Margarita Engle is an acclaimed children’s book author of many award-winning books written in verse. Before embarking on her journey as a poet and novelist, she pursued studies in botany and agronomy—a background that influences many of her works to be rich with descriptions of natural resources and an emphasis on ecological preservation and appreciation.

Among her many accolades, Engle has been recognized several times over by the Américas Award. In 2016 alone, her memoir, *Enchanted Air*, and children’s book, *Drum Dream Girl*, were Commended Titles. In 2015, her historical novel, *Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal*, was an award winner. In earlier years, the Américas Award has recognized in similar form the exceptional contributions that Engle makes to Latin American and Latino children’s and YA literature.

Here, the author converses with Hania Mariën of the Vamos a Leer blog as she poses questions about the Engle’s ties to Cuba and how her background has influenced her work. For more about Engle’s work, including publications and supporting educational resources, visit [http://www.margaritaengle.com/](http://www.margaritaengle.com/).
HANIA MARIÉN: You’ve mentioned that many of your stories (including *The Wild Book*) were inspired by your grandmother. Do you think her voice comes out in your writing? How might teachers use your books as springboards to encourage students to explore their family histories through writing?

MARGARITA ENGLE: *The Wild Book* was inspired by stories my grandmother told me about her childhood, and *Enchanted Air* is my own childhood memoir, but most of my verse novels are based on first person accounts written by historical figures such as Juan Francisco Manzano (*The Poet Slave of Cuba*), Fredrika Bremer (*The Firefly Letters*), Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda (*The Lightning Dreamer*), and Antonio Chuffat (*Lion Island*). I do think teachers can use *The Wild Book* and *Enchanted Air* to encourage students to interview older family members. Perhaps the best way to do this is to call it time travel. My memoir and all my historical novels are written in present tense specifically for the purpose of bringing the past back to life.

HANIA MARIÉN: In an interview with Colorín Colorado you mention that you gradually combined your love for the outdoors with writing. How did you learn that writing and the sciences were not mutually exclusive? How can teachers encourage students to bridge their passions with writing?

MARGARITA ENGLE: As a botanist and agronomist, it always feels natural for me to include plants and animals in my verse novels about people. In certain books, such as *The Surrender Tree* and *Silver People*, wilderness actually feels like a character in the plot. I’m enthusiastic about STEAM education, so I would encourage teachers to take their students outdoors for little walks, or to show them videos of natural habitats, and let them wonder how it feels to be a tree or a bird.

HANIA MARIÉN: *Mountain Dog* was inspired by your husband’s volunteer work in the Sierra Nevada forests. *Summer Birds* focused on one of the earliest female scientists and explorers and was selected for Scholastic Knowledge Quest. Most recently you’ve written about the lesser known ornithologist Louise Fuerte in *Sky Painter*. What role do you believe (historical and/or fictional) narratives play in science education? Do you think (historical and/or fictional) narratives can play a role in all curricular subjects?

MARGARITA ENGLE: I love to write picture book biographies about great scientists who have been forgotten by history. Several are included in *Bravo! Poems About Amazing Hispanics*, which will be published by Holt in March, and is beautifully illustrated by Rafael López. I think history text books have a tendency to check off categories such as ‘bird artist,’ leaving room for no one but Audubon. On the other hand, children are smart enough to know that the world needs more than one bird artist. Fuertes pioneered the painting of living birds in flight, ending the tradition of killing and posing birds. That is an accomplishment children respect and admire. I do think historical narratives can play a role in any area of study. For instance, can you name a Latino Nobel prize-winning medical researcher, or the wildlife biologist who established our National Park conservation policies? The first is Venezuelan-American, Baruj Benacerraf, and the second is Salvadoran-American, George Meléndez Wright, both included in *Bravo!* These are inspirational figures who can serve as role models for children. Women are even more likely to be omitted from history books. In *Bravo!* I’ve included Fabiola Cabeza de Baca, New Mexico’s pioneering nutritionist, and Ynés Mexía, a Mexican-American plant explorer.

HANIA MARIÉN: As a writer you’ve said you were influenced by several Latin American “magic realistic” poets including Octavio Paz, Jorge Luis Borges, Jose Martí and Rubén Darío. Can you share a bit about why those particular writers were so influential or inspiring?
**MARGARITA ENGLE:** Whenever I’m asked about poets, I just start listing names, because there are so many. Martí and Darío actually precede magic realism, and I also love Dulce María Loynaz from Cuba, and some of the twentieth century poets from Spain, such as Antonio Machado and Jorge Guillén. I find each of these writers to be inspiring on a particular day, in a certain mood, when I absolutely need to read a verse about freedom, or flying horses, or walking beside a river. One of my favorite contemporary English-language poets is Mary Oliver, because I find her odes to nature so comforting.

**HANIA MARIÉN:** Freedom is a recurring theme in your books. In an interview with Colorín Colorado you mention that you wrote several of your longer books with a “transitional age in mind” – when readers begin to seek “mature topics, such as freedom and justice.” What make “freedom” and “justice” “mature” topics? At what age do you believe kids can (or should) be exposed to thinking about these ideas? How can books (yours or others) enrich these conversations in the classroom?

**MARGARITA ENGLE:** Freedom and justice are accessible to very young children primarily in the form of a personal story, such as my picture book, *Drum Dream Girl*. Older children and teens are able to grasp broader, more general aspects that cover longer periods of time. When I say “mature,” I’m not just referring to images of violence from history, but to concepts of time. Very young preschool children don’t understand centuries, because they haven’t even grasped the difference between yesterday and tomorrow.

