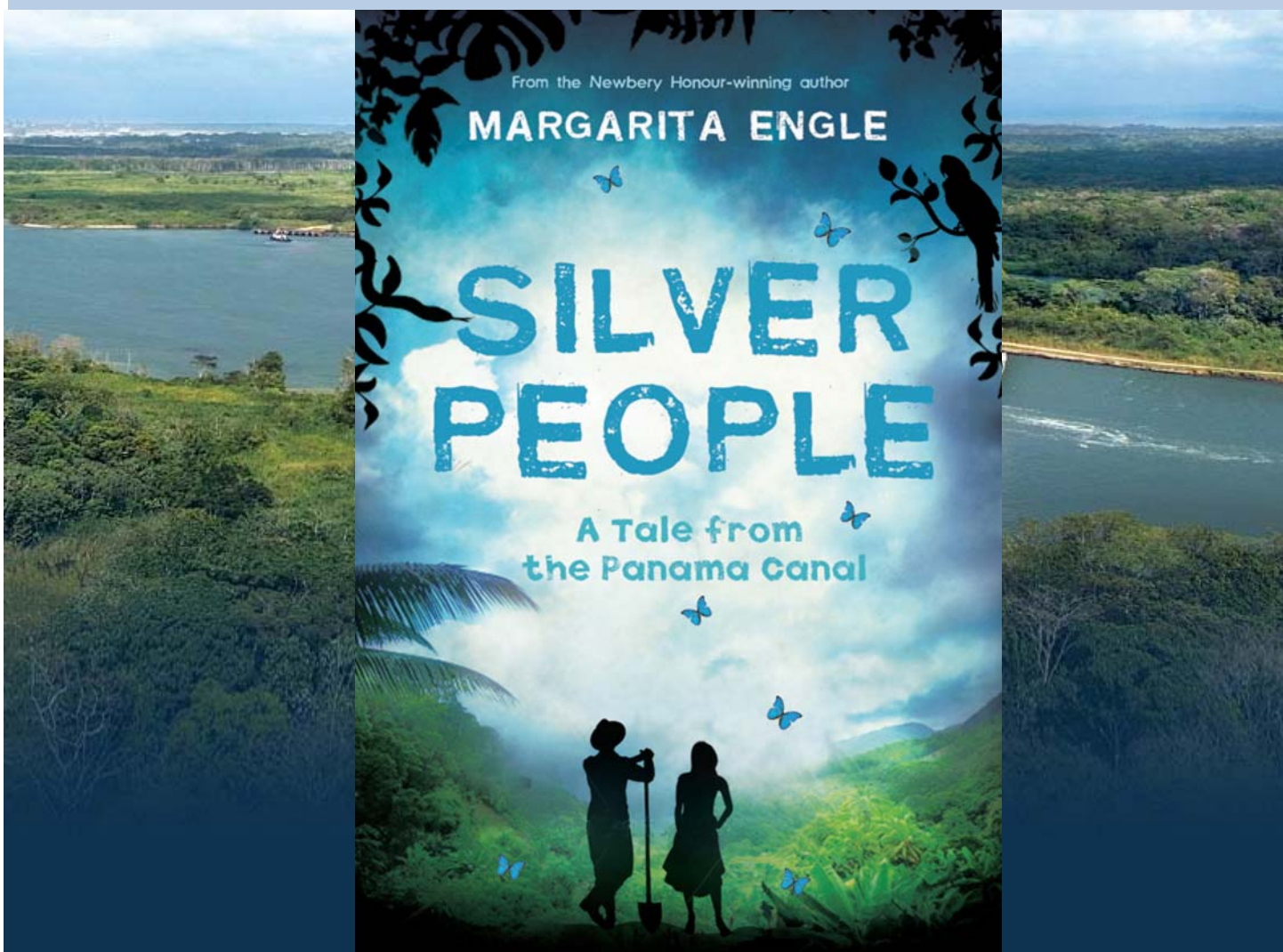


# Teacher's Guide

## Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal

By Jonas Edman, SPICE Curriculum Writer



Stanford | CENTER FOR  
LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES



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and Cross-Cultural Education



*Teacher's Guide*

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**SILVER PEOPLE: VOICES FROM THE PANAMA CANAL**  
BY MARGARITA ENGLE

**Recommended  
Grade Levels**

The activities in this teacher's guide for *Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal* are recommended for secondary school students.

