

TEACHER GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK

By the author of 2021 Pura Belpré Honor Book *The Total Eclipse of Nestor Lopez*, a sweeping, emotional middle grade historical novel about a twelve-year-old boy who leaves his family in Cuba to immigrate to the U.S. by himself, based on the author's family history.

"I don't remember. Tell me everything, Pepito. Tell me about Cuba."

When the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 solidifies Fidel Castro's power in Cuba, twelve-year-old Cumba's family makes the difficult decision to send him to Florida alone. Faced with the prospect of living in another country by himself, Cumba tries to remember the sound of his father's clarinet, the smell of his mother's lavender perfume.

Life in the United States presents a whole new set of challenges. Lost in a sea of English speakers, Cumba has to navigate a new city, a new school, and new freedom all on his own. With each day, Cumba feels more confident in his new surroundings, but he continues to wonder: Will his family ever be whole again? Or will they remain just out of reach, ninety miles across the sea?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Bay of Pigs invasion and Castro's rise to power

In January 1959, Fidel Castro overthrew dictator Fulgencio Batista and assumed power in Cuba. Arrests, torture, and executions began immediately. By May 1959, 600 people linked to Batista's government had been put to death. Castro suspended elections and it was clear he planned to remain in power despite pushback from the Cuban people. By October 1959, small uprisings began to occur in an attempt to remove Castro from power, but they had little effect. The United States severed all economic and diplomatic relations with Cuba. On April 17, 1961 1,500 Cuban exiles, financed by the CIA, staged an unsuccessful invasion at the Bay of Pigs. It was the last large-scale attempt to overthrow the Castro regime.

Operation Pedro Pan

Operation Pedro Pan was a clandestine mass exodus of over 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban minors aged 6 to 18 to the United States between 1960 and 1962. They were sent by their parents who had heard rumors of the Castro regime's intention to terminate parental rights and place children in communist indoctrination centers. Father Bryan O. Walsh of the Catholic Welfare Bureau organized the program to provide air transportation for children between Cuba and the United States. It operated covertly out of fear that it would be viewed as an anti-Castro political enterprise.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Have students read the information about the Bay of Pigs invasion at <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/bay-of-pigs-invasion> and answer the following questions.

1. What was the goal of the Bay of Pigs invasion?
2. What was the result of the Bay of Pigs invasion?

Now read the first two pages of Cuba in My Pocket and answer the following questions.

1. How does Cumba's family feel about the Bay of Pigs invasion?
2. How was his family affected by the invasion?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. After reading chapter 1, what are three character traits that you think Cumba has? What text examples support your chosen traits?
2. On page 5, Pepito exclaims, "Ay caramba! La caja de muertos!" If you don't speak Spanish, what context clues are there to help you figure out what he said?
3. Based on what you read in chapter 2, what is the purpose of the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution? How do you think that would affect how neighbors treat each other?
4. In chapter 4, we meet el sastre Schneider, the tailor and are given clues to his identity. Who do you think he is and what is his background? What clues in the chapter give you that information?
5. In chapter 6, we learn that Papi worked for the previous Cuban dictator Batista while Abuelo protested against Batista. How do you think Cumba's family felt about this?
6. Try your hand at AFDF and make a list of 5 things that changed in Cumba's life and in his friends' lives before and after Fidel took power. Look at chapter 7 for hints.
7. By the end of chapter 12, Cumba is in the United States and has already realized some differences and similarities between Cuba and the US. What are some of the things he's noticed?
8. In chapter 15, why do you think the memory of being caught in a riptide comes to Cumba's mind on his first day of school in the United States?
9. Prima Benita teaches Cumba that the most important phrase he needs to know in English for school is "May I go to the bathroom?" What phrase do you think is most important for someone to know at your school?
10. In chapter 17, Valeria, Alejandro, and Cumba all wish that Fidel Castro had made it into the baseball major leagues. Why do you think they feel that way?
11. At the end of chapter 28, Cumba realizes he forgot to put the caja de muertos in his pocket like he always does. Why do you think he forgot?
12. When Cumba writes a letter to Pepito on page 247, does he completely tell the truth? Why might he be bending the facts?
13. How is Cumba and Serapio being considered 'Cuban ambassadors' at school similar to stereotypes that are often applied to groups of people?
14. How does Cumba's opinion of bad luck and the caja de muertos change over the course of the book?

EXTENSION RESPONSES

Select one of the following quotes from *Cuba in My Pocket*. Write an extended response explaining whether you agree or disagree with the opinion presented in the quote.

Be sure to:

- Clearly state your central idea
- Organize your writing
- Develop your writing in detail
- Choose your words carefully
- Use correct spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar

1. You never really leave. You never really escape.... Your heart will always be in Cuba.
2. Sometimes stories in books aren't as fun in real life.
3. Maybe you have to forget where you come from to bear being in a new place.
4. A victory for one of us is a victory for all of us.
5. Nobody likes oatmeal.
6. It's hard to argue with hopeful people.

FOR FURTHER READING

Ada, Alma Flor, et al. *Island Treasures: Growing Up in Cuba*. Bind-Up, Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2015.

