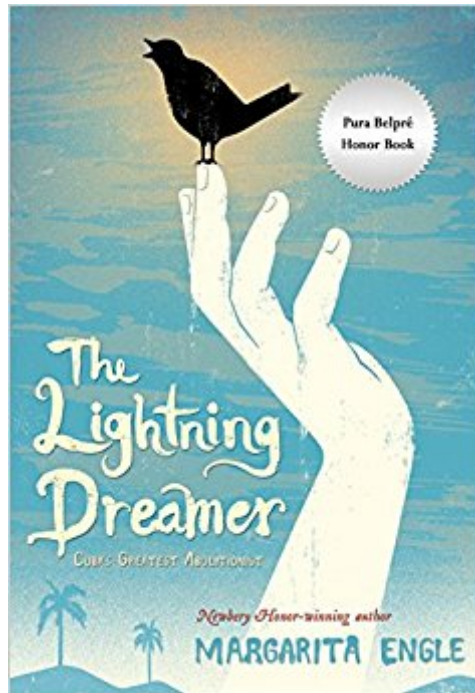




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# The Lightning Dreamer: Cuba's Greatest Abolitionist



## Synopsis

“I find it so easy to forget / that I am just a girl who is expected / to live / without thoughts. Opposing slavery in Cuba in the nineteenth century was dangerous. The most daring abolitionists were poets who veiled their work in metaphor. Of these, the boldest was Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, nicknamed Tula. In passionate, accessible verses of her own, Engle evokes the voice of this book-loving feminist and abolitionist who bravely resisted an arranged marriage at the age of fourteen, and was ultimately courageous enough to fight against injustice. Historical notes, excerpts, and source notes round out this exceptional tribute.

## Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 28 customer reviews

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Age Range: 12 - 15 years

Grade Level: 7 and up

## Customer Reviews

**\*Starred Review\*** Engle's historical novel in verse is a fictionalized biography of the nineteenth-century Cuban abolitionist poet Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, known as Tula. Told in multiple voices, Engle's elegant verses, rich in simile and metaphor, focus on the poet's life as a teenager. Forbidden access to books because her mother believes reading and writing make women unattractive, Tula escapes to a nearby convent. There, she discovers volumes by the rebel poet José Martí, whose words feed her own rebellious spirit, which is exemplified by her rejection of two arranged marriages. I long to write like Heredia,

she muses, but what do I know of great cities and the wide lives of men? I'm just a silenced girl. My stories are simple tales of emotion. Seen as an outcast and a madwoman, she is sent to the country, where she falls in love with Sab, a freed slave, and continues to write about equality for slaves and for women. Engle's richly evocative verses conjure up a time when women, like slaves, were regarded as property to be sold into loveless marriages. This is the context for a splendid novel that celebrates one brave woman who rejected a constrained existence with enduring words that continue to sing of freedom. Grades 7-12, --Michael Cart --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

A Pura Belpré® Honor Book Winner of the 2014 PEN Literary Award for Best Young Adult Book  
VOYA Top Shelf for Middle School Readers 2013 list 2014 International Latino Book Award  
Honorable Mention An NCTE Notable Book for the Language Arts An ALSC Notable  
Children's Book for 2013 YALSA 2014 Best Fiction for Young Adults \* "This is the context for a  
splendid novel that celebrates one brave woman who rejected a constrained existence with  
enduring words that continue to sing of freedom." --Booklist, starred review -- "An  
inspiring fictionalized verse biography of one of Cuba's most influential writers. . . . Fiery and  
engaging, a powerful portrait of the liberating power of art." --Kirkus -- "In these poems,  
their longings for freedom, their fears, their loves, and their heartaches are elegantly crafted through  
images that make the island of Cuba and its people vividly real and connect them to the hearts of  
contemporary readers." --Bulletin -- "A quick and powerful read worthy of addition to any  
collection. The verses speak of tolerance and acceptance beyond the context of this story."  
--VOYA 4Q 2P M J S -- "Engle adds another superb title to her lengthening list of  
historical novels in verse. . . . This is a must-have for . . . anyone in need of a comparative study to  
our own country's struggle with slavery." --School Library Journal --

Poetic dystopian? Well, not really but in this gorgeously written, wonderful little book the author describes a girl ahead of her time whose voice cannot be quieted despite many attempts by her mother and mother country. Engle's "Tula" rejects the status quo of slavery and women as property. She is ahead of her time and "fights" injustices through words, stories and actions. She pays a price for her voice because silence is unbearable. A beautiful book.

The Lightning Dreamer by Margarita Engle is both a collection of poems about, and a retelling of the history, of Gertrudis Gomez de Avelleneda, known also as Tula. Tula was raised in Cuba in the

early 19th century. Her mother sought to marry Tula off to a rich man and to keep Tula from becoming educated. Instead Tula wrote poetry and novels championing abolition, women's rights and interracial unity. Margarita Engle has created a suite of poems in the voice of, and in celebration of, this remarkable woman. The poems are simple and straightforward. They tell Tula's troubles, her outrage at slavery and her fierce independence. The poems are in many voices ranging from Tula's own to the freed slave who was a cook in her home to those who inspired her. This is a remarkable book, particularly for any young Latina, and is highly recommended.

