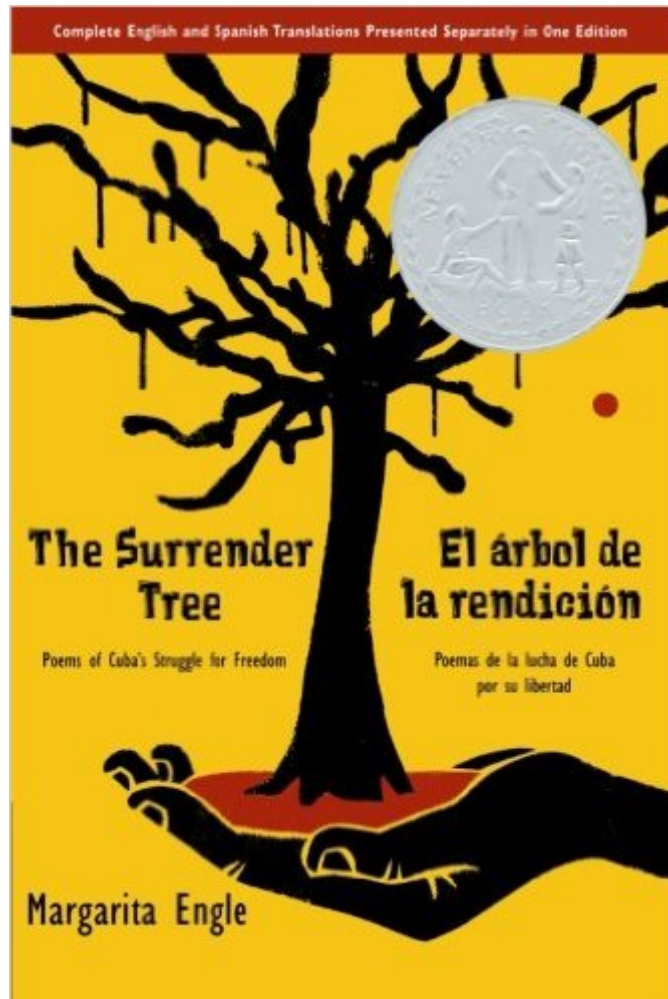


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# The Surrender Tree: Poems Of Cuba's Struggle For Freedom



## Synopsis

It is 1896. Cuba has fought three wars for independence and still is not free. People have been rounded up in reconcentration camps with too little food and too much illness. Rosa is a nurse, but she dares not go to the camps. So she turns hidden caves into hospitals for those who know how to find her. Black, white, Cuban, Spanish • Rosa does her best for everyone. Yet who can heal a country so torn apart by war? Acclaimed poet Margarita Engle has created another breathtaking portrait of Cuba. *The Surrender Tree* is a 2009 Newbery Honor Book, the winner of the 2009 Pura Belpre Medal for Narrative and the 2009 Bank Street - Claudia Lewis Award, and a 2009 Bank Street - Best Children's Book of the Year.

## Book Information

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Age Range: 12 - 18 years

Grade Level: 7 - 12

## Customer Reviews

Cuba's three wars for independence raged on as Rosa la Bayamesa, a nurse, tended to the sick and the injured. Using medicine made from plants, she helped the fallen soldiers, the children, even those who fought for the other side. This verse novel is based on actual events and people, and it follows Rosa's life from 1850 to 1899. Even when they were pursued by her enemies, Rosa and her husband Jose never stopped helping others. Jose and a few other supporting characters, such as a little girl named Silvia, step in from time to time to share a poem, but Rosa is the driving force behind the story. We could all learn something from her selflessness and determination.

