

Letters from Cuba (2020) - Ruthie Behar

Curriculum Opportunities created by Dr. Rose Reissman-Founder of the Ditmas Writing Institute

Project Based learning opportunities for classes who study this in 12-16 sessions as a class or for independent readers.

It is highly recommended that the book be studied in tandem with *Lucky Broken Girl*, Behar's 2017 work. This will make for a rich multicultural author study and also give NYC students insights into Queens life circa the 1960's to compare with Cuban life circa 1938 depicted here.

This rich fiction book, is an epistolary novel steeped in the real life experiences and values of Behar's grandmother who fled Poland to Cuba in the 1930's and then also fled Cuba to NYC in the late 1950's. It can be connected with: Hallmark of Literacy Essential Questions, Culturally Responsive Education, Social and Emotional Learning, Integrated Language Arts, Education for Social Justice, Student Leadership, Student Personal Development and other content. These projects listed below align with CCSS and represent a finite menu of opportunities. Teachers or independent student readers can select those projects which have the most appeal or direct connection to the curriculum or their prior experiences as readers.

1. The Epistolary Novel as a genre. (Craft) Students will immediately become aware of the craft genre Behar has selected from her choice of title "Letters from Cuba" as well as the structure of the each chapter which is comprised of a letter and often a geographic setting and a date.
 - a. Students can create a beautiful timeline and mapping of the work by using border oak tag and writing chapter letter dates with a geographic map or national emblem sign. If desired they can also include a quote and a url link or printout of an illustration.
 - b. The letters are all to Malka, who is the younger sister of Esther, the intrepid protagonist of the story. While the readers learn that letters are being receipted by Esther's father from her mother, there are no letters from Malka reacting to what Esther says. Students could develop a text for actual letters Malka might write in response to Esther. They can pick out ten particularly touching

- letters from the book and react in epistolary letter format to these from the perspective of Malka the younger sister or even from the perspective of Esther's mother in Poland.
- c. At the end of the novel we learn that Esther who has been saving these letters to share with Malka when she actually arrives in Cuba, does manage to share them in person with her younger sister. Students might want to develop a prose chapter or a dialogue between the two sisters as these "kept" letters are finally shared.
 - d. Obviously the father has also been writing seriously to Esther's mother and she has written as she was able to him. What were the contents of these letters? Students can focus in particular on the parents sharing the consequences of growing legislation against Jews in conquered Austria and father's experiences with the bullying and beating he endures by Eduardo.
 - e. Obviously Behar could easily have told the same narrative using conventional prose storytelling. Students can react to this Essential Question: To what extent is epistolary storytelling as effective as prose storytelling or is it much less effective? There is no single correct answer. Defend your subjective response with at least three details or opinions supporting your argument.
 - f. Students who enjoy creative writing can be challenged to transform 2 to 3 of the letters into a prose narrative, a dialogue or even a blank verse narrative. Blank verse novels are commonly used in the middle school grades, so that choice might appeal to students because of the familiarity they have with genre. In addition, many students may also be familiar and be avid readers of graphic narratives. These students might choose to "draw" or storyboard the first Govorovo letter of the book as a graphic narrative. While this middle school book has a lovely cover by John Parra, it does not show any depiction of Esther or other characters, so it will lend itself well to student graphic artist imaginations.
 - g. There are many recognized epistolary novels which can serve as a compare and contrast independent reading experience for this book. **Among them are:**

Ttyl- Lauren Miracle (Internet Girls #1)

P.S. Longer Letter Later-(Elizabeth and Tara*Starr, #1)-Paula Danziger, Ann M. Martin

Anastasia: The Last Grand Duchess, Russia 1914-Carolyn Meyer
Code Name Verity-Elizabeth Wein

Peace, Locomotion-Jacqueline Woodson

The Princess Diaries (The Princess Diaries, #1)-Meg Cabot

Diary of a Wimpy Kid- entire series- Jeff Kinley

Letters from Johnny- Wayne Ng

Jahanara: Princess of Princesses, India, 1627-Kathryn Lasky

Dear Mr. Henshaw- Beverly Cleary

Regarding the Fountain: A Tale, in Letters of Liars and Leaks-Kate Klise and M. Sarah Klise

Middle School is Worse Than Meatloaf: A Year Told Through Stuff-Jennifer L. Holm and Elicia Castaldi

Same Sun Here- Silas House, Neela Vaswani, Hilary Schenker

Students can write a review of these books as narratives and the extent to which the use of the epistolary craft format furthers their success and readability. They can also compare and contrast the use of epistolary format by these authors with the date and geographic details that Ruthie Behar includes in her work.

