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Tropical Secrets: Holocaust Refugees In Cuba



Synopsis

Daniel has escaped Nazi Germany with nothing but a desperate dream that he might one day find his parents again. But that golden land called New York has turned away his ship full of refugees, and Daniel finds himself in Cuba. As the tropical island begins to work its magic on him, the young refugee befriends a local girl with some painful secrets of her own. Yet even in Cuba, the Nazi darkness is never far away . . .

Book Information

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Age Range: 12 - 18 years

Grade Level: 7 - 12

Customer Reviews

As in *The Poet Slave of Cuba* (2006) and *The Surrender Tree* (2008), both selected as Booklist Editors'™ Choice titles, Engle's™ latest book tells another story set in Cuba of those left out of the history books. In fluid, clear, free verse, two young people speak in alternating personal narratives. Daniel, 13, is a German Jewish refugee whose ship is finally allowed entry in Cuba after being turned away from both the U.S. and Canada. He longs to be reunited with his parents, who sent him away after Kristallnacht. Paloma, 12, discovers that her father is getting rich selling visas to refugees and then selling refugees to the Cuban authorities. She and Daniel help hide a Jewish woman and her Christian husband, who is suspected of being a Nazi spy. When adult narrators fill in background, the voices become diffused. But the international secrets make for a gripping story about refugees that becomes sharply focused through the viewpoint of the boy

wrenched from home, haunted by the images of shattered glass and broken family. Grades 7-11.

--Hazel Rochman

• This book is an outstanding choice for young people of all reading skills. Reluctant readers will be encouraged by the open layout and brief text, and everyone will be captivated by the eloquent poems and compelling characters. • School Library Journal, starred review • Engle gracefully packs a lot of information into a spare and elegant narrative that will make this historical moment accessible to a wide range of readers. • Publishers Weekly • Engle's tireless drive to give voice to the silenced in Cuban history provides fresh options for young readers. • Kirkus Reviews • As in *The Poet Slave of Cuba* (2006) and *The Surrender Tree* (2008), both selected as Booklist Editors' Choice titles, Engle's latest book tells another story set in Cuba of those left out of the history books. In fluid, clear, free verse, two young people speak in alternating personal narratives...the international secrets make for a gripping story about refugees that becomes sharply focused through the viewpoint of the boy wrenched from home, haunted by the images of shattered glass and broken family. • Booklist • This moving free-verse historical novel tells the tale of thirteen-year-old Daniel, a Jewish refugee who escapes Nazi Germany in 1939 in hopes of finding safety abroad • the emphasis on the inner life of the characters gives the narrative an emotional drama that transcends its period. • BCCB • Readers who think they might not like a novel in verse will be pleasantly surprised at how quickly and smoothly the story flows...The book will provide great fodder for discussion of the Holocaust, self-reliance, ethnic and religious bias, and more. • VOYA

This book is written from a very intimate perspective in that the characters each tell their own story as if they are speaking to the reader personally. I was a little surprised at first, when I opened the book, because it seemed as though it was more a book of poetry than a book of history. It is both. Beautifully written in elegant prose, this story could only have been told by someone who had experienced these events firsthand. I absolutely loved it and will go back and read it again. I usually give books away after I read them. Not this one; it is a keeper! I thank the author for giving us such a treasure.

Love this book. This book uses poetry to tell a unique story about the Holocaust and it focuses on a boy that was sent to Cuba in a ship that was supposed to go to the United States. It's told in a nice way from a child's perspective for the most part.