In *The Surrender Tree: Poems of Cuba's Struggle for Freedom*, which was the first novel by a Latinx to receive a Newbery Honor, Engle portrays almost 50 years of the life of Rosario Castellanos, known as Rosa la Bayamesa, who grows from a slave, a "witch-child" learning about nature as medicine, to an iconic herbalist war nurse who treated anyone "friend or enemy" and never asked for money. Engle's novel in verse follows Rosa from 1850-1899, through the Ten Years War, the Little War, and the War of Independence. After all of that fighting, the novel ends with Spain's surrender to the United States. With Cuba still not free, the characters are left with mixed feelings of disappointment and hopeful anticipation for a better future. Engle's poems alternate among five perspectives, those of Rosa, her husband Jos , a slavehunter known as Lieutenant Death, Captain-General Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau, Marquis of Tenerife, Empire of Spain, and a young girl named Silvia. By including these voices, Engle captures different war experiences and interesting intersections. For example, Rosa meets Lieutenant Death early on, heals him later, and then becomes his target, since Rosa has become a powerful, elusive wartime figure. Also, later in the novel Silvia, an eleven-year-old girl, leaves her farm with her ailing mother and young twin brothers because of the mandatory order for peasants to enter reconcentration camps. Silvia's grandmother had been healed by Rosa in a previous war, and now Silvia believes Rosa is her only hope for survival. As in *The Poet Slave of Cuba*, Engle does not shy away from the brutalities of slavery and war. She explains that the ear of a runaway slave, proof that the slave died resisting capture, earns the hunter four pesos. Later, Rosa notes that "some of the ears come from people whose names and faces I know." Other times, Engle captures the exhaustion, fear, loneliness, heartbreak, and confusion of the men, women, and children hiding in caves. For example, she writes through Rosa: *The Little War? How can there be a little war? Are some deaths smaller than others, leaving mothers who weep a little less? And yet, throughout the novel, the characters also express feelings of pride and hope and a constant sense of purpose that leads to perseverance. While reading, it was easy to see why *The Surrender Tree* is one of Engle's many highly-acclaimed and decorated novels.*

This unique book is written in both English and Spanish, with each version combined into a single volume. The story is based on thirty years of almost continual war between the Cuban mambi' rebels and the soldiers of Spain. The story begins with a true heroine, Rosario Castellanos, known as Rosa la Bayamesa as an adult, as a young girl, Rosa is learning the art of healing with roots, herbs, and flowers from the older women. This book is written in poetry form, and starts as Rosa is thinking

or writing her thoughts about learning to be a nurse, and dealing with the sadness of trying to doctor the sick, wounded, and dying people who surround her. Another character called Lieutenant Death, is introduced as a young boy who is working with his father to capture and return runaway or dead slaves for bounty. Their stories interweave with the years, as Rosa and her nurse husband Jose, become revered healers to the mambi' rebels and the poor who seek their aid. In 1896, when a decree is issued for Cuban peasants to leave their villages and farms to be placed in "reconcentration camps" or be killed, thousands of people are moved into bases controlled with prison like precision and appalling conditions by the Spanish soldiers. As people begin to starve and die of disease, more and more people attempt to flee to the Cuban jungle to either join Rosa and her nurses, or fight with the mambi' rebels. At this time a fictional character named Silvia, is introduced as a young girl in the reconcentration camp who loses her whole family to starvation and illness. She escapes to flee to the mountains and jungle to accomplish her dream of working with Rosa to become a healer. As Rosa, Jose, Silvia, and the other nurses must constantly be moving to keep the Spaniards from capturing Rosa, the price on her head grows higher. She is constantly being stalked by Lieutenant Death. When the fighting gets most desperate, the Americans join with the mambi' rebels, after the American ship, Maine, is blown up by the Spanish soldiers in a Cuban harbor by the Spanish Army. As the Americans gain ground against the Spanish Army, will the Cubans at last be allowed their own country and the right to fly the Cuban flag under which they have fought? Margarita Engle, the author, writes a marvelous piece of historical fiction mixed with historical facts. In addition, she gleams much from the rich oral history of her grandmother and grandfather who survived interment in a reconcentration camp. This is a beautiful story that leaves a tender feeling in my heart for the Cuban people and the hardships they faced by the cruel reign of the Army of Spain.

It's not surprising that the Surrender Tree won so many awards, including a Newbery Honor. The language is beautiful, and the story itself is one that is not often told. Especially for an American audience, this text reveals a new type of Cuba that predates the Communist revolution that sparked an arms race during the Kennedy presidency. This is a Cuba much like the early America or Jamaica--a country of people who want to have their own independence, who want to live freely as one people, no slavery, all equals. It's interesting to see the story from so many perspectives, and I think that Engle adroitly switches through the first person narratives with ease. Often writers will struggle to create variance in the voices and speech patterns of their characters, but each of the four sounds different from each other, not only in style and rhythm, but also in their character--hopes, dreams, loves, actions, driving forces. I read it twice, and I would recommend it to

all readers.-Lindsey Miller, [...]

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