**Genre**

*Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal* is a work of historical fiction written in verse.

**Themes**

Themes in *Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal* that are explored in this teacher's guide include

- Apartheid
- Colonialism
- Conflict
- Cross-cultural communication
- Discrimination
- Ecosystems
- Homelands and diasporas
- Human-environment interaction
- Identity
- Interdependence
- Labor
- Migration
- Sacrifice

**Connections to  
Common Core  
Standards**

Common Core Standards addressed in the activities in this teacher's guide include

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3**

Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4**

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.6**

Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.9**

Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work (e.g., how Shakespeare treats a theme or topic from Ovid or the Bible or how a later author draws on a play by Shakespeare).

**Book  
Information**

*Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal* by Margarita Engle is published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston and New York, 2014.

**Teacher's  
Guide  
Information**

This teacher's guide is produced by the Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE), in collaboration with the Stanford Center for Latin American Studies and the Consortium of Latin American Studies Programs (CLASP). The primary author of this teacher's guide is Jonas Edman, SPICE Curriculum Writer.

CLASP founded the Américas Award in 1993 to encourage and commend authors, illustrators and publishers who produce quality children's and young adult books that portray Latin America, the Caribbean, or Latinos in the United States, and to provide teachers with recommendations for classroom use. CLASP offers up to two annual book awards, together with a commended list of titles. For more information concerning the Américas Award, including additional classroom resources, please visit the CLASP website at <http://www.claspprograms.org/>.

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## INTRODUCTION\*

Margarita Engle's *Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal* takes us back over 100 years to the building of the Panama Canal. Unlike much that has been written about the historic event, Engle's book does not focus on historical figures or the political and economic motivations of the United States in building the canal. Instead, the book gives voice to those who so often have no voice in these narratives: to migrant laborers, disenfranchised individuals, and indigenous peoples; as well as to the flora and fauna endemic to the Panama Canal Zone.

In the decade-long U.S. effort to construct the Panama Canal, tens of thousands of laborers worked, sacrificed, and died while building the largest canal the world had seen to date. Combating harsh terrain, disease, and deplorable living conditions, workers from around the world held a variety of different jobs in the canal zone, their pay and quality of life often directly related to their ethnicity.

The base of the workforce came from the West Indies. Laborers were recruited with promises of wealth and success, but were confronted by a very different reality upon arrival in Panama. The dense and untamed jungle that covered the 50 miles between coasts was a harsh and difficult work environment. The rainy season, which lasted from May to November, kept workers perpetually wet and coated in mud.

The apartheid system governed every aspect of a worker's life. The distinction began as a division between "skilled" and "unskilled" laborers, but as time passed it evolved into a purely racial divide. Skilled employees went on the Gold Roll and were paid in gold coins. These workers earned paid sick and vacation time and were housed in better accommodations than their unskilled counterparts. Those on the Silver Roll, the unskilled workers, were paid in balboas, or local Panamanian silver. West Indian workers, plentiful in numbers and eager to work, could be paid 10 cents an hour—half of the salary of a European or white U.S. worker. Over time, the Gold Roll became comprised of white U.S. citizens exclusively, while the workers on the Silver Roll, by far the majority of the workforce by the end of the construction period, were largely non-white.

Discrimination extended to living quarters made available to each group of workers. Barracks were distinctly worse for West Indians than for whites. Mess halls for black workers had no tables or chairs and fed up to 8,000 men a day with unappealing, simple food.

The living conditions exacerbated the poor hygiene in the area, and newcomers quickly learned about the serious threat of disease on what was dubbed "Fever Coast." Smallpox, pneumonia, typhoid, dysentery, hookworm, yellow fever, and malaria were some of the ailments with which workers had to contend.

Work on the Panama Canal could be dull and monotonous or deafening and treacherous. Laborers could be tasked to virtually any project in the canal zone, each with unique dangers and each requiring its own set of skills.

