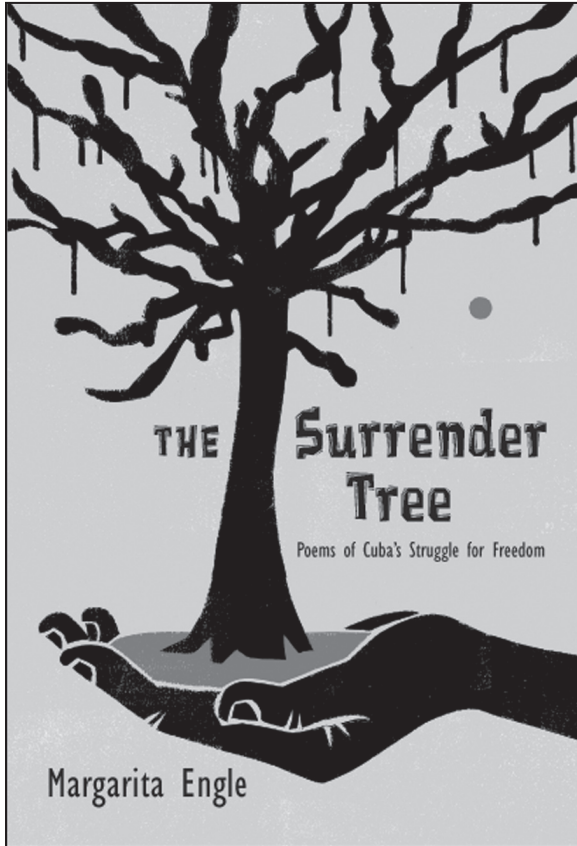


The Surrender Tree

POEMS OF CUBA'S STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM



SELECTIONS

Historical Background

On October 10, 1868, a handful of Cuban plantation owners freed their slaves and declared independence from Spain. Throughout the next three decades of war, nurses hid in jungle caves, healing the wounded with medicines made from wild plants.

On February 16, 1896, Cuban peasants were ordered to leave their farms and villages. They were given eight days to reach “reconcentration camps” near fortified cities. Anyone found in the countryside after eight days would be killed. Margarita Engle’s great-grandparents were two of the refugees.

ROSA

Too soon,
the battles
begin again.

Mercifully,
this new war
is brief.

Tragically,
this new war
is futile.

Sometimes, war feels
like just one more
form of slavery.

JOSE

We heal the wounded
just like before.

We hide in the jungle
just like before.

We are older.
Are we wiser?

Sometimes war feels
like a lonely child’s game,
one that explodes
out of control.

ROSA

Between wars,
José and I were just
a man and his wife.
We were free
to stay together.
José never had to leave me
to scout, or hunt,
or fight.

Between wars,
life was heavenly,
except when the slavehunters
were near,
with our names
on a list.

ROSA

This is how you heal a wound:
Clean the flesh.
Sew the skin.
Pray for the soul.
Wait.

ROSA

The Little War?
How can there be
a little war—are some deaths
smaller than others
leaving mothers
who weep
a little less?



A CONVERSATION WITH
Margarita Engle,
AUTHOR OF
The Surrender Tree

Can you tell us why you are drawn to write about Cuba and its people?

My mother is from the beautiful town of Trinidad on the south coast of Cuba. When I was a child we spent several summers there, getting to know her relatives. I fell in love with the island, especially the lush, green rural areas, and with the people, who are perhaps the warmest, friendliest people in the world. After the Missile Crisis of 1962, travel became impossible, and even communicating was difficult. I felt like I had lost a part of myself, and in a way, writing became a way of trying to know that missing part.

What do you see as the biggest difference between this book and *The Poet Slave of Cuba*?

The biggest difference is that *The Poet Slave of Cuba* was inspired by Juan Francisco Manzano's notes about his own childhood. *The Surrender Tree* covers a much longer time period, and I had to do a lot more imagining, because Rosa la Bayamesa did not leave a diary of any sort. I also added some entirely fictional, composite characters based on several sources rather than a single autobiographical narrative.

How do you do research for your books?

I immerse myself in Cuban history. I love antique books, and there is nothing more pleasing to me than the chance to open a book from the island that still smells like humidity and a sea breeze. I have been to Cuba many times since 1991, when travel restrictions were eased by the Cuban government. Since travel is still severely restricted by the U.S. government, it is always an ordeal trying to get permission from both countries at the same time.

What inspired you to write *The Surrender Tree*?

I feel a deep admiration for Rosa la Bayamesa, who chose to become a nurse and help others during thirty years of war. I am also fascinated by the way history took a pause in Cuba, so that the struggle to end slavery coincided with the struggle to free Cuba from Spain. The wealthy planters who freed their slaves and declared war against Spain seemed to understand something that slaveowners in the U.S. never grasped: true freedom is possible only when it is shared by all.

Tell us about your writing process. Where do you write? When?

Morning is my best time, and early morning walks are often my best time for getting ideas and solving problems. I love to write outdoors, on old-fashioned paper, with an old-fashioned pen. My husband leads a search and rescue dog training group, and I am a volunteer “victim.” I hide in the Sierra Nevada forest, so the dogs can practice finding a lost person. Sometimes I hide for hours, and I always take paper and pens with me. There is no place more suited to poetry than the wilderness. Anything can happen. Usually I just see squirrels and birds, but there are bears, deer, and eagles.

Then comes the hard part—sitting indoors, putting the rough draft on the computer, revising, letting the work sit, reading with a fresh eye, and revising again. The hardest part of all is putting the manuscript in the mail and waiting to find out whether it will ever be published.

Do you prefer writing in verse to writing prose? Does your process differ from one style to the other?

I love both, but as a child I wrote poetry, and now, as I age, I tend to write more poetry and less prose. My prose novels for adults were inspired by family history, and I think I needed to use a narrative approach. When I write poetry there is more of a sense of immediate discovery, even if the setting is historical. I tend to write poetry in present tense, as if it is occurring today, and prose in past tense, as if telling a story about something that happened long ago.

When you read, do you have a favorite genre or subject? What are you reading right now? What was your favorite book as a child?

I love travel books and books that don't fit into a category. In other words, I like a mixture of fantasy, history, adventure, etc. I also love poetry, and I can read and re-read the same poems many times, always finding something new. I usually read several books at the same time. I just finished a book about sea turtles in Costa Rica, and now I am re-reading a bilingual volume of spiritual poetry by the Spanish mystics. I am also very slowly making my way through an old, humidity-scented history book about my mother's hometown, stopping to ask her questions along the way, because I keep running into references to our ancestors, who were scribes, poets, patriots, and guajiros (Cuban subsistence farmers). I have even discovered that one of my ancestors was a pirate of the Caribbean.

My favorite book as a child was *The Black Stallion*. I was so swept up in the adventure that I kept asking for horseback riding lessons. Unfortunately, my parents are artists, and they kept offering me art lessons instead. When I grew up, I actually had a horse for a few years and found out that I'm not as great a rider as I had dreamed I would be. That's the power of reading—to feel free and triumphant, at least on paper.