I have never been disappointed by one of Margarita Engle's books and *The Lightning Dreamer* is no exception. It's the fascinating true story of a Cuban woman who worked both for the abolition of slavery and equal rights for women. My guess is that many of you have never heard of Gertrudis Gmez de Avellanda, I certainly hadn't. Engle's ability to bring to life these lesser known but incredibly important historical characters is part of what makes her work so significant. Her novels in verse make historical characters like Tula accessible and real to younger readers. In writing this review, I was reminded of my obsession with biographies when I was in elementary school. When I was eight years old I decided that I was going to read every biography in my school's library. Our biographies were shelved alphabetically by the name of the person the book was about. When I think about the books that I read then, I remember a number of books about Davy Crockett, Grover Cleveland and Amelia Earhart. Obviously, I didn't make it all the way through, it would seem I stopped somewhere around E. But in thinking back, I'm struck by the lack of diversity in the people represented on my library's shelves. I can only hope that with the availability of books like that of Engle things aren't the same now. If books such as *The Lightning Dreamer*, *The Surrender Tree*, or *Hurricane Dancers* had been available to me then, I may have made it past E in my quest to read all those biographies. In telling the story of Tula, Engle's book opens up a number of relevant topics for classroom discussion. As Tula becomes increasingly aware of the disparities in society, she begins to both ponder and write about things such as slavery, interracial marriage, and women's rights. Tula grapples with these moral and ethical dilemmas in a language that invites students to question and struggle with her. She provides a way to teach our younger students about times when equal rights for people of color and women were explicitly denied. While it's important to continue to discuss the ways in which equality is still not a reality for all people today, it's just as important to

discuss the historical contexts that our contemporary struggles for equality come from. Engle gives us a strong female protagonist who fights to remain authentic to the things she believes in, but in doing this, Engle also shows how hard it is to be that kind of person. It's never easy to go against main stream society or to be the outcast among one's friends or family. Through Tula, Engle gives voice to what it feels like to be alienated or exiled for one's beliefs. These are powerful ideas for our students to think about both those who can identify with Tula's loneliness and those who realize they may be like the people who mocked Tula for being different. Tula is a powerful character, not just because of what she believed, but because of how she chose to stand up for those beliefs. She fought for equality and human rights through her stories and her poetry. She used the power of words as a means to change the minds of those around her. How valuable a lesson for the students in our classrooms that our words are one of the most powerful tools we have for fighting against the things that try to hold us back. I'll leave you with the words from Gertrudis Gmez de Avellanda that inspired the title of the book.

"The slave let his mind fly free, and his thoughts soared higher than the clouds where lightning forms.

The Lightning Dreamer: Cuba's Greatest Abolitionist has received a number of awards: 2014 YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults, School Library Journal's Top Ten Latino-themed Books for 2013, Teaching for Change 2013 Favorite, Center for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature selection as a Best Multicultural Book of 2013, 2014 Pura Belpré Honor Book, and International Reading Association Top Chapter Book for 2013. Our free educator's guide is available on our wordpress blog *Vamos a Leer*.

The novel begins in 1827. Tula's mother, who twice made the mistake of marrying for love, is desperate to prevent her thirteen-year-old daughter from taking a similar path. Mam's motivations are clear-cut. A wealthy connection through Tula is the family's only hope for propping up their shaky economic status. In 19th-century colonial Cuba, arranged marriages are the social norm, but Tula's mother worries that a girl who buries her nose in books will not attract the right kind of husband – a rich one. Who is Tula? Margarita Engle is acclaimed for novels in verse that bring to life history's outliers, young men and women from previous centuries who thought and acted in surprisingly modern ways, and Tula stands tall among them. She's based on Gertrudis Gmez de Avellaneda, a Cuban poet who championed liberty for all humans and

wrote *Sab*, an abolitionist novel, the first of its kind in Spanish. *Sab* predated *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the Harriet Beecher Stowe classic, by eleven years. Avellaneda's importance as an abolitionist and feminist writer is not widely known in English-speaking America. *The Lightning Dreamer* corrects this oversight and imagines Avellaneda's formative years, just as she began to discover the life-changing force of poetry. Marriageability is not the only issue that arises from Tula's penchant for reading. She happens upon the forbidden poetry of José Martí - a Heredia, whose sharp observations awaken Tula's passion for justice. In colonial Cuba, injustice is everywhere. Her eyes take in the plight of African slaves, biracial babies abandoned to the convent, lovers kept apart by miscegenation taboos, and girls like herself, doomed to business arrangements thinly masquerading as marriages. Tula expresses her ardor for justice through poetry, which she burns to keep her mother from discovering. When Tula refuses the marriage that her grandfather arranges, she must rise to meet a string of new challenges. The inheritance is lost and her family is condemned to relative poverty. For a while, Tula finds refuge in a storyteller's community, where she becomes entangled in an unrequited love. She moves away from the countryside to Havana, where she supports herself through tutoring. In 1836, her brother, Manuel, warns her that their mother is cooking up another arranged match. Tula flees for Spain, expecting to find greater social and creative freedom there. *The Lightning Dreamer* is written in free verse and is voiced through multiple characters. Tula is the most frequent speaker. Short segments provide other characters' point of view. A partial list includes Tula's mother; Manuel; Caridad, the freed slave who works for the family; the nuns who offer Tula space to read and write in peace; and Sab. Each character speaks in first person. I imagine them as a series of stage players delivering brief and sometimes prejudicial monologues reflecting on Tula's choices. This approach perfectly suits the fictionalized treatment of a young poet. The language is spare and often stunning, capturing vivid images and profound interiority.

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