Perhaps the worst job—one to which almost all West Indians were assigned at some point—was dynamiting. The greatest danger lay with the material's instability; it could blow up at any moment or malfunction upon detonation, remaining unignited until exploding later by accident. Laborers heading out for dynamiting duty frequently carried all their belongings with them, understanding their relatively low odds of a safe return to the barracks.

## introduction

The most taxing physical labor was in the excavation of the Culebra Cut, the artificial valley that links the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Panama. Each day, workers moved miles of construction track and filled the 160 trains that ran in and out of the Cut. Landslides occurred in the Cut with little to no warning, often burying workers and equipment within seconds and wiping out months of progress.

In 1909, construction of the locks brought a new host of potentially lethal dangers. Eight stories up, riveters worked without safety harnesses on precarious scaffolding, which could become unhooked with any sudden movement. Falling materials would hit other sets of scaffolding on the way down, causing scores of deaths and injuries. A job on the railroad was no easier. Due to the number of train cars running from multiple directions around the clock, working by the spoil dumps on the rail track required constant vigilance so as to avoid getting run over or hit by a swinging boom.

Although significant safety improvements were made during the second half of the U.S. construction period, treacherous construction methods and deadly diseases took their toll: at least 25,000 workers died during the combined French and U.S. construction periods of the Panama Canal.

\* Adapted from pbs.org. "General Article: The Workers." <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/panama-workers/> [16 December 2015].

## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

### Examining Maps

- *Silver People* takes place in Panama and the Panama Canal Zone, but the characters in the book come from many different countries. Use the following Prezi presentation to introduce students to the various countries and places referenced in the book: [http://prezi.com/cvfeyqphqml/?utm\\_campaign=share&utm\\_medium=copy](http://prezi.com/cvfeyqphqml/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy)
- Have students use maps to explore why Panama was chosen as the location for the canal.

### Examining Historical Background

Have students research historical events related to *Silver People* and the building of the Panama Canal. Suggested historical events include:

- The Cuban War of Independence (1895–98)
- French efforts in the late nineteenth century to build a canal in Panama
- Panama’s independence from Colombia in 1903
- Events leading up to the outbreak of World War I in 1914
- The anarchist movement in Latin America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century
- Technological advances in excavation and machinery in the early twentieth century

### Examining Historical Images

- Use the following Prezi presentation to introduce students to photographs taken during the building of the Panama Canal: [http://prezi.com/x1tvzcegswyf/?utm\\_campaign=share&utm\\_medium=copy&rc=ex0share](http://prezi.com/x1tvzcegswyf/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy&rc=ex0share)
- Have students use the Internet to find other photographs from the building of the Panama Canal. The Library of Congress website is an excellent resource for historical photographs: <https://www.loc.gov/>

### Examining and Designing Political Cartoons

- Use the following Prezi presentation to analyze historical political cartoons related to the building of the Panama Canal: [http://prezi.com/8\\_r3t5ztuldg/?utm\\_campaign=share&utm\\_medium=copy](http://prezi.com/8_r3t5ztuldg/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy)
- Have students design their own political cartoons on a theme related to *Silver People* and the building of the Panama Canal.

### Analyzing Fictional Characters

Have students develop character sketches for the fictional characters in *Silver People* (Mateo, Anita, Henry, Old Maria, and Augusto). Ask students to consider the following when creating their character sketches:

- Physical characteristics: What does the character look like? How do the character’s physical attributes play a role in the story? How does the character feel about his or her

## suggested activities

physical attributes? How does the character change physically during the story? How do these changes affect the character's experience?

- Emotional characteristics: How does the character feel most of the time? How do his or her feelings change throughout the story? How does the character feel about himself or herself? When faced with challenges in the story, what emotions come up for the character?
- Social characteristics: How does the character get along with other characters in the story? Who does the character choose for friends and why does the character choose them? Where does the character stand in the social order?
- Philosophical characteristics: What does the character believe about the way life is? On what are these beliefs based? How do these beliefs affect the choices the character makes? How do those beliefs change throughout the story? Do others in the story share these beliefs?

