

THE BIG PICTURE

The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano

by Margarita Engle; illustrated by Sean Qualls

Many young readers may not know of Juan Francisco Manzano before picking up Margarita Engle's portrayal of the nineteenth-century Cuban poet's life, but this gripping story of his struggle for freedom will ensure that they never forget him. Before he was a famous poet, Manzano was born to slaves and treated as a pet by his mother's owner, Doña Beatriz, who encouraged his remarkable memory for opera and verse, called him "the child of my old age," and, as a baptism gift, freed his parents. Juan was to remain a slave only as long as Beatriz lived, but upon her death his ownership was transferred to a cruel, abusive new owner, La Marquesa de Prado Ameno. La Marquesa viewed Juan's recitations and love for verse as hateful, locking him in the cellar or having him whipped for the slightest transgression. Over time she abused him to the brink of death, but Juan's anguish-filled story ends here in triumph, when he escapes into the night on horseback. For details on Manzano's life after his escape and for samples of his poetry, readers can turn to the book's end matter, which includes a historical note, a short list of sources, and several translated poems.

Aside from this brief historical note, however, the usual factual listing of events, photographs, timelines, and quotes are not part of this biography. Engle instead depicts Manzano's life, appropriately, through poetry, in a free-verse sequence similar to the form of Marilyn Nelson's widely lauded *Carver* (BCCB 9/01) and *Fortune's Bones* (BCCB 2/05). The poems alternate between Juan's viewpoint and the viewpoints of his mother and father, owners, and overseer, among others. The varying perspectives, while not always distinctly individuated, help layer tension and depth into the story, depicting mental and physical terrors while also sketching out the context of flawed social systems, fear, and twisted logic that surrounded slavery's existence. Rather than merely representing facts, the portrayal steadily builds emotion and drama as the text progresses, drawing information from Manzano's autobiography and peering into the minds of contemporaries whose motivations and emotions can only be imagined. Engle creates immediacy and portrays hauntingly memorable characters, especially in La Marquesa, whose twisted feelings toward Juan are especially chilling ("How strangely he seems to have taken/ my sanity/ as if he were the master/ and I the slave/ All my thoughts are of punishment/ but after nine days . . . I almost apologize . . . I have allowed him to become/ the only person that matters/ in this, my strange life").

The poems are lyrical and spare, seamlessly incorporating Spanish vocabulary; each verse is packed with intense emotion, often lending striking insight

into both Juan's plight and the world in which he lives. The poems point out that Juan is not the only one without freedom, and that the rich, "The ghostly ladies masked and hidden/ inside their casings of eggshell-and-rice powder/ so no one can tell/ if they are dark too," are also prisoners within the system they have helped to perpetuate. Juan is able to rise above his situation through his compositions ("My mind is a brush made of feathers/ painting pictures of words"); these feathers make flying free possible for Juan when it will never be a possibility for those under whom he is oppressed.

Somber and affecting black-and-white illustrations by Sean Qualls accompany the poems, featuring thickly brushed paint, downcast, shadow-filled faces, and stark compositions. The artwork complements and enhances the poetry throughout—for instance, a portrait of a tormented Juan kneeling in prayer before the pale, regal La Marquesa, who sits with closed, shadowed eyes on a throne-like chair, strikes a perfect tonal chord. Symbolic imagery and repeated themes, such as wings, butterflies, bones, and silhouetted forms, heighten emotion and tie the art to the text throughout.

Together, Engle and Qualls create a memorable and powerful depiction of Manzano's remarkable life. The moving poetry and finely crafted story will draw readers in and leave them in tears and in awe.

Maggie Hommel, Reviewer



NEW BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

ABBOTT, TONY *Firegirl*. Little, 2006 [160p]

ISBN 0-316-01171-1 \$15.99

Reviewed from galleys

R* Gr. 6-9

Tom's a normal seventh-grader, negotiating a slightly prickly stage in his long friendship with Jeff and yearning from afar after glamorous classmate Courtney Zisky, whom he rescues again and again in elaborate fantasy scenarios. The arrival of new girl Jessica Feeney, however, changes everything: Jessica, who is attending a local hospital for treatment, has been badly burned by a fire, and her terrible disfigurement shocks the class into confusion. This isn't the usual book about adjustment to difference; instead, Abbott brilliantly explores the kids' struggle to manage this intrusion of abnormality into their lives, with tactics ranging from blaming (an elaborate rumor develops wherein Jessica herself set the fire and killed an angelic younger sister in the process, so she's now on the run from the police) to wary avoidance (Tom's friend Jeff refuses to take Jessica's hand during a class prayer). Jeff is clearly demonizing Jessica as a response to his own troubled family situation, but he's just the extreme edge of the general discomfort: even Tom, who rejects the blind suspicion of the herd, is uneasy in his interactions with Jessica, overwhelmed by the momentous horror of her experience ("It was too much to understand, too much to get") and her depersonalized appearance. The book allows