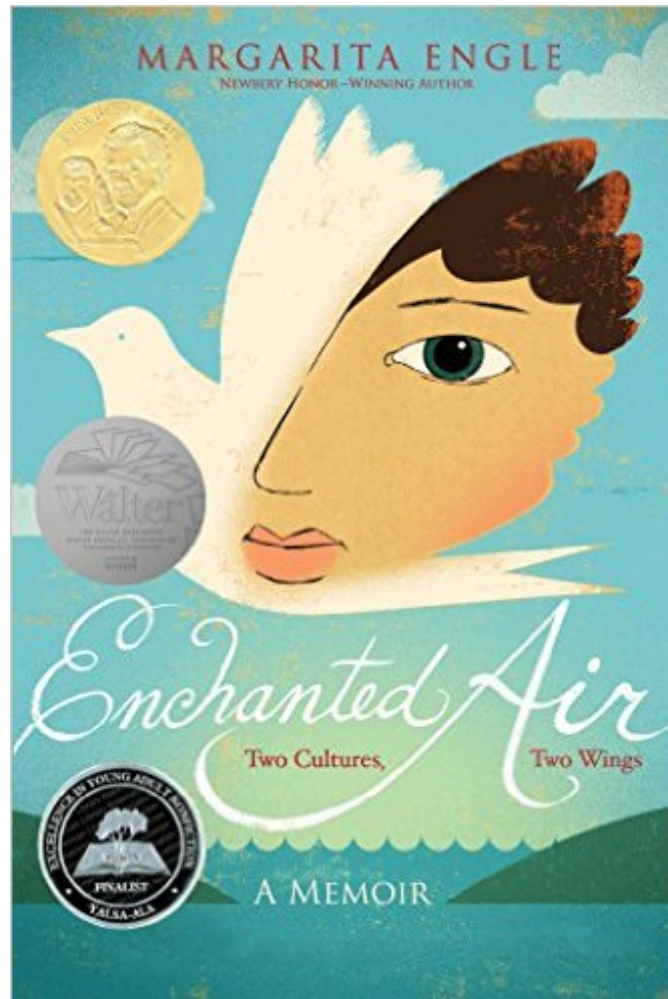


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# Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings: A Memoir



## Synopsis

In this poetic memoir, which won the Pura Belpré Author Award, was a YALSA Nonfiction Finalist, and was named a Walter Dean Myers Award Honoree, acclaimed author Margarita Engle tells of growing up as a child of two cultures during the Cold War. Margarita is a girl from two worlds. Her heart lies in Cuba, her mother's tropical island country, a place so lush with vibrant life that it seems like a fairy tale kingdom. But most of the time she lives in Los Angeles, lonely in the noisy city and dreaming of the summers when she can take a plane through the enchanted air to her beloved island. Words and images are her constant companions, friendly and comforting when the children at school are not. Then a revolution breaks out in Cuba. Margarita fears for her far-away family. When the hostility between Cuba and the United States erupts at the Bay of Pigs Invasion, Margarita's worlds collide in the worst way possible. How can the two countries she loves hate each other so much? And will she ever get to visit her beautiful island again?

## Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars See all reviews (8 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #93,358 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #14 in Books > Teens > Literature & Fiction > Poetry #26 in Books > Children's Books > Geography & Cultures > Explore the World > Central & South America #28 in Books > Teens > Biographies > Cultural Heritage

Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

## Customer Reviews

Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings (A Memoir) by Margarita Engle Atheneum Books for Young Readers 2015 189 pages ISBN: 9781481435222 Enchanted, indeed! Readers will experience the sights and sounds of Cuba through Margarita Engle's triumphant YA book. Engle captivates and transcends decades and distance. Remembering back to her youth spent in Cuba before the Cold

War, Engle describes an enchanted island of sun, sea, horses, farms, fragrant flowers, bright colors, music and tropical fruit. The lime picked by her grandmother is the most fragrant lovely thing young Margarita has ever tasted. When her family moves to smoggy Los Angeles, she is forced into a school where she's an outsider. As she looks at the other students, she realizes that she will never fit in. The girl longs for her other home, her island home. She misses her Abuelita and the enchanted air of Cuba. April 1961 brings the Bay of Pigs, a failed U.S. attempt to control Cuba and Margarita is looked upon as the enemy by classmates. She is afraid that she may have to go to a war camp like Japanese Americans during World War II. The girl retreats into books where she can be free. 1962 is the beginning of the Cold War and American school children are taught to hide under their desks for nuclear drills. Grown ups whisper and people are visibly shaken. America is afraid of Cuba and the Soviet Union. America holds its breath as the President continues talks with Khrushchev. America closes its doors to Cuba. Margarita's family may never see their relatives again. Engle writes in the author's note, "While I was writing *Enchanted Air*, my hope was that normalization would begin before it went to press. That prayer has been answered....one of the closest neighbors of the United States is just beginning to be accessible to other American citizens." Young Margarita lives for books and poetry, spending much of her time visiting the library. She writes, "Books become my refuge./Reading keeps me hopeful." How many readers have escaped through books? The written word is powerful indeed, connecting a lonely child with a world outside her four walls and a country that does not welcome her. The "two wings" are the two countries: America and Cuba, her two lives so different yet both a part of her. Readers will engage with the verse structure of the book. Easy and accessible to readers, even reluctant ones, *Enchanted Air* is a great addition to any multi-cultural studies collection or classroom. Engle describes the historical incidents of the Cuban missile crisis and the Bay of Pigs from a child's point of view. It is powerful and poignant. Highly, highly recommended grade 6-up. This is one book that has many teaching opportunities: history, sociology, English, poetry, and teach it for the love of literature! Visit my YA blog for all YA reviews; Books By Pamela Thompson--What We're Reading Now

This is a beautifully written book that conveys the pull between cultures experienced by many children. Margarita Engle's *Enchanted Air* tells her story in breathtaking verse, accessible for even very young readers. Highly recommended!

