



A Curriculum Guide to:

With a Star in My Hand: Rubén Darío, Poetry Hero

By Margarita Engle

About the Book

Margarita Engle's verse novel, *With a Star in My Hand*, traces the journey of Nicaraguan author Rubén Darío (1867–1916), who achieved fame as a young poet known for his experimental approach. Through his voice, readers experience the hurt that came from being abandoned by his mother as a young child, the fear of failure given the public nature of the poet's work, the joy and rapture of young love, the doors that opened and closed in response to the kind of poetry he wrote and wanted to write, and his growth as an artist and person as he journeyed around the world, seeking both adventure and a sense of home.

Discussion Questions

The following discussion questions and activities are designed to support students in meeting the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for English Language Arts in Reading, Writing, Speaking and Thinking, and Language, Grades 6–12, of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS Reading 1-5, 9) (CCSS Language 3, 4, 5) (CCSS Writing 2, 4, 6, 7) (CCSS Speaking and Listening 1, 2, 3, 5)

1. Darío claims that “maybe reality / is the strangest, most mystery-filled / terrible / true story / of all.” How do you make sense of this statement? Is reality strange and terrible and true all at the same time? Can you defend Darío’s claim, or do you feel differently about the way the world works?
2. Darío reports that “words are . . . my sturdy refuge,” and his aunt tells him that words are “weapons more effective / than swords.” How do words matter in our daily lives? Do you think they hold power in the larger society we inhabit? How do you see language as influencing the way we see and understand ourselves and one another? Give examples from your own experiences, current events, or within your community.
3. The loss of Darío’s mother affects him deeply, particularly when he learns that she abandoned him as a child and is still alive. Why do you imagine she chose to leave her baby in the jungle? When she returns, do you think she’s after her son’s riches, as he claims? Why do you suppose she is not mentioned in the story following this scene?
4. The natural world is referenced repeatedly throughout the novel. In some moments, it seems to provide refuge and solace, as when Darío remembers “playing with towering animals / under a palm tree” and finding peace as he “stand[s] at the edge of a blue lake / alone.” In other moments, the natural world wreaks havoc; she “reclaims/ her absolute / authority” in the form of an earthquake and a volcano that bring down the walls of houses and cover the city in gray ash. Describe Darío’s relationship with nature. How may he relate to its constant changes? Think about Darío’s identities as a poet and a person, and how they affect his relationships with others. Explain your answers using examples from the book.
5. At the start of the novel, Darío is curious about his *indio* background, seeing connections with the gardener who shares his heritage, brown skin, and black hair. He wonders if his mother was “a *mestiza* of half-Matagalpan descent” or if she belonged to “some other proud forest nation.” He takes pride in this identity when his poetry becomes known and admired in Central America, letting his “hair grow long / like [his] *indio* ancestors.” When he chooses to leave Nicaragua and emigrate to Chile, however, “anti-indigenous racial hatred / strikes [his] life / for the first time”

and leaves him feeling “defeated and desperate.” How do you think Darío’s shifting understanding of his cultural and ethnic identity changes the way he views himself? How does it impact his poetry?

6. Darío tries to make sense of his role as a son in the absence of his parents. When his aunt changes his name, he describes himself as “not / the real son of this house, just a substitute,” and when he learns that he is “the son of Uncle Manuel / the drunkard,” he wonders if “Perhaps it’s better to claim no parents / than two who have no use for a son.” What do you think it means to be somebody’s son? Is being someone’s child the result of biology or something more? Think about the role of a caregiver, and how that relationship can affect a child. Did Darío have other role models outside of his home?

7. Think about the way a poem is constructed and represented on the page. What does it mean to experiment with forms? Examine Engle’s poems “Feeling Worthless” and “Volcano.” How does she create visual imagery? Explain your observations, citing specific lines.

8. Darío names his feelings of inadequacy as a writer, wondering “if [his] small-town rhymes / will ever be eloquent enough / for city dwellers.” How do you feel about yourself as a writer? Are there certain kinds of writing that appeal to you in ways that other kinds of writing do not? What is scary about writing and being a writer? What is liberating?

9. Darío notes that the stories of adults tend to generate fear; they “are about a hairy hand / that walks the streets at night / like a spider, / and a headless priest / who wanders all over the city, / and a witch with cruel laughter, / and ordinary people who fly away / high above rooftops.” When he sees the Manuelita, a woman who sells cigars, he hears “stories / of flying horses, magical genies, / and endless mazes / where ancient heroes / were always / wandering / ending up / lost.” How does Darío’s perspective differ from other adults in his life? Think about what it might feel like to be “*el niño poeta*,” the child poet. How might this impact the way others view him, and how he sees the world around him?

10. Over the course of his youth, Darío falls in love with three young women. He notes, “When you’re in love / every word is magical,” “falling in love is a cliff / not / a / slope,” and “falling in love / made [him] foolish.” Do these declarations and comparisons feel believable to you as a young person? Do you think age matters when it comes to falling in love? Explain your answers.

