

Second Reaction: Isla to Island

Castellanos, Alexis. *Isla to Island*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2022.

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“A picture is worth a thousand words.” This is a phrase that I have heard many times in my life, as I am sure we all have. But what if the pictures we are given are the *only* words we have? This is the best way that I can think of to describe a wordless picture book to students when I first introduce them to this style of text. For this study, I asked them to look at and narrate the story of Marisol in *Isla to Island*.

I work with seventh grade students and teach a combination curriculum of ELA and Social Studies, so *Isla to Island* was a perfect choice for my students. The premise of the book is that a young girl named Marisol is sent to live in the United States from her home in Cuba as Castro rises to power. The events which follow are a combination of struggles a teenage girl faces in middle school and those from moving to a new country without the company of family

members. Many of my students are also immigrants or the children of immigrants and could find many connections to Marisol.

The first thing that students noticed when they opened the text was how colorful the illustrations are. They seem to leap off the page and as one student said, allow you to “smell the flowers and taste the fruit at the market.” They all noted how happy Marisol seems, and even those that do not speak Spanish could tell that the music and activities were ones which made Marisol happy. However, life soon changes for Marisol as Castro and his regime take over Cuba. Students were shocked to learn that her parents were willing to send her alone to the United States and noted how she went from being so happy to looking very sad.

My students were quick to notice that Marisol’s sadness becomes very evident as she lands in New York City, because what was once a vibrant book, is now a black and white landscape. A comparison made from her life in Habana to New York is the sad song which is playing on the radio as Marisol arrives at her new foster home. The only colorful thing she holds onto is the flower her father gave her as she left Cuba. My students who have experienced the struggle of learning a new language which they are expected to fully emerge mentioned how they related to the scenes where Marisol tries to express the frustration of her foster parents speaking to her in English, which she is not familiar with.

I loved the conversations we were able to have once color found its way back into Marisol’s life. This happens once she discovers the school library and can begin reading again. The students were quick to relate to Marisol and offered up the activities that make them feel bright even on dark days (such as, reading, music, drawing, sports), and could relate to how such activities are able to make your emotions change. We were also able to discuss how important it is to have adults in your life who support you, even if they do not quite understand you. Marisol’s foster parents work to support her interests by giving her many opportunities to read and perform activities which make her feel less homesick (including taking her to a botanical garden to see flowers native to Cuba and cook traditional Cuban cuisine).

Overall, this book was such a wonderful experience to read with middle schoolers. It was refreshing to hear their perspectives on pieces which I had missed because I am no longer in the phase of life which they and Marisol are. It was also such an amazing tool to discuss topics in history which can be hard. I enjoyed having the open door to the true events mentioned in the book and plan to elaborate on these with future lessons. Above all else, it was refreshing to see

students enjoy a story for how they interpreted it and now for how they were told to interpret it. I think that this book will become a middle school classic in the coming years, and I hope that students continue to color their world with the stories they create.

About the Author

Skylar Buckmaster is a graduate student at Appalachian State University, where she is studying for a degree in Literacy Education. She has been an educator for four years, focusing on Social Studies and ELA in upper grades. She enjoys helping students find an interest in history and reading, and is shifting her focus to the elementary classroom.

When she is not teaching or attending classes, she likes to spend time with her husband, Josh, and her cat, Ragnar. Any additional free time is spent reading mystery novels and researching doctoral programs for Reading.