Behar, Ruth. *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba* by Ruth Behar (2007-11-01). Rutgers University Press, 2021.

---. *Letters from Cuba*. Nancy Paulsen Books, 2020.

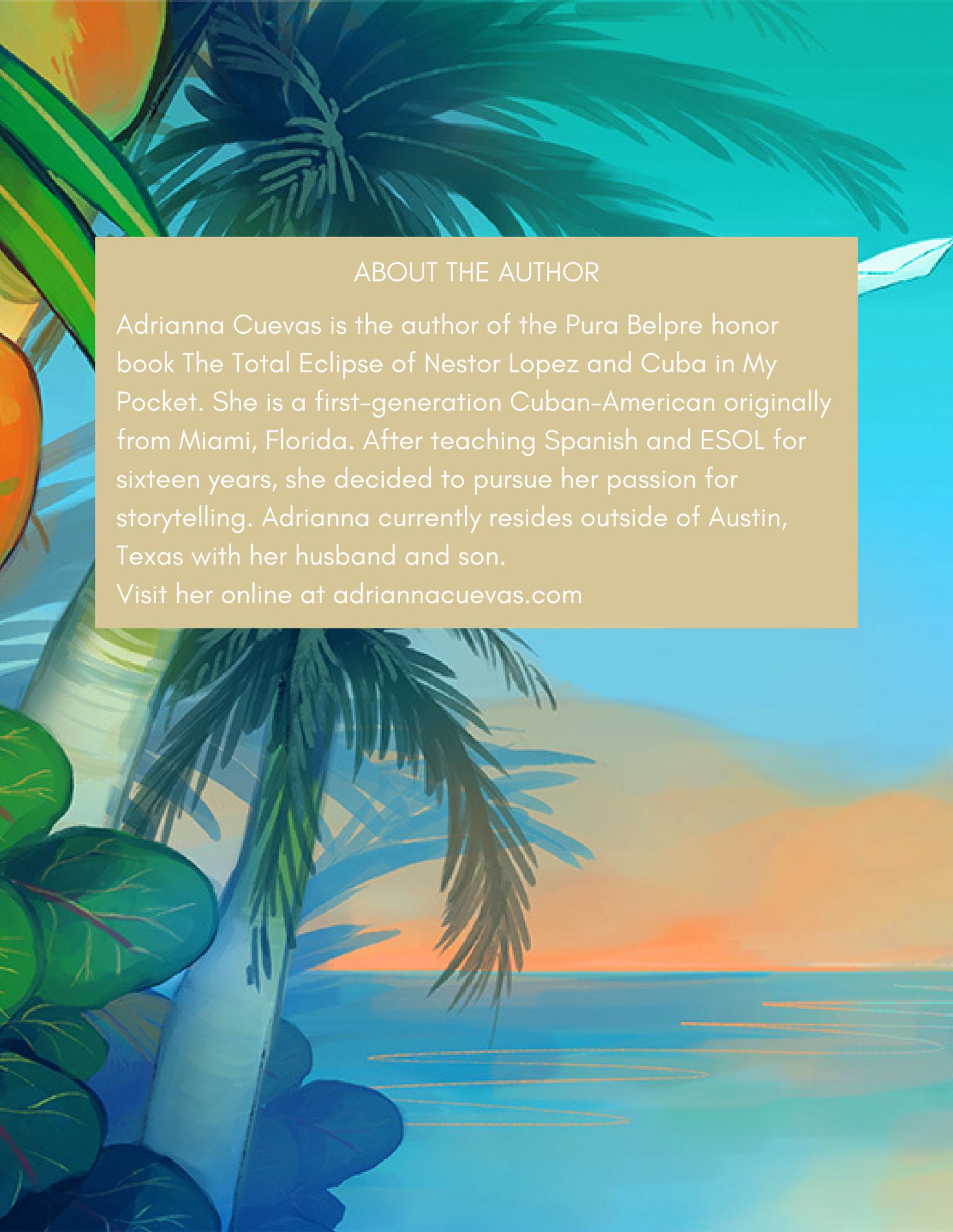
Engle, Margarita. *Tropical Secrets*. Reprint, Square Fish, 2017.

Engle, Margarita, and Edel Rodriguez. *Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings: A Memoir*. Reprint, Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2016.

Flores-Galbis, Enrique. *90 Miles to Havana*. Reprint, Square Fish, 2012.

Gonzalez, Christina. *The Red Umbrella*. Reissue, Yearling, 2011.

Osa, Nancy. *Cuba 15 (Random House Reader's Circle)*. Reprint, Ember, 2005.

A vibrant tropical sunset scene with palm trees and a white envelope icon in the top right corner. The background features a gradient from deep blue to bright orange, with silhouettes of palm trees and a white envelope icon in the top right corner.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adrianna Cuevas is the author of the Pura Belpre honor book *The Total Eclipse of Nestor Lopez and Cuba in My Pocket*. She is a first-generation Cuban-American originally from Miami, Florida. After teaching Spanish and ESOL for sixteen years, she decided to pursue her passion for storytelling. Adrianna currently resides outside of Austin, Texas with her husband and son.

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