### Creating Characters

According to author Margarita Engle, students often ask her why she didn't include a particular voice in her book. Have students add new voices by creating poems for new characters. Ask students to consider the following when creating their new characters:

- What physical, emotional, social, and philosophical characteristics will their new characters have?
- What literary devices (e.g., metaphor, simile, personification, alliteration) will they use to give voice to the thoughts, feelings, and viewpoints of their new characters?

### Researching Historical Figures

John Stevens, Theodore Roosevelt, George W. Goethals, Jackson Smith, Gertrude Beeks, Harry Franck

- Have students research and present on the historical figures in *Silver People*.
- Have students find source material related to the historical figures in *Silver People*. How has Margarita Engle used this source material to shape the historical figures in her book?
- Have students research and present on historical figures related to the building of the Panama Canal that are not in *Silver People*.

### Analyzing and Designing Images

- Have students analyze the book cover. What does it include? Why? What is left off? Why do you think that is? After examining the book cover, have students create their own covers for the book.
- Have students develop an image for one of the verses in the book.

### Researching and Designing a Memorial for Those Who Died Building the Panama Canal

- Have students use the Internet to research if there are any memorials for the workers who died during the construction of the Panama Canal. Ask students if they can find memorials to laborers on other major construction projects.

- Have students design a memorial for those who died building the Panama Canal. Who will the memorial depict? What will the memorial look like? What materials will be used in the memorial? What text will be included in the memorial?

### Comparing Headlines of the Opening of the Panama Canal, 1914

- Have students use the Internet to find newspaper headlines and articles of the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914. How is the opening of the Panama Canal portrayed? What information is included in the headlines and articles? What information is not included in the headlines and articles?
- Have students write their own newspaper article on the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914.

### Analyzing Statistics and Making Calculations

Have students use Panama Canal transit statistics for 2015 from the following website to answer the questions below: <https://www.pancanal.com/eng/op/transit-stats/#breadcrumbs-end>.

- Which month had the highest number of commercial transits through the Panama Canal? How many transits were there?
- Which month had the lowest number of commercial transits through the Panama Canal? How many transits were there?
- How many vessels registered to Panama (i.e., vessels flying the Panamanian flag) transited the Panama Canal in 2015?
- What countries had the most vessels transit the Panama Canal in 2015? Name the top five.
- What were the top five countries by origin and destination of cargo in 2015?
- What trade routes utilizing the Panama Canal were the most common in 2015?
- What were the most common commodities shipped through the Panama Canal in 2015? Name the top three.
- What was the most common grain shipped southbound through the Panama Canal in 2015? What was the most common grain shipped northbound through the Panama Canal in 2015?

### Analyzing Verses/Poems

- Discuss with students the vocabulary of poetry. How does Margarita Engle use metaphor, simile, personification, alliteration, symbol, irony, and imagery to express new ways of looking at things beyond the literal meaning? Ask students to find examples of each of these poetic forms of language in the book.
- Read and discuss the poem “History of a Canal” by Pablo Neruda. The poem can be found online here: <http://zinnedproject.org/materials/history-of-a-canal/>

### Exploring Panama’s Fauna

Have students research the animals that are personified in *Silver People*. (Howler Monkeys, Glass Frogs, Blue Morpho Butterfly, Monkey-Eating Eagle, Three-Toed Sloth, Tree Viper, Giant Hissing Cockroaches, Crocodiles, Jaguar, Ruby-Throated Hummingbird, Army Ants, Bullet



## suggested activities

Ant, Mosquitoes, Vampire Bats, Violet-Green, Swallows, Capuchin Monkey, Giant Swallowtail Butterflies, King Vulture, Scarlet Macaws, Poison Dart Frogs, Resplendent Quetzal, Poison Dart Tadpoles)

- Have students research the sounds of animals described in *Silver People*. An excellent resource for this is the Macaulay Library at Cornell University (<http://macaulaylibrary.org/>), which has a searchable collection of animal audio recordings and videos.
- Have students record and share the sounds of animals in their own environment.
- Have students write verses that personify the animals and plants in their own environment. Encourage students to imagine human-environment interaction from the animal's perspective.