2. Connecting Texts to History, Current Events and Contemporary Selves. (Research- cross disciplinary- learning through the arts)
Initially, even in our diverse society situating a class or individual reader with a book for intense study that is set in 1938 and focuses on a Jewish refugee from Poland who has fled to Cuba, would seem to be very disconnected from 21st century diverse students. Yet as the book is read by students, it becomes obvious that Esther the 12 year

old refugee girl separated from her mother and siblings in Poland, is a character that connects to history, current events and student lives. Challenge students as they read the work to list history events, topics or themes they are studying which they see can be connected to those depicted during the months of 1938 covered in the narrative. Among the themes which resonate ancient civilization and American History themes are: social justice, racial equity, slavery to freedom, hate crimes, discrimination, protest, union organizing, refugee treatment, labor laws for child labor, entrepreneurial intellectual property rights, genocide, cultural affirmation, cultural rites/rituals, object stories, foods as history, cultural arts and international reaction.

Challenge students to identify at least two social/community concerns that Esther and her father encounter in Cuba. Have them write about these concerns and explain why they reflect social studies issues (i.e. local laws, social/community attitudes/biases, cultural intergroup interactions). Ask that they detail what these issues are and describe how these external social studies issues impact on Esther and her father's lives. Then challenge the students to make explicit connections to these issues and the curricula of their current or past year Social Studies/History course. Suggest that they develop in pairs or teams, a poster or poster board or artifact construct that graphically presents the similarities/commonalities between the events of this 20th century story and the contents of current events or a specific Social Studies content studied. The completed constructs can be part of an onsite Literary Expo or an on school website exhibited collection of images. This type of project opportunity allows students to use their visual/tactile and print/verbal talents to share key connections between the novel 1938 Cuba setting and other historical time periods.

3. Students as Citizens Now- (Essential Questions- Discussions- Social Action- Leadership Training- Family Partnership, Social and Emotional Learning, Speaking and Listening Culturally Responsive Teaching) The 21st Century Hallmarks of Literacy Initiative suggests that students focus on key questions or issues within the fiction and nonfiction literature they study. The focus of such discussions are not to have the students identify a single correct response to the

question, but rather as is necessary in this increasingly complex world examine the dynamics and the perspectives of the questions. In that spirit, Letters from Cuba- offers many essential questions, the teacher can infuse before the group/individual student reading and after to gauge the extent to which the reading shifted attitudes. In addition, a student or adult response to these questions will to some extent be affected by culture and other demographic background factors.

Among the key questions raised by this work are:

- a. To what extent should a young person who is still a legal child, take on or be allowed by a caring parent to assume adult responsibilities and risks? Should a child, no matter what the economic circumstances or political dangers, be allowed to engage as an adult to support a family mission? There is no clear cut answer here. How do you react to this question? Why would you react in that way? If there were a service or a task that you could do for your family, but which is considered “adult,” should you be allowed to do it or stopped because you are a child? Explain the feelings or opinions which support your response.
- b. To what extent do you feel that you as a young person can or should bring adults who differ in values or perspectives together? For example, should adults be invited to share one another’s different cultural festivals or rituals for the purpose of learning about one another? In what ways could that type of interaction be positive? Why or why not?
- c. If you develop a product of your own such as a technology, jewelry, writing, art or other construct, should you as a young person be okay with receipting some form of payment but not name credit for your work? Why yes or why not? If you are paid or compensated for your work which is a representation of your talents, do you need to be credited as a creator/owner in name for your work if you are a minor, why or why not?
- d. To what extent if any, should a country help its refugees get jobs or education opportunities, if the country has citizens who are adults and their families who do not have sufficient income or educational opportunities? Explain your perspective on either side of the question.

Students can select any one of these essential questions. They can develop a short “soapbox” 90 second maximum response to the questions which can be presented from an actual soapbox podium in an actual school classroom or at an assembly. The presentations can also be livestreamed or filmed for the school website. Another way to broaden the response for this student based self- expression is to use flipgrid to record the presentations with the students being able to edit them. This online recording allows for reaction also online among different school classes to a relevant age sensitive, essential question plus allows for distanced and allowed access adults and other schools to join the essential issue conversation. This realizes the goals of the 21st Century Hallmark of Literacy.

If desired, students can also pose the chosen question to their parents or adult neighbors and with permission from them record as audio files or transcribe their responses. This will add an adult generation/family response to the questions plus nicely authenticate true family partnership which is so fitting for the theme of this book.

4. Esther as a Character Model- (Reading character analysis, reflective writing- social and emotional learning- self-concept- personal development- leadership development- family connections)
Since the letters which comprise this book are entirely those authored by Esther, it is through reading them that students can identify character traits that Esther displays and nurtures. Begin this project by challenging the students to identify positive character traits they have or those which they admire and wish to develop themselves. Among those which might be elicited are: bravery, family connectedness, friendly, loyalty, sincerity, truthfulness (integrity), courage, persistence, perseverance, dedication to goals, resilience, and optimism.

