



Curriculum Guide for
Rima's Rebellion: Courage in a Time of Tyranny
By Margarita Engle

About the Book

Rima's story begins as a twelve-year-old girl in 1920s Cuba, questioning the hateful words she receives for being an illegitimate child and the violence she risks daily simply because of her gender. Rima lives in a matriarchal home led by her grandmother and mother, who ride horses with las mambisas, a voting club working toward women's suffrage. Las mambisas are diverse feminists who put themselves on the line during Cuba's wars for independence, acting as nurses, carrying military correspondence, distributing pamphlets, and even fighting alongside male comrades. Rima gains courage through riding her horse, Ala; friendship in connecting with her half-sister, Violeta; encouragement from her love interest, Maceo; and autonomy in her work as a typesetter as she discovers her place in the revolution.

Discussion Questions

1. Rima's first act of nonviolent protest was bringing chairs "for hardworking women / whose stern male bosses / expect them to remain standing at attention / never resting, not even during long / quiet moments / between customers." In pairs, discuss more examples of protest found in the novel. What is the role of nonviolent protest in a revolution?
2. President Machado censors newspapers and orders thugs to "disappear" poets, journalists, and anyone helping them. Why is the word "disappear" considered such a threat in this context? Explain your answer.
3. Rima feels hope when she envisions "girls riding, women voting." Share as a class what brings you hope in moments of fear, worry, or concern. Consider what horses symbolize for Rima and the rest of las mambisas. Use examples from the text.
4. Rima laments, "If only I could vote to make laws / that would treat me as a whole person / instead of my father's fractured / mistake." Why do natural children need male validation? Why is having a single last name less valuable? Why does Rima carry guilt and shame over her father's choices? Explain.
5. Rima comments that Violeta's rebellion is "against our father, / not the government." Earlier in the novel, it's implied that most suffrage clubs are full of wealthy women and that the issues brought forward don't favor poor women or natural children. Compare Rima's and Violeta's struggles and how they represent the tensions between women in the suffragist movement. How does the Mambisa Voting Club defy standards of most suffrage clubs?
6. Misogyny is prejudice toward women. Rima thinks there is "no cure for fear and shame inspired by the noisy voices of insolent boys." Provide examples of misogyny from the text. How is Rima made to feel small? How are women and girls kept powerless? In what ways does misogyny appear in your personal experiences or things you have witnessed? How does it compare to the book?
7. Using quotes from the novel, how do you define "a teenage girl's uniquely / overpowering / anxiety?" Where does this anxiety come from?
8. Rima's name means "rhyme" in Spanish. What is the significance of her name within the story and for the novel's structure? Explain your response.
9. After Violeta fails to walk out of the congress in solidarity with natural children, Rima indignantly thinks "If our situations were reversed, / wouldn't I accept Violeta / as my equal?" What is your answer to her question? Be prepared to defend your answer.

10. There are many instances where the United States is mentioned in the book as being involved with Cuba's struggles, either through social commentary, economic deals, political decisions, or military action. In pairs, select one instance and research more on the United States' actions. What was the reason for US interference? What are your thoughts on what you have learned? Have you learned about these historical events before? Were the events portrayed the same way as in the novel? Be prepared to expand on your answers.
11. The Women's Congress is seen as "just practice, a way for ladies / to imagine equality." When you don't have equality, is imagining it enough? Why do government officials think they have a right to make decisions without taking those who will be affected into consideration first? Can you think of a contemporary example of imagined equality? Share with the class.
12. Machado tries to manipulate women by promising suffrage in exchange for their support. Should leaders only act if there is something in it for them? Give a rationale for your answer.
13. Over time, Rima confronts her understanding of what makes a "truly dedicated feminist." How does her mindset shift as the story unfolds? What characters affect her way of thinking? Identify key moments that showcase her changing viewpoint. How do the book's sections parallel her growth?
14. The insults voiced by Carrie Chapman Catt, the director of the Women's Struggle for World Peace and Friendship with South America, regarding feminists of Latin America, can be categorized not only as racism, but also as white feminism. Locate a definition for white feminism and find other examples in media, current events, or personal experiences that resemble this concept.
15. Consider the trajectory of the hurricane and all the changes it brings. What does the hurricane symbolize beyond natural disaster? Choose a character and connect their actions and characteristics to those of a hurricane.
16. Rima states that she "cannot compromise. I need an end to both / forms of oppression, the wider tyranny / imposed by a cruel president / and legalized violence / within families." Where can women and girls truly feel safe when there is violence both from the government and family? Explain your answer.
17. Why does the author choose to title each poem with a date, beginning with "November, 1930" through the remainder of the novel? Compare this choice to the rest of the book and discuss how the poetry structure changes. You can select a pair of poems from different sections to analyze. How does the poem's structure assist in conveying its message?

