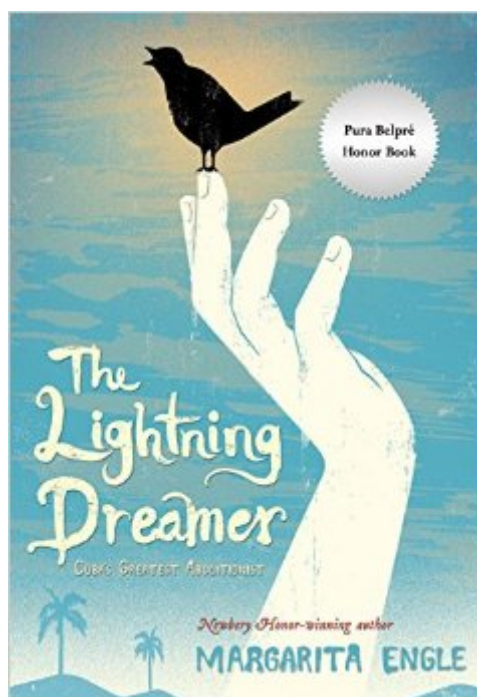


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The Lightning Dreamer: Cuba's Greatest Abolitionist



Synopsis

• You can't find it so easy to forget / that I'm just a girl who is expected / to live / without thoughts. •

Opposing slavery in Cuba in the nineteenth century was dangerous. The most daring abolitionists were poets who veiled their work in metaphor. Of these, the boldest was Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, nicknamed Tula. In passionate, accessible verses of her own, Engle evokes the voice of this book-loving feminist and abolitionist who bravely resisted an arranged marriage at the age of fourteen, and was ultimately courageous enough to fight against injustice. Historical notes, excerpts, and source notes round out this exceptional tribute.

Book Information

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Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

Customer Reviews

The Lightning Dreamer by Margarita Engle is both a collection of poems about, and a retelling of the history, of Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda, known also as Tula. Tula was raised in Cuba in the early 19th century. Her mother sought to marry Tula off to a rich man and to keep Tula from becoming educated. Instead Tula wrote poetry and novels championing abolition, women's rights and interracial unity. Margarita Engle has created a suite of poems in the voice of, and in celebration of, this remarkable woman. The poems are simple and straightforward. They tell Tula's troubles, her outrage at slavery and her fierce independence. The poems are in many voices ranging from Tula's own to the freed slave who was a cook in her home to those who inspired her. This is a remarkable

book, particularly for any young Latina, and is highly recommended.

Poetic dystopian? Well, not really but in this gorgeously written, wonderful little book the author describes a girl ahead of her time whose voice cannot be quieted despite many attempts by her mother and mother country. Engle's "Tula" rejects the status quo of slavery and women as property. She is ahead of her time and "fights" injustices through words, stories and actions. She pays a price for her voice because silence is unbearable. A beautiful book.

Written for readers age 12 and up, this historical fiction biography about Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda begins in 1827 in Cuba. I knew nothing about her until I began reading the book, grew curious, so stopped and did some Internet research before returning to savor THE LIGHTNING DREAMER. Told entirely in free verse poetry with most poems being one page long (and double spaced) written in the first person from different people's perspectives was an approachable way to convey a lot of opinions and issues of the day in under 175 pages. The poems were easy to understand and the opinions clearly show that Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda was ahead of her time yet fit in well with the views in America today so are easily accepted and relatable to today's teens. The work lay in explaining what societal norms were in Cuba back then regarding the role of women, the silencing of women's opinions and the fact that they could not vote or have a voice in the community, about arranged marriages where the girl was essentially bought by the husband-to-be, slavery and racial relations with black slaves, children born out of wedlock (many biracial) and left at a Catholic orphanage and inter-racial romantic relationships. Most of the book focuses on her early teen years and avoiding one arranged marriage, issues of feeling constricted due to the lack of women's rights including not being able to be formally schooled and being pressured to not write or discuss her opinions. It included her work with orphans and poetry writing, and a close relationship with their freed slave cook. The book then has a section that is fictionalized the most about Sab, a black man who she loved but could not have because he loved another. I felt that is where the book started to feel weak. The last section is short and tells of writing a book about inter-racial relations and slavery which she published as Sab. The end notes have a bit of information about her life which include major points not touched upon in the book itself. This is probably because her having a child out of wedlock and being involved with a married man is not something the author or publisher may have wanted included in a book for junior high school students or to keep the page count short. The end note mentions she had a child before she got married but did not mention that she had two affairs with married men, one of which resulted in the