### Exploring Panama's Flora

- Trees figure prominently in *Silver People*. Have students research the types of trees found in Panama. An excellent resource for this is the Center for Tropical Forest Science (<http://ctfs.si.edu/webatlas/>), which has photos and descriptions of flowers, trees, shrubs, and palms of Panama.
- Have students explore the trees in their own environment. Which trees are native to the region? Which are not?
- Have students write verses that personify the trees and plants in their own environment. Encourage students to imagine human-environment interaction from the tree or plant's perspective.

## READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

The following reading comprehension questions can be used to guide students in reading *Silver People*. In addition to specific questions for each of the chapters in the book, students can also answer the essential questions listed below.

### Essential Questions

- Who built the Panama Canal? From where did the laborers come? In what ways was the Panama Canal Zone a multicultural place?
- What were living conditions like for Panama Canal workers?
- With what diseases and ailments did workers on the Panama Canal have to contend?
- What was the environment and weather like in Panama?
- How did the apartheid system govern workers' lives? What are examples of discrimination and unequal treatment workers faced?
- What dangers did workers face in their jobs?
- What did laborers do for entertainment during their free time?
- How did laborers make political stands and advocate for their rights?
- What impact did the building of the Panama Canal have on the people living in Panama?
- What impact did the building of the Panama Canal have on local flora and fauna?

### The Panama Craze 1906 (pp. 1–22)

- Where is Mateo from? How old is he? What is his family situation?
- Why is Mateo desperate to leave home for work?
- Why does Mateo lie to the recruiter? What does he lie about?
- What are Mateo's expectations of Panama? From where do these expectations come?
- How do Mateo's expectations of Panama differ from what he encounters when he arrives in Panama?
- What countries are the people Mateo encounters in Panama from? How are people from various countries treated differently?
- Where is Anita from? What is her family situation? Where does she feel most at home?

### The Forest 1906 (pp. 23–28)

- What are the howler monkeys observing and to what events are they reacting? How would you describe their mood?
- What are the trees observing and to what events are they reacting? How would you describe their mood?
- How does author Margarita Engle use language and rhythm to bring the flora and fauna of Panama to life?

**The Serpent Cut 1906 (pp. 29–54)**

- How does Mateo define the term “anarchy”? With whom are the anarchists angry? What are Mateo’s feelings about anarchy and anarchists?
- What is the *Culebra*? How does Mateo describe it?
- What is Mateo’s job? What does it entail?
- Where is Henry from? What dreams did he have before coming to Panama? What does he dream of now?
- What is Henry’s job? What does it entail?
- What forms of discrimination and unequal treatment of workers does Henry observe?
- Why doesn’t Mateo return home to Cuba?
- Who is John Stevens? What prejudices does he have toward different ethnic groups and nationalities?
- What nationalities and multicultural activities does Mateo encounter in the makeshift town that he describes as being “made of mud and rum”?
- In the boxing match, why does Henry especially enjoy throwing punches at Mateo?

**The Forest 1906 (pp. 55–61)**

- What are the howler monkeys observing and to what events are they reacting? How would you describe their mood?
- What are the trees observing and to what events are they reacting? How would you describe their mood?
- How does author Margarita Engle use language and rhythm to bring the flora and fauna of Panama to life?

**The Cockroach Slide 1906 (pp. 63–99)**

- How does Mateo escape in the evenings from the pain of work?
- What questions does Henry have about Mateo?
- What questions does Mateo have about Anita?
- What questions does Anita have about Mateo?
- From what ailment does Mateo suffer?
- Who is Old Maria? What is her relationship to Anita?
- What work-related accident does Henry experience?
- Why is Mateo taken to jail? Of what is he accused? How does he get out of jail?
- Who is Theodore Roosevelt? Why does he think his trip to the Panama Canal will make history?
- How does Anita view the tourists who come to see the Panama Canal?

**The Forest 1906 (pp. 101–107)**

- What are the howler monkeys observing and to what events are they reacting? How would you describe their mood?

- What are the trees observing and to what events are they reacting? How would you describe their mood?
- How does author Margarita Engle use language and rhythm to bring the flora and fauna of Panama to life?