11. Reflect on the ways that poetry and its uses are portrayed in this novel. Think about a poet’s intentions or an audience’s experience, as well as poetry as a commodity to be sold and the fame that often comes with it. Use examples from the book to accompany your thoughts.

12. When Darío begins as a poet, he often writes for others, crafting pieces for families to read at the funerals of loved ones or for aunties to celebrate their “pretty daughters.” However, these early successes leave him feeling sad in that they fail to reflect the pain he feels as a child who has lost his mother; he feels “cheated / by abandonment,” with a “wounded heart / and suffering / mind.” He would rather write “*la verdad*,” the truth. What does “writing the truth” mean to you? Would you write for others, or for yourself? What kind of topics would you choose to write about? Explain your answers.

13. Darío asks, “Isn’t the role of poets to pass along truths / both gruesome and beautiful?” What do you think is the poet’s responsibility in our society today? What famous poets or poems do you know? Whose voices do we hear, or not hear, when we read poetry, especially in class and other sanctioned spaces?

14. When Darío begins to experiment with his poetry, he asks, “Why obey such strict rhyming rules / when poems have minds, hearts, and souls / of their own, always loving / freedom?” Have you ever tried writing a poem? What do you think are the biggest challenges and rewards? What rules of poetry, if any, do you think are necessary to defining the genre? How might poetry invite and allow for experimentation in ways that prose writing might not?

15. As Darío travels the world as a poet, he expresses a tension between craving a home and longing to roam. He comes to an understanding that “wanderlust / is a powerful force / that leaves the eager traveler / longing to live / two lives / at the same time, / one of adventure, / the other / peace.” Can you relate to Darío? How do you define home? Would moving to a new place change your conception of home? Explain your answers.

16. When Darío finds himself living in a “shabby room” that is “all [he] can afford,” he argues that “creativity is the best fuel / for every poor man’s future.” What might this statement suggest about survival? Do you think creativity is enough to sustain a person? Conversely, is a life filled with money but lacking creativity a rich life? Explain your thoughts.

Extension Activities

1. At the age of thirteen, Darío imagines the statues he sees in the park as coming to life, “reversing the process / that preserves old soldiers / as rigid sculptures.” He wonders about how this process connects to him as a young person: “I am the block of marble / carved / and waiting / for tomorrow.” Using a block of modeling clay provided by your teacher, wonder for yourself what it might mean to “spring to life.” Create a representation, realistic or abstract, of the form you might take in the tomorrows that you envision for yourself. Name your piece and

write an artist's statement that explains your thinking; then include your creation in a classroom gallery for public viewing.

2. As a poet, Darío is inspired by the natural world, both in terms of poetry topics and the experimental forms that they take. In the poem, "When I Write Poetry," for example, he describes how his experience on a ship on the ocean influences his thinking about "syllables, / silences, / and rhyme," and, in response, he captures the movement of the waves, "that come / and then go again, in patterns of long / and short / tidal rhythms." Drawing inspiration from Darío's writing, try generating a piece of poetry that mimics something you see and know in the natural world. To begin, you might listen to various soundscapes on YouTube, including Nature Soundscapes (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_WVQw56O3jaZwu3IjV66w). As you compose, feel free to draw upon your linguistic strengths and write in any language you choose.

3. In the author's note at the novel's conclusion, Engle names several poets who have shaped her work and the field more broadly. To enhance your understanding of these individuals' lives and contributions, work as a small group to select one of the poets listed. Gather information through a variety of sources, and share what you learn with the rest of your classmates. To enhance your presentation, you might include photographs that feature your poet, audio of your poet's work being read aloud, visual art inspired by your poet or their work, or examples of the poet's work in their heritage language.

4. In the author's note, we also learn that Darío "is most often remembered by the general public for his rhymed fairy tale, 'A Margarita Debayle,'" a story of a princess who flies into the sky to claim a star for herself. Consider your own childhood and the tales that the adults in your life shared with you. Learn more about the origins of these tales and reflect on whether they've shaped how you see yourself in the world. Then craft your own retelling of one tale for a contemporary audience. How might the original tale be modified to reflect the realities, needs, and desires of young people today? Consider sharing your piece with an audience of young people in your community or with your family.

5. Place plays a central role in Darío's story, particularly as he moves from location to location around the globe, sometimes by force and sometimes by choice. To capture his physical and emotional journey, work as a class to build a wall map that includes both the geographical locations he visits and how he experiences these places as a person in the space. For example, at the start of the novel, he lives in the jungles of Honduras, where he feels abandoned by his mother and found by the wild animals he encounters there. He is then taken by his great-uncle back to his homeland of Nicaragua, where he feels like an imitation son. Work together to trace

his path from there. To construct the map, consider a long piece of butcher paper that can be tacked or taped up on your classroom wall.

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