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A Curriculum Guide to
Your Heart, My Sky
By Margarita Engle

About the Book

Even while Liana and Amado are falling in love, they suffer every day. In 1991 Cuba, both teens have dangerously defied the government. The economy is failing, after the loss of Soviet subsidies, and Cubans are desperately hungry. As foreigners arrive for the Pan Am games, food is supplied to visitors, instead of Cubans. With the help of a mysterious stray dog, Liana and Amado scrounge food on beaches where they encounter *balseros*, desperate Cubans about to risk their lives heading to Florida on handmade rafts. Even when Amado's parents teach them how to grow vegetables, they are still hungry for freedom and independence. Glorious poems with vivid imagery tell Liana and Amado's gripping story of first love amid near despair.

Discussion Questions

The following discussion questions and activities particularly address the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (RL.7–12.1,2,3,4,5) (SL.7–12.1) (W.7-12.2,7)

1. The book's dedication reads, "Para los balseros / y los que se quedaron." If you don't speak Spanish, look up the English translation. Discuss what it means and how it relates to the book. Why do you think the author chose not to translate it? Discuss the use of Spanish in the book and how the author makes it accessible to readers who don't speak the language.
2. Why do you think the book is called *Your Heart, My Sky*? Relate your answer to the book's epigraph from José Martí, and to this line from Liana's poem, "Admiration": "It's enough to make my heart and mind/feel as wide and far-reaching as the sky."
3. Liana says, "My name means jungle vine, / a plant that grows tangled like prayers" and that "Amado is a word that means love." Liana names the dog they find "Paz." Discuss these names and how they reflect the characters and their personalities. How do you think the characters feel about them?
4. When does Paz appear, and what does he do? Why is he called "the singing dog"? Why are sections about him italicized and in third person? Describe the magical elements, including his role as a matchmaker like other dogs in history. Discuss Amado's statement: "Paz has taught me / that memory is a library / of scents and flavors, while fear / is a warehouse of hungers."
5. How do Liana and Amado meet? Why are they attracted to each other? Compare and contrast their personalities and situations. What do they argue about? How has each of them defied the government, and what are their fears about having done so?
6. When Liana first sees Amado, she thinks he's courageous, and eventually she realizes she is as well. Discuss her observation, "Sometimes it takes a clear view / of someone else / before I can see my own / unexpected self." How are both teenagers courageous? How do their decisions and actions impact their lives and those around them?
7. Consider Amado's poem, "Confusion Is Another Word for Wishes," which describes Liana as "perfectly / furiously / intelligent" but also "distant." Why do you think he views her this way? How does she become less distant as time goes on? Explain your answers using examples from the book.
8. Why are Liana, Amado, and their families so hungry? How are the governments of Cuba, the US, and Russia involved? Why do people like Amado's grandparents no longer work small farms? Analyze what is meant when Liana describes hunger as "tyranny" and Amado calls it a "weapon of war."
9. What are some of the punishments for stealing food? Describe the food riot and its consequences.
10. What are Liana's and Amado's physical and psychological symptoms of hunger? What do they forage to eat, and how successful are they? How does the dog help them find food? In the first poem, why do you think Liana says, "Hunger / helps lonely beings / sing"?
11. What role do the teenagers' parents play in the story? What do they think and say about Liana's and Amado's choices? What has happened to Amado's brother, Generoso? What important choice do Liana's brothers make? What effect do these situations have on the rest of their families?
12. What do Liana and Amado learn from Amado's grandparents? Discuss the advice they give in the poem "Journey." Describe the importance of growing their own food, and Liana's idea for a restaurant. What dangers are involved?

13. What does Amado mean when he visits his grandparents and says that his grandfather “lives on a menu of memories, / while my generation needs to survive / on nothing / but wishes”? Do you think his grandfather would agree with him?
14. Find passages where Liana and Amado talk about their love. What do they love about each other? What kind of images do they use to express it? Find and discuss images that relate love and hunger. Analyze poems that combine both Liana’s and Amado’s voices. How do these readings impact your understanding of love and hunger?
15. Some poems group three or four words like a list, such as Amado’s questions: “Fly? / Swim? / Run? / Race?” Find other examples and discuss the format’s effect or purpose on the story. Read the words aloud and consider how they sound as poetry.
16. An insidious aspect of life under many tyrannies, including Castro’s, is that governments encourage and reward people to turn in neighbors or strangers for violations of strict laws. Why do you think governments do this? How does it affect people’s behavior and their sense of trust? When does this topic arise in the novel, and what happens?
17. Why do the *balseiros* flee? Where do they hope to go? How do they escape, and what do they need to succeed? What are the dangers and the chances of survival? Give examples and information from the book to support your answers.
18. When Liana and Amado visit the cigar factory, Liana’s mother sings; Liana recalls, “The fountain of music / that flows all around me / like sun / at the end of a storm.” Discuss this and other places in the novel in which music is important. Are there other hopeful moments or ways hope is expressed?
19. What difference do the Pan Am games make to Liana’s and Amado’s lives and to Cuba as a whole? Why is it illegal to talk to foreigners? Why are foreigners given food when most people in Cuba are starving? What else is rationed for Cubans besides food?
20. Find places where Amado and Liana talk about their need for freedom. Why is it so important to them? What images do they use in talking about freedom? Compare what you know about freedom in the US now, such as the right to criticize government actions, with what you’ve read about 1991 Cuba.

Extension Activities

1. The book opens with a quote from the Cuban poet José Martí. Have students research him and his life. Then ask them to share key facts and find a poem to share with the class either by reading it aloud or presenting it on a small poster.
2. *Your Heart, My Sky* is full of vivid figurative language. For example, Liana talks about the “bear hug of Russia” and Amado describes his friends being taken away in army trucks, “carted like cattle.” Have students each make a list of at least ten images from the poems that appeal to them. Then they can analyze the sources of the figurative language, such as nature or food, and the effectiveness of comparisons being made. They can also use figurative language to craft their own poems.
3. Ask students to meet in small groups and discuss what the novel reveals about daily life in Cuba at the time of the novel. What details does the story convey about customs, local geography, transportation,

sports, and so on? Then they can compare and contrast life for teens in 1991 Cuba to life in the United States for teens today.

4. Both Liana and Amado reference political history and their present situation involving Cuba, the United States, and Russia. Have students research more about this topic and write a paper that combines what they've learned from the book and what they've found in their research.

5. Hunger is a central theme in *Your Heart, My Sky*. Ask students to learn more about global hunger epidemics and food insecurities by using print and digital sources, and then discuss it in small groups. What are symptoms of serious hunger? How does it specifically affect children? What areas around the world are most affected? Who is trying to solve this problem, and how? How might you help in your own state or community?

6. Liana's parents are *lectores* who read aloud to workers at a cigar factory. As a class, watch this short video about a person who still holds such a job in Cuba:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkcy2nyPFDE>. Although the tradition of *lectores* is only mentioned briefly in the book, it's been a unique tradition among Cubans since the mid-1800s. Discuss what it shows about Cuba's cultural values.

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