Ask the students to read through the book with an focus on identifying at least 8 character traits that Esther has which are revealed in her letters to

Malka. For each trait, the students identify, require them to include at least two specific page text references to the trait identified. After the students develop their lists of traits, engage them in developing a way to present these Esther character traits which is an artifact or a costume or creation of a 3 or 2D representation that conveys the key textual imagination. This might include a video with the character of Esther coming live through a conversation or a video commercial for the book.

This type of analysis of the text project with a possible arts or digital project outcome broadens the potential engagement of visual and of interpersonal learners in the text beyond the already engaged text /print readers.

5. Author Study- (Reading across multiple texts- author study literary analysis) Middle school students have the opportunity to do a two work author study using the Lucky Broken Girl published by Ruthie Behar in 2017 in conjunction with Letters from Cuba. The stories- although focused on different locations are both solidly based on Behar's personal life. Letters from Cuba focuses on her actual grandmother's experiences as a child refugee from 1938 Poland to the then safety offered by 1938 multicultural Cuba. Students can focus for their comparative book study project on any single or more connections between the two books.
 - a. Compare and contrast how the Esther character feels about Cuba as her new home, versus how the grandmother in Lucky Broken Girl feels about Queens, NY. What might account for the difference in feelings?
 - b. In what ways do the key protagonist characters, Esther in Letters from Cuba and Ruthie in Lucky Broken Girl share character traits? Which traits do they not share? Would Esther as a grown up years later in Queens be proud of her granddaughter Ruthie? What information does the author Ruthie Behar provide through her back notes to this book that help the readers understand the author's purpose for writing Letters as compared to the purpose for her first book Lucky Broken Girl? Do the purposes align or are they very different? Explain.
 - c. In what ways do Cuban culture and Jewish culture play a key role in both books? Explain how both Cuban and Jewish culture figure in both works through at least 3 examples from each work. Would

- the stories with their young protagonists be very different if the protagonists were from other cultural backgrounds? Would the stories work as well as they do without the pop culture and history/news references in each story? Why yes or why not?
- d. Now that you as a reader have read both books which appeals to you the most? Which is the story or character that stays with you? Why? Is there any characters from Letters from Cuba who should naturally be the next focus of Ruthie Behar's next work for Middle school readers? Choose one character and write a proposal or request letter to the author explaining why you as a reader would like to learn more about this character. Propose a follow up story or an origin story for this character you would love to read.

6. Students as Digital Creators and Artistic Designers- (Writing using an anchor text- analyzing multisensory texts, reading across digital and text platforms, social and emotional learning, reflective writing, UDL) When a middle school and beyond book is as rich as this one is in multisensory descriptions as is this work and as emotionally engaging, students can use their talents to create digital and artistic 3D or 2D artifacts and products. Such products use the text of Letters from Cuba as an anchor for the student owned products. Not only will this activity allow the students to "reflect" and to "react" to Behar's narrative, but it will allow them to become "active" readers and join the creative circle of artists in various media responding to issues and ideas.

Allow students to choose among these options or perhaps suggest another with an artistic product that they identify to develop.

Reader artistic/digital product inspired by Letters from Cuba:

- a. Create using storyboards, canvas, or cardboard –a scene as described in the books from Agramonte or Havana, Cuba. To do so, take notes on exterior vegetation and structures from at least 3 to 4 chapters of the book. Using specific page citations, list: colors, structures, vegetation, interior objects, and more. Be prepared to model with clay/play dough or some other material, objects such as the drums or materials such as cloths or the

sewing machines, needles which are key to the story. Use and acrylic or watercolor paint food containers and packaging to represent the scenes and objects that are integral to the Letters from Cuba story. If you are creating a Red Grooms style cardboard representation of the landscape of Agramonte or Havana, glue the scenery constructs and DIY (do it yourself models) onto a Grey or other neutral color, hard paperboard sheet- (for example measuring 250x250MM). These sheets are under 7.50 each and most probably the school custodian or arts educator has some that can be cut down already available.

Once the scene construct has been completed, have the single student or the students as a team explain the process they used to design and realize/transfer the author's descriptions to this 3 D construct and explain how the construct makes the text come alive. Let them develop signage as part of an onsite or virtual expo to celebrate this book. Take photos of the projects for outside hall display plus the school website.

- b. This work was publicized by a short book trailer

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=F28116T79c&feature=share>.