conception of her child. In any event the book was impressive and I was hooked by it and enjoyed the free verse. I think teens will like this book, especially girls who will easily identify with her and will hate the idea of arranged marriages and marrying for money not love, as well as agreeing that girls should have a voice too and should have rights. She was an outspoken feminist who was way ahead of her time. I rate this book 5 stars = I Love It.

I have never been disappointed by one of Margarita Engle's books and *The Lightning Dreamer* is no exception. It's the fascinating true story of a Cuban woman who worked both for the abolition of slavery and equal rights for women. My guess is that many of you have never heard of Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, I certainly hadn't. Engle's ability to bring to life these lesser known but incredibly important historical characters is part of what makes her work so significant. Her novels in verse make historical characters like Tula accessible and real to younger readers. In writing this review, I was reminded of my obsession with biographies when I was in elementary school. When I was eight years old I decided that I was going to read every biography in my school's library. Our biographies were shelved alphabetically by the name of the person the book was about. When I think about the books that I read then, I remember a number of books about Davy Crockett, Grover Cleveland and Amelia Earhart. Obviously, I didn't make it all the way through, it would seem I stopped somewhere around E. But in thinking back, I'm struck by the lack of diversity in the people represented on my library's shelves. I can only hope that with the availability of books like that of Engle things aren't the same now. If books such as *The Lightning Dreamer*, *The Surrender Tree*, or *Hurricane Dancers* had been available to me then, I may have made it past E in my quest to read all those biographies. In telling the story of Tula, Engle's book opens up a number of relevant topics for classroom discussion. As Tula becomes increasingly aware of the disparities in society, she begins to both ponder and write about things such as slavery, interracial marriage, and women's rights. Tula grapples with these moral and ethical dilemmas in a language that invites students to question and struggle with her. She provides a way to teach our younger students about times when equal rights for people of color and women were explicitly denied. While it's important to continue to discuss the ways in which equality is still not a reality for all people today, it's just as important to discuss the historical contexts that our contemporary struggles for equality come from. Engle gives us a strong female protagonist who fights to remain authentic to the things she believes in, but in doing this, Engle also shows how hard it is to be that kind of person. It's never easy to go against main stream society or to be the outcast among one's friends or

family. Through Tula, Engle gives voice to what it feels like to be alienated or exiled for one's beliefs. These are powerful ideas for our students to think about—both those who can identify with Tula's loneliness and those who realize they may be like the people who mocked Tula for being different. Tula is a powerful character, not just because of what she believed, but because of how she chose to stand up for those beliefs. She fought for equality and human rights through her stories and her poetry. She used the power of words as a means to change the minds of those around her. How valuable a lesson for the students in our classrooms—that our words are one of the most powerful tools we have for fighting against the things that try to hold us back. I'll leave you with the words from Gertrudis Gómez de Avellanda that inspired the title of the book: "The slave let his mind fly free, and his thoughts soared higher than the clouds where lightning forms." •The Lightning Dreamer: Cuba's Greatest Abolitionist has received a number of awards: 2014 YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults, School Library Journal's Top Ten Latino-themed Books for 2013, Teaching for Change 2013 Favorite, Center for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature selection as a Best Multicultural Book of 2013, 2014 Pura Belpré Honor Book, and International Reading Association Top Chapter Book for 2013. Our free educator's guide is available on our wordpress blog [Vamos a Leer](#).

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