The unusual topic of the plight of Holocaust refugees is told from the perspective of several characters, each with a distinct voice. Engle's evocative language in this beautifully crafted story is an outstanding example of the novel in verse genre. Daniel is a young refugee who hopes to find his parents, but his sense of despair and loneliness as he arrives in Cuba is heartbreaking. His words pull the reader in from the first page. Last year in Berlin, on the Night of Crystal, my grandfather was killed while I held his hand...How can hatred have such a beautiful name? Crystal should be clear, but on that night the glass of broken windows did not glitter. A reader cannot finish the page without a visceral response. Paloma is the daughter of a shipping Lord who controls the refugees and profits from their entry. She lives in the dovecoat of her castle, with the birds, sneakily helps the refugees, and longs for her mother who has abandoned the family. She befriends Daniel, along with David. David is also a Jewish refugee who has made a life selling ice cream in Cuba. Through their voices, the political dynamics of Cuba after the war are revealed. The backdrop of Cuban culture is also shared through descriptions of people, places, and cultural celebrations. With friendship and the passage of time, David begins to heal, and so does Paloma. This breathtaking book pays homage to refugees of Cuba and those who supported them. Not only will readers learn about a little discussed historical event, they will fully engage in a beautifully told story whose characters resonate long after the last page is read. - BARBARA BIETZ - OAK PARK, CA

Very little has been written about the Holocaust refugees who, denied entry to the United States and other countries, found refuge in Cuba. This book uses poetry to tell the story of one such escapee from Nazi Germany who lands in Cuba with nothing but his woollen coat and winter clothes. A beautiful young girl helps him to acclimate to the island life style, but she has her own reasons to want to escape. Daniel shares his fear of the horrors he left behind and his reluctance to embrace the island life through a series of poems in his voice. Paloma tells her story in poetry also as she tries to help Daniel and the other refugees despite the fact that her father is "El Gordo," the man who is keeping the other refugee ships from landing and who is threatening to send the refugees already in Cuba back to Germany. David, an old man who came to Cuba from Russia, and who is Jewish like Daniel, helps the two children as they learn to share their feelings and overcome their fears. The poems are haunting in their imagery and honesty. Each character speaks with a distinctive voice. Although the story has some action, it is mostly a novel of character. The reader gets to know each character and watch as Daniel and Paloma change and grow. This book is highly recommended for middle school and high school students who want a different Holocaust story. A

historical note at the end of the book puts the actual historical events in a context that will help young readers relate to the events in the story. For ages 12 and up. Susan Dubin

If children's authors were given superpowers upon the occasion of their first publication, I know what Margarita Engle's would be. Stealth. She's the kind of author you never see coming. You can pick up a book of hers, be it "The Poet Slave of Cuba" or "The Surrender Tree" and you'll never see her wordplay coming. She plays fair, of course. From page one onward you see exactly what you're getting yourself into, sometimes as early as the first line. What you took to be the poor man's version of a novel (the verse novel sometimes fails to get the appropriate amount of respect it deserves) instead has taken a board with a nail in it and is now systematically whacking you in the heart with its text. In the case of Ms. Engle, Cuba serves as her muse, and not in the way you might expect (see: Castro). Through her books kids are learning about historical aspects of Cuba that you simply cannot find anywhere else in juvenile lit. She's already tackled slavery in "The Poet Slave of Cuba" and the war of independence from Spain "The Surrender Tree". Now comes the most child-friendly of her novels. Don't mistake the term "child-friendly" with "simplistic", though. Perhaps the best plotted and conceived of her novels, Engle writes her most touching tribute to Cuba yet. As a place where all people with an inclination have found their own true home. He was meant to wind up in New York. That was the plan. When Daniel's parents spent all their money buying their son a ticket out of Nazi Germany, the idea was for him to disembark in Manhattan and meet his parents eventually there once they could get across. Instead, his ship was denied access to disembark in America, and sailed south to Cuba. Determined not to forget his parents, Daniel is so committed to his dream that he even has difficulty even parting with his hot winter clothing during the sultry Cuban days. While there he meets and befriends Paloma. Daughter of a corrupt Cuban official leeching money off the refugees, Paloma spends most of her days in her dovecote, living with the birds. The two kids are also friends with David, a Jewish man who once fled Russia, and who gives Daniel the advice and friendship he needs to move on. Secrets are revealed, friendships strengthened, and Daniel finds a way of living without merely going through the motions. You pay your money for a Margarita Engle book and what do you expect in return? Words words words. You want to see a woman at her craft, and "Tropical Secrets" will provide. There are lines like "I am thirteen, a young man, / but today I feel / like a baby seagull / with a broken beak." It's particularly sweet when you consider that later he will befriend Paloma, a girl who would care for such a bird. My plucking that line out of context does little to diminish its feel. Just look at these lines as I remove them from the story and tell them to stand on their own: "I have nothing to say / to any stranger who treats me / like

