

# SILVER PEOPLE: A TALE FROM THE PANAMA CANAL Margarita Engle



# Teachers' Notes Written by a practising teacher librarian in context with the Australian curriculum (English)

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#### SYNOPSIS

Silver People: A Tale from the Panama Canal is a beautifully written verse novel centred around the construction of the Panama Canal over one hundred years ago. The story unfolds through a variety of narrative voices: Mateo, a young Cuban escaping his troubled home; Henry, hoping to earn enough money to support his family in Jamaica; Anita, orphaned at a young age; and the forest, mourning its loss as the mountains are cleared to make way for the canal.

Margarita Engle has interwoven issues including inequality, survival and hope into a powerful and engaging story that lingers long after the final word.

#### **THEMES**

#### Relationships

- Mateo is fearful of his father; he flees to the Panama Canal to escape.
- Mateo develops friendships with Henry, the Jamaican worker, and Anita.
   He is also helped by Augusto, a Puerto Rican scientist and artist.

# Inequality

- Workers of different races were paid according to their ethnicity. Their working and living conditions also differed greatly.
- The inequality experienced by canal workers has been compared with South Africa's apartheid.
- Inequalities between the 'dark', 'semi-dark' and 'white' workers was exacerbated by different pay and living conditions.

#### Panama Canal

- The construction of the Panama Canal is the context for the verse novel.
- The building of this canal was an engineering masterpiece; however, it also resulted in the loss of workers' lives.
- Working conditions were very dangerous, often life-threatening. Mud slides and diseases such as yellow fever and malaria claimed tens of thousands of lives.
- Historical figures involved with the building of the canal feature in the text.

# **Environment**

- The forest grieves as it is destroyed to make way for the canal.
- Anita and Mateo long for the refuge the forest offers.



# Hope

- The forest, although struggling, clings to the hope of new life and rebirth.
- Mateo, Anita, Henry and Augusto hold fast to their dreams and hopes in times of adversity and despair.

# Poetry

- The author skilfully uses a variety of poetic devices to tell this story, including imagery, personification, similes and metaphors.
- The free verse form allows the text to flow seamlessly between different narrative voices.

#### WRITING STYLE

Silver People: A Tale from the Panama Canal is written in third person, present tense. The story is told from a variety of narrative voices, both fictional and historical. Margarita Engle's poetry is evocative, powerful and perfectly nuanced; each tale is told with authenticity and depth.

#### STUDY NOTES

- Before reading the text, discuss how to read free verse poetry fluently, including that punctuation marks indicate pauses and stops.
- The text begins with Mateo describing his feelings of fear. How does the author convey his fear? Why does he describe himself as a 'war orphan'?
- Use the poem 'Job Hunt' to activate students' understanding of poetry and figurative language, including imagery and metaphors such as 'fear is a fierce wind'.
- Briefly discuss the Panama Canal. Locate Panama and the Panama Canal on a world map (<a href="www.globalresearch.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/panama-canal0.gif">www.globalresearch.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/panama-canal0.gif</a>). Discuss America's desire to build the canal. Why was this considered such an important project?
- What persuasive techniques are used by the recruiters to entice workers to Panama? Create a pamphlet similar to that mentioned in the poem 'Job Hunt'. As you read the text, compare the pamphlet with the reality faced by Mateo and Henry.



- Discuss the powerful imagery in the first stanza of 'The Voyage from Cuba' on p7. Why has the author described *regret* in this way? What is meant by the term 'human cargo'?
- Imagine you are Mateo. Based on the poem 'Colour-coded' (p9), write a
  journal entry that reflects your feelings and experiences.
- Select a character from Silver People: A Tale from the Panama Canal.
   Write from that character's point of view in prose form, using appropriate language conventions.
- Create free verse poetry of your own based on a theme such as segregation, inequality or hope. Include explicit vocabulary and poetic devices such as imagery and metaphors to convey your point of view.
- In the role of Henry, write a letter home to your family.
- Why do Henry and Mateo box? What are they really fighting when they get into the ring?
- Old Maria teaches Anita the art of 'offering hope'. How does Anita offer hope? Give examples from the text to support your response.
- Re-read the poems 'Army Ants' and 'Bull Ants'. How do these different types of ants compare with characters and events from the text?
- What do we learn about Augusto from the poem 'Science' on p97?
   Create a character profile of Augusto using this poem.
- Why do a lot of the Jamaicans decide to live in the 'Crate Town'? How is the crate town more comfortable than the accommodation previously provided? How does it make them feel more 'human'?
- The building of the Panama Canal has been described as 'one of the
  most innovative engineering feats of all time and one of the most
  expensive in terms of both lives and money'. Reflect on the building of
  the Panama Canal. Use a strategy such as De Bono's 6 Thinking Hats or
  a PMI Chart to analyse this project from various perspectives. What
  aspects of its construction are most disturbing to you? What are most
  remarkable? Debate whether 'the end justified the means'.



- Use the primary source documents found at the link below to further investigate the building of the canal. What can be learnt from primary source documents? Why use them when researching?
  - Make the Dirt Fly! <u>www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/panama-hardeveld/</u>
  - Canal Record 1907
     www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/panama-record/
- Compare the poem 'Making Dirt Fly' (p81) with Rose van Hardeveld's first-hand account *Make the Dirt Fly!* (www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/panama-hardeveld/).
   The Smithsonian Institute also has an interactive website entitled *Make the Dirt Fly.* (www.sil.si.edu/Exhibitions/Make-the-Dirt-Fly/).
- Visit websites to further research the events surrounding the construction of the Panama Canal. Teach effective internet search techniques to help students properly evaluate the validity and effectiveness of various websites.
  - www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/generalarticle/panama-workers/
  - o http://cms.uflib.ufl.edu/pcm/Home.aspx
- Use original photographs from the building of the canal to better understand the text. Discuss ways in which the author has been able to produce visual images for the reader through her precise use of vocabulary. What language features work particularly well in her verse novel?
  - (www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/panama\_gallery\_04.shtml)
- Select a poem or series of poems written from a particular character's point of view. Show your understanding of poetic devices by annotating the poem/s, highlighting specific poetic devices used by Margarita Engle. Write a reflection to explain how the author has brought these characters to life through her writing.
- Focus on 'The Forest' chapters. These poems are excellent poems for group discussion. They include rich imagery, personification and effective use of repetition. Analyse the way in which the creatures and trees share their points of view.



- Why has Margarita Engle decided to include animals and trees as part of this narrative?
- Create a newspaper article based on the construction of the Panama Canal. Use ideas and themes from Silver People: A Tale from the Panama Canal to help determine your angle and point of view.
- Create a short information report on one of the diseases that threatened
  the workers such as malaria or yellow fever. Information is readily
  available online

(<u>www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/panama-fever/</u>). How did Gertrude Beeks suggest conditions could be improved in order to secure the welfare of the workers?

#### **AUTHOR MOTIVATION**

When I took my children to Cuba to meet relatives and see where their grandma and great-grandma grew up, I told family stories while we walked around. My daughter Nicole asked me to write the stories down, so they would not be lost.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margarita Engle is a Cuban-American poet and novelist whose work has been published in many countries. Her books include *The Surrender Tree*, a Newbery Honour book and winner of the Jane Addams Children's Book Award, the Pura Belpré Award, the Américas Award, and the Claudia Lewis Poetry Award; *The Poet Slave of Cuba*, winner of the Pura Belpré Award and the Américas Award; *Tropical Secrets*, *The Firefly Letters*, and *Hurricane Dancers*. She lives with her husband in Northern California.

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