While the trailer does introduce the themes and protagonist of the book, it does not really succeed as an effective advertisement to get students not familiar with Behar's work to read it. Challenge the students using their experiences with other book trailers and movie trailers to come up on their own with a book trailer that will generate independent student selection of this book. Encourage them to use their live video or animation (scratch) or canva skills to create a trailer. Do have them anchor it to the key themes of the book and make it engaging enough for their peer viewers so they want to actually read the book. After the trailers are finished, screen them for the class and allow them to react to peer creations. Have the school librarian test the peer reaction to them as well. Post the book trailers online on the school website and of course screen them for the Letters from Cuba expo onsite or online.

- c. Many wonderful middle school stories are retold or reiterated as grade and age appropriate picture books. Challenge middle school students to consider how the richly detailed story of Esther and her

owning her design talents to raise money for her family's steamship tickets to Cuba, can be told in a way that younger children ages 4-6 can be exposed to this story. Have a discussion with student creators to identify what aspects of the story are best suited to retelling it as a story filled with pictures and a powerful simple narrative. List the ideas and focus the students generate. Remind the teams or pairs of students who choose this option, that a children's picture book often have deep messages and themes but also generally are half filled with illustrations. These illustrations must also be powerful enough to tell the story through their pictures accompanied by the words.

In 2022, Ruthie Behar published a picture book *Tia Fortuna's New Home* with illustrations by Devon Horzwarth (Knopf). The book itself can be shared with the perspective picture book adaptors and they can be facilitated to identifying the following key picture book elements which they as a team (perhaps with one artist member) will produce using the middle school Behar text:

- a. Cover Design emphasizing key theme and craft choices of Behar.
- b. Selection of a single or two at most key narrative threads to tell in a way younger peers ages 4-6 will appreciate.
- c. Development separately at first of the narrative retold in a picture book age and grade appropriate manner by a student writer or team of writers.
- d. Development separately by the student artist or artists of a series of images that reflect the key narrative of the story.
- e. After the initial separate work of development, the artist and the writer teams need to meet collaboratively to see what each has designed. With these initial ideas in tow, they can then see how the material can be blended into a picture book the target audience will enjoy. At this point, the teacher and the school librarian or reading specialist can lend ideas for fine tuning the product the students are creating. If the school is a K-6 or K-8, the student finished products can actually be read by the creative team to these classes with these target younger peers providing

- feedback. The products of the teams should be “pdf” ed and posted on the school site, plus if possible printed as actual saddle stitched paperbacks on magazine glossy paper. Beyond sharing them with the students who worked together to do this project, the books could be sold as fundraisers for additional student literary activities.
- f. We live in an era where audio books are often the choice of many adult readers and used extensively in schools to train multiple reading skills (listening, focusing on vocabulary, sequencing). Audio passages are even part of certain reading tests and adult job skills tests. Students can be challenged to choose a single letter from the book which they connected with on a personal level. They can be recorded as a podcast and as an introduction the students can provide written to accompany the posting of the podcast explanation of how that particular letter touched them as readers and as persons. Obviously the podcast can be posted and family and peers can be sent the link to share. It is important to emphasize that there is a vast commercial career and industry which enables audio recordings. This is a growing field and students who either enjoy recording per se as voice actors or the process of recording in term of the technology tools, may well want to start taking such electives in high school and beyond.
- g. Paper-engineering the book- several letters at a time. One of the most delightful and most accessible projects, students can develop with a fairly quick and demonstrable product and reading comprehension outcomes- is a collaborative class paper-engineered book adaptation. Each student or a team of students is assigned a set number of pages from the book to render as at least one to two separate paper engineered pages. The key to this emerging as a project that students, families and staff can enjoy as a student owned literacy rich environment , is the use of standard sized color pocket folders with the paper engineer slits being cut in the mid-seam of the folder, Uniform paper engineer materials and if not a file folder with pockets a large piece of heavy cardstock- same color best- 11 or 12inches by 17 or more inches makes for a display that by it uniform size allows the different student visual and textual renditions of the

pages shine. In addition, this project has a lovely collaborative jigsaw puzzle, bonding sensibility. Each team or person is given an equitable share of the pages in Lucky Broken Girl -233 in the text so if you have 30 students 8 or under student or 15 teams of 2 about 16 per team. The teacher can demonstrate and beyond the separate same sized paper sheets of cardstock or folders standard art supplies such as markers, scissors, glue, glue stickers, glitter, colored construction paper and dyi cloth, feathers, ribbon, threads (given dress design) will do.

If students enjoying learning from a professional artist introduce them to Matthew Reinhart a published pop up artist-

<https://www.sciencefriday.com/educational-resources/pop-up-book-engineering/>.

The designed paper engineering pages will also include a short paragraph detailing how the artists decided to paper engineer the Letters from Cuba pages.

Beyond the deep analysis of the text needed to render a paper engineered version of the letters, the letter epistolary genre lends itself wonderfully to this project which also enhances students working as a team to “render” the text into 3D.