

Children's Literature Association Conference
June 13-15, 2019
Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis & Indiana University East
Westin Indianapolis
Indianapolis, Indiana

Abstract

Dr. Krystal Howard
Assistant Professor
Liberal Studies Program
California State University, Northridge
18111 Nordhoff Street
Northridge, CA 91330-8338
krystal.howard@csun.edu

“Margarita Engle’s Poet-Activists”

Margarita Engle, the Poetry Foundation’s current Young People’s Poet Laureate, has published (to-date) fourteen verse novels for young readers. While most of these works focus on the Cuban and Cuban-American experience, three of her verse novels focus specifically on the history of Cuban poet-activists—*The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano* (2006), *The Wild Book* (2012), and *The Lightning Dreamer: Cuba’s Greatest Abolitionist* (2013)—and Engle’s memoir in verse, *Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings* (2015), examines her growth and development as a Cuban-American poet-activist in her own right.

In this presentation, I trace Engle’s movement from chronicling real, historical and familial poet-activists to charting her own coming-of-age as a poet-activist. Like the poet-protagonists in her previous collections, Engle’s memoir in verse uses poetry to promote resistance, disruption, empathy, and awareness during tumultuous political periods in history. I argue that Engle’s model of writing about the historical and personal young characters in her verse novels encourages young reader’s participation and activism. In her poem, “My Library Life,” Engle laments that although books become her refuge as a young person, she never finds any books about “the beautiful green / crocodile-shaped island / that throbs / at the center of my being...// Maybe someday / I’ll try / to write one” (129-30). Through what Engle terms a “poetic plea” (192), young readers can use art, writing, and poetry to influence those around them and make writing their activism.