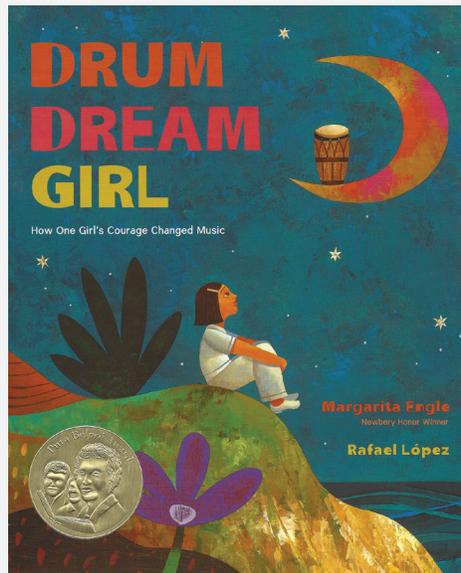


## First Opinion: Defying Expectations and Limitations in *Drum Dream Girl*

Engle, Margarita. *Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl's Courage Changed Music*.  
Illustrated by Rafael López, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015.

Karly Grice



“Girls cannot be drummers” (Engle dustjacket). These unwelcoming words await the reader who flips open Margarita Engle’s and Rafael López’s *Drum Dream Girl: How One Girl’s Courage Changed Music*. This was the reality of 1930’s Cuba, where young Millo Castro Zaldarriaga lived, forcing her to relegate her love of drumming to the realm of dreams. But some dreams are too big to keep hidden from the sun. Her persistence convinces her father of her devotion, who then finds her a music teacher and gives her a chance. As Millo’s dreams are achieved, she changes the reality of Cuba for girls and reminds all readers that “both girls and boys should feel free to dream” (Engle unpagged).

Much like dreams allow us to step out of the confines of reality, López’s surrealistic illustrations show the drum dream girl escaping her cultural-historical restrictions and prepare the reader to suspend disbelief. Millo’s world is characterized by an anthropomorphized sun and moon, attentive animal audiences, and a mermaid, among other fantastic elements. López repeatedly depicts Millo’s imagination of taking flight through a visual metaphor as she floats in the air, eyes closed and arms outstretched, daring to defy the odds with her drum beats.

Latinx art traditions, from visual surrealism to literary magic realism, echo throughout the text. As Millo's father reels her in from these flights of fancy with actual multicolored ribbon, he positively grounds her dreams by putting them into action with music lessons.

López further uses the visual and physical arrangement of the book to augment Engle's message of the importance of dreaming and the necessity of changing one's perspective. Creating a multimodal reading experience twice in the text, the reader is required to alter the physical orientation of the book. In these moments, the boundaries and expectations of the world are shifted as the book is tilted on end, altering the horizontal orientation into that of a vertical, double-page spread. Through this, the inspirational magnitude of Millo's cultural surroundings are represented as she gazes up in awe at the carnival stilt dancers. López also uses this orientation to emphasize the distance between the drum dream girl and her goal as she glances up at it—represented by a winged drum entrapped in a floating cage—and appears to wonder if it is out of her reach. But perhaps López is also employing this orientation alteration to highlight Engle's message that dreamers, like Millo, teach the world that we need to alter our perspective in order to change minds and the world.

Making concrete the connections between past dreamers and future achievers, López tells the story of Millo as a musical dreamer-turned-inspiration by also nodding to the artists that inspired his own artistic fancies. The flora and fauna of the landscape encroaching Millo's nighttime drumming share striking similarities to that of Henri Rousseau's "The Dream" (López, "Finding"). Furthermore, López pays homage to Miguel Covarrubias through the clear replication of Covarrubias's "Jazz Combo" in the layout of the all-girl jazz band, Anacaona. Covarrubias's influence is further felt in the final illustration as a boy with a sketch pad—presumably young López in self-portrait—floats on a cloud while drawing a young couple dancing to the drum dream girl's beat. The couple the boy is sketching bares striking resemblance to that of Covarrubias's dancers in "Lindy Hop." In this book, López acknowledges the influence Covarrubias had on him as a fellow Mexican artist (Danielson).

In his 2016 Pura Belpré acceptance speech, López connects the dynamic results of Millo's dare to dream with a current impetus in children's literature and society as a whole: "There are those who want to close doors, to build walls, to keep diversity out. They tell us we should fear those who are different, be suspicious of anyone who disagrees with our point of view. But words and images have the power to make convincing change" ("Belpré"). To this end, López animates Engle's flowing, melodic poetry using the saturated colors of an island at night, representing the vibrancy that characterizes movements of change concurrently existing with the dark uncertainty of change's possibility. Finally, the textured brush strokes of acrylic on wood visible on each page create a tangibility to the artistic surreal López paints and, with it, a practical potential for the dreamer.

### Works Cited

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