a normal person / with a family / and a home." "I was taught that there are four / kinds of people in the world - / wise, wicked, simple, / and those who do not yet know how to ask questions." I'd quote more to you, but many of the best (like a line Paloma has about wolves and saints) retain their power only within the context of the story. Theme... boy, I hate talking about theme. I'm not a thematically minded person. If I notice a book has done something clever with a theme I'll sort of point at it and, in my customary caveman-like manner go, "Theme. Theme good. *grunt*" In terms of "Tropical Secrets" there was a moment in particular that just killed me. At one point in the book Japan attacks Pearl Harbor and America declares war. In response, the Cuban government arrests everyone who is German and NOT Jewish. Says Daniel, "I cannot understand / how the J / that condemned me / in Germany / has been transformed / into a mark of safety / on this crazy island-" And later, "and will it help them / understand / that those who feel safe today / could be the ones in need of refuge / tomorrow?" I'm always particularly struck by works of historical fiction that can take crazy true facts like this one, and then get to the nut of the situation in as few words as possible. Sometimes I feel like Engle works so hard on her imagery that her plotting suffers. But the gaps I felt in something like "The Surrender Tree" (a man spends practically his entire life hunting down a woman and then just disappears from the text without so much as a bow?) aren't present here. However, like her other novels I didn't get a real sense of the ending of the novel. (Spoiler Alert) I appreciated that she didn't tack on a happy ending for Daniel, of course. Had he suddenly met the next boat in the harbor and discovered his entire family safe and well and on-board, that would have been something. As it stands, however, his acceptance of his past serves as its own caper. There is room for a sequel here, though. By the end you have a sense of Daniel's story and where it may go, but Paloma's is still wide-open, waiting for a bit of closure beyond her birds. It's hard to establish character with so few words, but not impossible. In Engle's books, adults are often suspect and flawed. They're victims of their own desires, forgoing basic human decency in the face of greed or obsession. Paloma's father is no exception here. You are allowed a single glimpse into his heart, and the reasons why he does the horrible things he does. But it's a brief glimpse, hardly long enough to make you feel anything for him but mounting disgust. Because Engle likes to switch her point of view from person to person, you have to be constantly on your toes, paying attention to who is saying what. If it works, it's only because she has a firm grip on her own characters. She'd have to in order to make her bad guys understandable and still hideous. I'm not a fan of violence in books and the sheer torture and gore of "The Poet Slave of Cuba" meant that I could respect the novel but never love it. That's a personal thing. Some of that feeling remained with "The Surrender Tree" too. Violence was still prevalent, but at least in the text there was a level of distance. "Tropical

"Secrets" is the most removed from this kind of sheer brutality, but you can't tell a story about Holocaust survivors and not mention what it is that they are escaping. The first sentence in this book reads, "Last year in Berlin, / on the Night of Crystal, / my grandfather was killed / while I held his hand." You get no extenuating circumstances other than these words on the page. No gory details. Just the horror of your own imagination. It is enough. Every person you meet has a point of view. Engle shows kids this. Even the bad people. Even the mean or confused people. She takes moments when humans have done simply terrible things to one another and then enters their heads. Their thoughts become verse, saying what they cannot or could not. "Tropical Secrets" sits well with the reluctant reader and the world-weary twelve-year-old with a taste for Steinbeck alike. A person always has to consider whether or not a verse novel really needs to be written in that style or if the author is just being lazy. No one will ever say that Ms. Engle is lazy, though. And this style fits the book like a hand in a glove. A remarkable novel about an amazing and true moment you probably will not find in your average elementary school world history textbook.

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