### **Curiosity 1906 (pp. 109–132)**

- How has Mateo and Henry’s relationship changed? How do they communicate with each other?
- Who is Augusto? Where is he from? What is his job? How does he feel about his job?
- Why does Augusto fascinate Mateo? What English words does Augusto teach Mateo?
- How does Mateo gain access to the gold zone? How does he describe the gold zone? How does the gold zone differ from where Mateo, Henry, and the other laborers live?
- What does Anita mean when she says “life seems as changeable as a clearwing butterfly”?

### **The Forest 1906 (pp. 133–139)**

- What are the howler monkeys observing and to what events are they reacting? How would you describe their mood?
- What are the trees observing and to what events are they reacting? How would you describe their mood?
- How does author Margarita Engle use language and rhythm to bring the flora and fauna of Panama to life?

### **The Silver Ward 1907 (pp. 141–167)**

- Why are some laborers moving out of their barracks and into the jungle?
- Why does Mateo yearn to move to the Jungle? Why is he apprehensive of moving to the jungle? What does he feel when he finally does move to the jungle?
- What does Mateo mean when he says that in the jungle canal rules don’t matter?
- Why does Chief Engineer Stevens resign? How does his replacement, George W. Goethals, plan to run the Panama Canal Zone?
- Who is Jackson Smith? How does he view the Panama Canal laborers?
- What disease does Mateo contract? How is he nursed back to health? How are silver people and gold people treated differently in the hospital?
- Why does Anita want to spend more time with the gold nurses?
- Who is Gertrude Beeks? For what reforms does she advocate?

### **The Forest 1907 (pp. 169–176)**

- What are the howler monkeys observing and to what events are they reacting? How would you describe their mood?
- What are the trees observing and to what events are they reacting? How would you describe their mood?

## reading comprehension

- How does author Margarita Engle use language and rhythm to bring the flora and fauna of Panama to life?

### **Open Hours 1908 (pp. 177–196)**

- Why does Augusto have to leave the gold zone? How does he challenge his demotion? Is he successful?
- How do people challenge Goethals' decisions? Who takes part in the unrest?
- To what new job is Henry assigned? How does he initially feel about his job? What drastic action does he take soon after starting his new job?
- Why is Mateo hiding from police? Where is he hiding?
- Why does Augusto feel there is no escape?
- Where is Henry's new life? How will this new life be different from his old life?

### **The Forest 1908 (pp. 197–203)**

- What are the howler monkeys observing and to what events are they reacting? How would you describe their mood?
- What are the trees observing and to what events are they reacting? How would you describe their mood?
- How does author Margarita Engle use language and rhythm to bring the flora and fauna of Panama to life?

### **The Crocodile Bridge 1910 (pp. 205–226)**

- What does Augusto plan to do after leaving the Panama Canal Zone?
- Who does Henry marry? How does Mateo describe Henry's wedding?
- Who is Harry Franck? Why does he find his job so difficult? Why is he uncertain of how to categorize Augusto, Mateo, and Anita?
- How do Anita and Mateo feel about being categorized by Harry Franck?
- Why do so many Panama Canal laborers suddenly lose their jobs?
- What happens to Anita and Mateo on the bridge?

### **The Forest 1910 (pp. 227–232)**

- What are the howler monkeys observing and to what events are they reacting? How would you describe their mood?
- What are the trees observing and to what events are they reacting? How would you describe their mood?
- How does author Margarita Engle use language and rhythm to bring the flora and fauna of Panama to life?

**Sky Castles 1914 (pp. 233–240)**

- Who was affected by the flooding of the Panama Canal in 1914?
- Where do Anita and Mateo end up? What is their new life like? What are their dreams for the future?

**The Forest 1914 (pp. 241–247)**

- What are the howler monkeys observing and to what events are they reacting? How would you describe their mood?
- What are the trees observing and to what events are they reacting? How would you describe their mood?
- How does author Margarita Engle use language and rhythm to bring the flora and fauna of Panama to life?

**Epilogue (pp. 249–250)**

- Where is Augusto when he writes his letter to Mateo, Anita, and Henry?
- What is included in the exhibit about the Panama Canal?
- What is *not* included in the exhibit about the Panama Canal?
- Why does Augusto think no one cares about the work they did?
- How does Augusto think their history can be told?
- What does Augusto mean when he asks Mateo, Anita, and Henry to help him “howl our wild truth”?