**HANIA MARIÉN:** The latest election cycle has generated discussions and debates about the boundaries of freedom of speech. How can educators engage students in discussions that support such freedoms but also respect the outcomes of freedom of expression?

**MARGARITA ENGLE:** This is a heartbreaking dilemma. I think we are in a moment of history when it would be unfair to ask Latino and Muslim children to utilize their freedom of expression without caution, because they have been directly threatened by a screaming man on the television screen, a man who is now extremely powerful. In a memoir unit, facts revealed about families could place them on lists for deportation or internment. Tragically, it’s very likely that hostile classmates will be encouraged to report certain groups to their parents. This is a time for teaching poetic devices, showing children how to use metaphors, so that emotions can be expressed indirectly, without placing oneself in danger. It’s the way poets survive in repressive regimes.

**HANIA MARIÉN:** There has been a lot of rhetoric recently around students feeling unsafe and/or uncertain about their futures in and out of the classroom. You say one thing you have noticed about people who are doing amazing things in history is that they “made hopeful choices in situations that seemed hopeless.” What “hopeful” choices can youth and educators make to create supportive communities and classrooms that affirm and validate student experiences?

**MARGARITA ENGLE:** I think educators can use history to show how people found hope. There are so many examples of nonviolent heroes who used words to change the world. Even though history’s mistakes keep getting repeated, history’s freedom advocates always respond.

**HANIA MARIÉN:** Recent events, including the U.S. presidential election and the death of Fidel Castro, present a renewed necessity for understanding the relations between Cuba and the United States. If you were a parent or teacher interested in broaching this topic with youth, how might you structure that conversation? Where would you start?
MARGARITA ENGLE: Cuba has been marginalized by the U.S. for so long that it’s necessary to show a map, even when speaking to adults. The map makes it clear that this is one of our closest neighbors, and that neighbors can be friends. I’m always saddened when children ask me, “What is Cuba?” instead of, “Where is Cuba?” That means they haven’t studied their close neighbor in class. Recently I met a high school U.S. History teacher who actually thought that Cuba was still a protectorate of the U.S., like Puerto Rico. That means she was taught incorrectly. Ignorance is passed from generation to generation.

HANIA MARIÉN: When seeking a perspective on Cuban culture that’s suitable for classroom use, we often turn to your work and that of Alma Flor Ada. Are there other authors or resources that you would recommend?

MARGARITA ENGLE: Thank you! That makes me very happy. Meg Medina’s Mango, Abuela, and Me is a wonderful picture book about the Cuban-American experience that could be used for any immigration unit.

HANIA MARIÉN: We want to draw attention to some of your books and hear what’s on the horizon for you. My colleague, Keira Philipp, returned from her trip to the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) raving about your new book, Bravo! Poems About Amazing Hispanics, having seen an advance copy. She also heard about your forthcoming book, All the Way to Havana. Can you speak a bit about these projects, their inspirations and where you’re headed from here?

MARGARITA ENGLE: I’m so grateful for her interest! Since I already mentioned Bravo! above, I’ll focus on All the Way to Havana, beautifully illustrated by Mike Curato. This is one of the most unusual author-illustrator relationships, because he went to Havana, stayed with my cousins for a week, rented an old car, and rode all the way to Trinidad, in order to make sure his art would be authentic. It’s a story about a boy and his family driving from the countryside to the city, fixing their car along the way. It’s a tribute to poor people everywhere, who keep their possessions working because they can’t afford to buy new ones. In addition, I have Miguel’s Brave Knight, a picture book about Miguel de Cervantes, coming out from Peachtree in August, 2017, with absolutely gorgeous illustrations by Raúl Colón. I wrote it in honor of the power of imagination to offer hope in times of trouble.

I’m a bit embarrassed about the way things have worked out, with three beautiful picture books in the same year. I wrote them at different times, but somehow they’ve converged. I hope librarians and educators will order all of them, instead of choosing just one, because they’re for different age groups, about very different subjects. In October, 2017, Atheneum will publish Forest World, an adventurous middle grade novel set in contemporary Cuba, with a strong environmental theme. It’s a family reunion story, with siblings meeting for the first time, after one parent has lived in Miami, and one in rural Cuba.

HANIA MARIÉN: For some time now, The Surrender Tree/El árbol de la rendición was your only work available in a bilingual edition. Recently, we’ve been ecstatic to hear about the Spanish language editions coming out, from Enchanted Air to Drum Dream Girl. Can you speak a little about how this shift has come about and what prompted it?

MARGARITA ENGLE: Thank you! The publishing world seems willing to experiment at this moment in time, but this has happened before, and it won’t last unless people buy the books—-not just mine, but bilingual books and Spanish editions in general. The brilliant translation of Enchanted Air, by Alexis Romay, will come out in August. Bravo! will have a Spanish edition. A middle grade historical fantasy called Morning Star Horse/El caballo Lucero (also translated by Alexis Romay) will be released next month by HBE Publishing, an innovative new small press which is actually making a choice of three separate editions available—-English, Spanish, or bilingual. I feel blessed!

HANIA MARIÉN: Lastly, drawing upon your dedication to preserving and promoting Latino/a culture, Cuban and beyond, is there any advice or inspiration you can offer to the teachers reading this interview who may have young Latino/a students in their classrooms?

MARGARITA ENGLE: I hope teachers can help all students enjoy reading about a wide variety of cultures, backgrounds, and experiences. I hope they can help children feel curious about the whole world.