Margarita Engle's non-fiction memoir in verse, *Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings*,

tells of her upbringing in Los Angeles during the Cold War era, learning about the Bay of Pigs invasion, and the palpable fear she felt for her family in Cuba. Engle describes the challenges of growing up with two cultures and always longing for one place while in another. Young Margarita finds herself in words when it feels like she belongs to both culture and neither at the same time. *Enchanted Air* is the outstanding memoir of a truly amazing writer. Engle's memoir in verse is a timely story. War and violence continue to separate many children and their family in one country from their families in another country. Engle describes the isolation she felt due to her different culture when she left Cuba for the U.S. The freedom to roam about as she did in Cuba was not always very realistic in the U.S. She notes that even her mother changed a bit. Engle further recounts the fear and anxiety she felt when she learned that her two countries did not get along. Engle found solace in libraries and the stories they contained. Poetry gave her the wings to soar again. Her memoir stops in 1965 with her childhood hope that she will one day be able to return to Cuba. Now that relations with Cuba have been renewed and commercial flights to Cuba might soon be available there are probably many that are also glad they will be able to reacquaint themselves with the island of their childhood.

In this poetic memoir, which won the Pura Belpré Author Award, acclaimed author Margarita Engle tells of growing up as a child of two cultures during the Cold War. Margarita is a girl from two worlds. Her heart lies in Cuba, her mother's tropical island country, a place so lush with vibrant life that it seems like a fairy tale kingdom. But most of the time she lives in Los Angeles, lonely in the noisy city and dreaming of the summers when she can take a plane through the enchanted air to her beloved island. Words and images are her constant companions, friendly and comforting when the children at school are not. Then a revolution breaks out in Cuba. Margarita fears for her far-away family. When the hostility between Cuba and the United States erupts at the Bay of Pigs Invasion, Margarita's worlds collide in the worst way possible. How can the two countries she loves hate each other so much? And will she ever get to visit her beautiful island again? *My Thoughts* Engle is well-known for her historical novels-in-verse that offer glimpses into different periods of Cuban history. Her passion for Cuba is obvious through her commitment to bringing often little or unknown historical figures and periods to life. *Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings* shares this same passion, but its deeply personal nature as a memoir-in-verse sets it apart from her other books. As a coming-of-age memoir-in-verse, it's a unique and engaging way to introduce students to the genres of memoir and autobiography through poetry. Like her other novels, it's written with beautiful lyricism and descriptions. It would be an excellent

way to model for students the power of well-crafted simile, metaphor, and other literary elements. It's also useful for teaching content beyond genre or writing style. With references to the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Civil Rights Movement, and JFK's assassination, Engle's memoir provides the historical context for teaching about a pivotal historical period. With the state of U.S.-Cuban relations as the backdrop for the majority of the book, the memoir offers a history lesson that is far more personal and engaging than any textbook could offer. The timeline in the back matter provides the means to contextualize the major global events that took place during the period covered. Engle's book is compelling for far more reasons than just the content-driven implications discussed above. I was so moved by the reflective, vulnerable, and self-aware nature of her writing. Throughout her memoir, Engle reflects on who she is, the ways she's changing, how her experiences impact her, and how she comes to understand and process others' perceptions of her. Self-awareness can be such a powerful tool. What better way to teach this to our students than using Engle's novel as a model for how we can explore our own understanding of who we are and how we came to be that way. Engle doesn't shy away from discussing the more vulnerable or intimate aspects of growing up. She lets us in as she examines the feelings surrounding her struggles to fit in and being an outsider. Too often this kind of vulnerability is seen as a weakness. But in her book, it becomes a means to be bold, brave, and courageous. As she writes about her ability to be bold with words, she creates the space for our students to explore writing as the means to examine themselves, be reflective, practice vulnerability, and thus be bold themselves. Perhaps, our students will begin to think about the ways in which they can practice courage in their everyday lives, and not just relegate it to the protagonists in their favorite fantasy novels or comic books. Reading and writing are powerful tools, and Engle demonstrates this through the impact they had on her. As immigration remains at the forefront of media and political conversations, I hope that Engle's memoir influences the ways in which we approach this topic as educators. Many of our students are immigrants or children of immigrants. Engle's experience is relevant to them and should be relevant to us as their educators. Her memoir humanizes the experience of what it's like to be an immigrant or refugee. Our students who come from multiple languages and multiple cultures need books that help them to explore how this complicates and shapes their identities. In last month's review of *Names on a Map* we talked about the idea of inherited exile. It's an idea that's clearly relevant here as well, as we read about the ways in which Engle grappled with her Cuban identity and others' perception of that *cubanidad*. As a teacher, I always had a soft spot for my more rebellious students. Certainly, they drove me crazy at times, but I couldn't help but

respect their ability to hold their ground. Engle had that rebelliousness. When a teacher tells Engle that her first story is wrong, Engle's response is that the teacher is wrong (which she was, given she had no knowledge of plant life in Cuba). When a teacher attempts to shame her over her Cuban identity, Engle thinks "why should such an ignorant grown-up imagine that she knows me?" (p. 44). Not all our students are courageous or independent enough to decide that a teacher who makes them feel badly about who they are or what they know is ignorant or wrong. I can only hope that our students will take note of this rebelliousness and remember it when they need it. Hopefully it's obvious that I loved the book. It's certainly one that deserves to be on the shelves of all our classrooms and libraries. For access to the full review and additional resources, check out our Vamos a Leer blog at [teachinglatinamericathroughliterature.com](http://teachinglatinamericathroughliterature.com).

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