenge students to use some of these words in everyday speech. Possible vocabulary words showcased throughout the book include:

- Nomadic
- Hybrid
- Riptides
- Pacifists
- Conspiracy
- Mimic
- Agnostic
- Vapor
- Mythical
- Schizophrenia
- Aviary
- Physiology
- Synapse
- Chasm
- Electrodes
- Rhetoric
- Panhandlers
- Tsunami
- Hallucinations
- Boycott
- Hypocrite
- Fanatic
- Counterrevolutionary
- Deluge
- Transcendentalists
- Notorious
- Tranquil
- Makeshift
- Barometric
- Photosynthesis
- Taxonomy
- Desertification
- Equitation
- Asylum

## **Activities**

### **Languages Other Than English**

Another important component of this memoir in verse is the role of language. Several poems explicitly reference or incorporate multiple languages, examining how the ability to speak or write in these various languages affects one's place in society. Discuss the place of language in the power dynamics introduced in this memoir, 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 incorporate languages other than English and discuss why the author might have chosen to include them. How is this important to Engle's story? It may be helpful to use digital tools (like Google Translate) to hear how these words and phrases should be pronounced.

### **Figurative Language, Literacy Devices, and Jargon or Slang**

Discuss how Engle uses free verse in her poems and creates a distinctive rhythm through her structuring of stanzas and her word choices. Read passages aloud to hear the rhythm. She also frequently incorporates figurative language, particularly similes and metaphors. In some cases, a whole poem, such as "Walking Trees," can be considered a metaphor. Challenge students to find other "whole poem" examples. Then discuss the impact of each metaphoric poem or passage they discover.

Engle also uses devices like allusion (e.g., "Orpheus") and irony (e.g., the prologue, "Earthbound," "Volunteer," and "Hopeless"). Talk about what these two devices are, how they work, and why Engle might have employed them. See if students can find other examples.

In the poem "College at Last," Engle focuses on the "language of cool," citing words and phrases like "freak out," "uptight," "laid-back," "groovy," "bummer," and "bread" as she learns the college ropes in 1968–1969. Talk with students about what each of these words mean, and what comparable words or phrases they might employ for the same things today. See if students can find other examples of such jargon or slang in other poems in *Soaring Earth*.

### **Writing**

The author weaves haiku (e.g., "Homesick Haiku on a Foggy Bay Area Day") and tanka poems (e.g., "A Tanka Poem Made of Stolen Hope") throughout her memoir in verse. Talk about these two poem forms, including their roots and structure, and invite students to try writing them as autobiographical poems. Alternatively, consider how Engle often raises questions in her poems, particularly in end passages. For example:

- "Why do I imagine / that in order to accomplish anything, / all my feeble, trial-and-error efforts / need to be / perfect?"
- "Am I only myself / between the pages / of strangers' / memories?"

Why might the author use this questioning format in a memoir? Invite students to try writing free verse poems that incorporate or end with questions, particularly autobiographical poems of their own.

### **Margarita Engle's Reading List**

The author mentions several authors whose works she read during this pivotal period. This includes Octavio Paz, Vine Deloria Jr., N. Scott Momaday, V. S. Naipaul, Mariano Azuela, Piri Thomas, Jorge Amado, Gabriel García Márquez, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Tomás Rivera, and the Mahabharata tales from India. Have students work

together in groups to find out more about these authors, their books, and their literary impact. How might they have influenced Engle's own writing or worldview?

### **Geography**

Travel is an essential element in Engle's experiences as a young adult, both in her dreams to see the world and in her wandering life across the US. Use a map to identify some of the places mentioned in the book such as Cuba, Peru, Borneo, India, Japan, Korea, China, Poland, Holland, Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Italy, Spain, Vietnam, Portugal, Morocco, Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Thailand, Singapore, and others. Invite students to share places they have visited or dream of seeing.

### **STEM Connections**

There are several STEM connections to make in *Soaring Earth* (STEM = Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). Work with students to identify the scientific fields that interested Engle along the way, and what each field includes. Talk about the scientific terms, if unfamiliar. Botany emerges as the author's focus area in the end. Why might this be so? How is this revealed? Engle makes many parallels between science and poetry throughout the book; challenge students to find passages about the connections between poetry and science, and share and discuss them.

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