Second Reaction: Giving Voice to the Marginalized Stories of the Holocaust


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Margarita Engle’s latest book of poetry, Tropical Secrets, offers many possibilities for the secondary classroom. Not only does this text liberally incorporate literary elements such as symbolism, figurative language, and theme, but it also tells a story often marginalized in United States curricula, making it a logical choice for English and social studies teachers in diverse classrooms. Paloma, David, and Daniel prove relatable for young adult readers in the United States and offer new voices to Holocaust studies, which are largely dominated by the European voices of Jews who survived or suffered in the camps. While these stories are integral to studies of the Holocaust, Tropical Secrets brings
to light other stories of World War II by narrating the experiences of Holocaust refugees granted safety, but rejected in the Americas.

For two weeks, during which time students read the Holocaust survival memoir *Night* by Elie Wiesel, I read the poems from *Tropical Secrets* aloud to my ninth grade students at the beginning of class. After each day’s reading, students wrote in their daily journals for approximately five minutes, after which we discussed students’ responses to the poems as a whole class or in small groups. Students at first struggled with the text. The text’s genre confused them since it is arranged in poems but tells a coherent story. This was an unfamiliar format for students and they frequently asked to see the pages of the book so that they could assess its format. However, the text lends itself to being read aloud because of the imagery and cadence of the story, and once students grew comfortable with its structure, they began identifying with the characters and with the story more easily. One student writes, “I love how the poems go from Daniel, a refugee, to Paloma, the child of an officer. The contrast and different perspectives on one event is truly amazing.” Once they identified that the poetic structure allowed for constant changes of perspective and message, students began appreciating the text’s format for what it could offer to them as readers/listeners.

The motifs in *Tropical Secrets* offer secondary English teachers many possibilities for literary study with students. For example, music serves initially as a comfort for Daniel as he attempts to find his place in Cuban culture: “Music helps me forget / my loneliness. / Melodies feel like paths / I can follow / to find my way past / all the terror” (80). As Daniel settles into the island and comes to accept David and Paloma as friends, he connects with Cuban culture through music, saying, “Music is the only part / of Cuba’s heated air / that feels like something / I can breathe” (94). Students are able to identify and connect with music as a universal language capable of communicating emotions where language might fail. One of my ninth grade students writes, early in our study of the text, “To Paloma, music represents freedom, joy, happiness, and a bit of her mother. To Daniel, it’s a scarring reminder that he’s not in his comfortable zone, that things are different.” As we finished the text, the students began to recognize Daniel’s change of heart; one student writes, “The music in Cuba is like air to Daniel. Music is joy to the people of Cuba. To Daniel and Paloma the music is a place of liberation.” Students are able to identify music as a characterization technique and analyze music as symbolic of each character’s relationship with the island and its culture.

Paloma, who hides in her dovecote and defies her father by helping the refugees, offers other possibilities for literary study. Students quickly identify her internal struggle: “Paloma in the beginning sounds like a caged bird. She will not let go of the past, she does not want to let go of her mother,” writes one student. Unlike her birds, which are free to come and go from her dovecote, Paloma is caged by her father’s cruelty and her mother’s abandonment. Unable to find a way to escape, she helps the refugees and finds comfort in the dovecote with her birds. Like Daniel, Paloma finds liberation in music and dancing;
just as Daniel’s musical talent was passed down to him by his father, Paloma’s dancing was handed down to her by her mother. This parallelism connects these characters and shows that, despite their different cultural backgrounds and upbringings, they share common experiences and emotions. One student articulately analyzes the significance of birds when she writes, “I like how the poems today keep referencing back to birds. Paloma and Daniel seem trapped in their own way and what is a better symbol for freedom than a bird? I believe they are thinking about and dreaming about freedom.”

While students certainly identify with the characters and crave to understand each of their situations more thoroughly (they were frustrated when one character did not speak for a whole day or two of readings), students were most captivated by the vivid description and poetic language of *Tropical Secrets*. One student writes, “This book has some really awesome metaphors and similes. One of the poems starts off with ‘I feel like the King Midas of living things.’ It really paints a picture in my mind.” Another says, “I really loved the similes and metaphors used in today’s poems. Things such as ‘liquid hatred’ when describing spit really make the poetry interesting.” Because the story is not plot-driven but is instead theme-driven, the students’ identification of the importance of figurative language and imagery in the text speaks to its relevance for a secondary English classroom.

American history textbooks and units treating The Holocaust or World War II rarely emphasize the stories of Holocaust refugees who were turned away from Canada, the United States, and Cuba. Many of these refugees were sent back to Germany to die in death and labor camps. The United States had the opportunity to help twenty thousand refugees with the Wagner-Rodgers Bill, and instead the senate voted the bill down, sending passengers of *The SS St. Louis* and other ships to Cuba and then back to Europe. United States history texts have always had a tendency to downplay the United States’ tragic role in World War II, and *Tropical Secrets* brings to light and gives human voice to those marginalized stories—a must in today’s diverse classrooms with diversified curricula.

I used *Tropical Secrets* as a supplemental text for a larger unit, and I would certainly suggest this approach to any teachers who wish to incorporate this text into their curricula. I also support this text as a read-aloud; many of the poems’ themes and images stood out to me when I read the book aloud to students more than in my initial silent readings. However, *Tropical Secrets* could certainly be read as an anchor text for a unit on poetry, on The Holocaust, or on World War II, and it could also be used as a supplemental text in a social studies classroom that incorporates literature and literacy skill development. In the words of one of my students, “The way this book is set up is very creative. I like how it’s put into ‘poems,’ but it still tells a story.” The possibilities for this unique text in the classroom are endless. The text offers possibilities for literary analysis, supplies relatable and vivid characterization, gives voice to marginalized stories, and illustrates to students that international response to world conflicts can significantly alter the fates of many.
Works Cited
Anonymous. Student Writing Samples, October 2009.

About the Author
Liz Homan is a current high school English teacher and has taught both middle school and high school, in addition to pre-service teachers and English students at Purdue University. She graduated from The University of Illinois with a bachelor’s in English Education in 2007 and from Purdue University with a Master’s in English Education in 2009.