18. When Violeta becomes pregnant with her working-class boyfriend's child, her father attempts to enact legal murder as protected through the Adultery Law. Were you shocked by this? If not, what moments in the book foreshadowed this event?
19. Maceo remains patient and supportive when Rima postpones their relationship milestones, especially marriage. Is this a way for him to portray feminist values? Explain your answer. What are other ways men can support feminism and equality for all genders?
20. Rima softens toward her half-sister when she realizes, "If we are ever going to succeed / in gaining suffrage for women / then certainly we'll need / to see all females / as equals." What barriers exist in the novel and in real life for all women to be seen as equal?

Extension Activities

1. Divide the class into voting clubs of four to six. Research current feminist issues and host a congress to debate the issues selected. Each group should craft a speech to bring awareness to their issue and devise a law/program/project/solution to present to the entire congress. Consider the tactics used by the leaders of voting clubs in the book. Will you distribute pamphlets, flyers, bring a "witness" affected by the issue, stage a walkout, or something different? Consider what arguments or responses could be made about your presentation and be prepared to respond.
2. In the poem "Heroism," Abuela gives Rima a history lesson on four significant women in Cuba's fight for freedom and on a group of women from the Railroad Washing and Ironing Guild who marched for equal pay. Often, women do so much labor for revolutions and are then erased from history. Research a woman in history you didn't know existed or know little about. Create a five-to-seven-minute history lesson to present to the class on this notable woman. You can be creative and create a PowerPoint, game, zine, short documentary, a collection of poetry, infographics, discussion questions, or something else to help present your lesson.
3. "The poets whose work I print / write in ways that say so much / without appearing to convey / anything political. Gardens in poems are prisons. / Flowers in the verses / are revolutionaries. Birdsongs / are guns." Choose a historical event occurring in the US at the same time as an event in *Rima's Rebellion*, then choose one of the following activities:
 - a. Find a published poem that has political references to the event you're interested in researching. Write an analysis of how the poem refers to the event, whether it's explicit statements or metaphors like Rima mentions. If you're at a loss at where to start, check out some poems written about women's suffrage.
[\[https://poets.org/poems-womens-suffrage-movement\]](https://poets.org/poems-womens-suffrage-movement)

- b. Write your own poem and hide a political statement within the stanzas. Make sure to write a paragraph introducing your event and provide enough information to decode your message.
4. The historical note and international timeline of women's suffrage detail how race and colonial histories affect women's experiences of oppression and their access to equality. This is a way that intersectionality presents itself in the text. Watch "Intersectionality 101," from the *Learning for Justice* YouTube page to learn about intersectionality, along with a few examples. Write a one-to-two-page personal narrative that takes into account your identities and reflects on how intersectionality appears in your life. Connect your reflections to the struggles girls in 1920s Cuba faced and how they compare to your experiences in the US today. Consider the progress feminists have made for gender equality and what role you may play in the revolution.
[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6dnj2IyYjE>]
5. Many Latin American countries, including Cuba, have a legacy of slavery and colonization similar to the United States. The book discusses the Taíno, Indigenous people in the Caribbean, and the variety of peoples European settlers brought to Cuba either willingly or forcibly, including "Yorubas from Nigeria, / Berbers from Algeria, / and Cantonese from China." A short bio on Ana Betancourt, a real mambisa, found on the Brooklyn Museum website, states she linked "female emancipation to the abolition of slavery and the anticolonial struggle." Working with a partner, choose a Latin American country and draft a time line that reflects the invasion of settler colonists, the creation and abolition of slavery, wars for independence, and women's suffrage. Include a short essay explaining any patterns or links you noticed.
[https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/heritage_floor/ana_betancourt]
6. Glass buttons make frequent appearances in the poems, with Rima vividly describing each one and assigning meaning to it. She is thrilled when Maceo gives her a precious button with an image of a girl riding a horse. Design a button that represents you. Some things you can incorporate into the image and colors are your name story, values, hobbies and interests, and characteristics. You can draw or paint your button, make a collage, or create a digital rendition.

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