

AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO

LETTERS FROM CUBA

RUTH BEHAR
AUTHOR OF **LUCKY BROKEN GIRL**

Dear Educator,

The situation is getting dire for Jews in Poland on the eve of World War II. Esther's father has fled to Cuba, and she is the first one to join him. It's heartbreaking to be separated from her beloved sister, so Esther promises to write down everything that happens until they're reunited. And she does, recording both the good—the kindness of the Cuban people and her discovery of a valuable hidden talent—and the bad: the fact that Nazism has found a foothold even in Cuba. Esther's evocative letters are full of her appreciation for life and reveal a resourceful, determined girl with a rare ability to bring people together, all the while striving to get the rest of their family out of Poland before it's too late. Based on Ruth Behar's family history, *Letters from Cuba* is a compelling story that celebrates the resilience of the human spirit in the most challenging times.

This educator's guide is aligned to Common Core State Standards for sixth grade, but can be applied to similar CCSS in other grades. Use this six-week curriculum however you see fit, either as a roadmap for a comprehensive unit or to supplement an already existing language arts curriculum. A range of discussion questions on immigration, family, community, friendship, and the healing power of art and literature, provides students with many ways to access the book and acquire skills and concepts. Suggested activities allow students to delve into Cuban and American history, reflect on special books, and learn about diverse immigrant experiences and the meaning of cultural heritage. There are also opportunities for students to see themselves reflected in Esther's story and open up about their own vulnerability and losses. Described as "both necessary and kind," we invite you to immerse your students in a story that offers unforgettable lessons on overcoming hardship and finding one's luck in the worst of circumstances.

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This discussion guide and unit were co-developed by Elizabeth Tacke and Ryan McCarty. Elizabeth currently works with pre-service teachers in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Previously she taught as a seventh and eighth grade English teacher in Oakland, California. She has several years of teaching experience with reading intervention, and she makes it a point to provide literature-rich content and a focus on writing in all of her teaching. Ryan McCarty is currently working in post-secondary literacy and composition. He spent several years teaching secondary English in the Bronx, where he developed an interest in finding ways to help multilingual students draw on the rich language resources they bring to the classroom.

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PRE-READING ACTIVITIES



1. Four Corners Activity (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.4)

- a. Teachers use a number of complex thought statements to activate student schema and get them thinking about the novel’s central themes. Students respond first in writing, before engaging in a structured conversation with their peers. These statements are meant to spark conversation. Students are “forced” to make a choice; there is no middle ground.
- b. Suggested Statements:
 - i. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.—Martin Luther King Jr.
 - ii. Anyone at any age has the power to resist hatred and violence.
 - iii. People working together can overcome any obstacle.
 - iv. Every country should welcome immigrants with open arms.
 - v. Hatred comes from a fear of difference and change.
 - vi. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.—George Santayana
- c. Students should think about each statement and decide whether they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Teachers are encouraged to have students independently write their responses first.
- d. The teacher will set up in each corner of the classroom an agree, disagree, strongly agree, strongly disagree sign. The teacher reads aloud each statement, and students travel to the corner that matches their stance. Students are called on to rationalize and give context for their reasoning. They can be persuaded by others and are free to change their position.

2. Book Tour (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2)

- a. Teachers prepare a number of activities to activate schema, including asking students to engage in pre-reading freewrites, to make predictions, and to analyze paratextual information.
- b. Discussion Guide Pre Reading: This novel takes place in the late 1930s in Cuba. It is about a twelve-year-old Jewish girl who leaves Poland to join her father in Cuba. Make some predictions: What is going on in the late 1930s in Poland?

PREDICTIONS: I think this book will be about _____ because...	TEXT EVIDENCE: (Insert text evidence). This piece of text evidence supports my prediction because...
Identify one potential theme the novel may address based off of your book tour, our four corners activity, or the book synopsis: I think a major theme of this book will be _____ because...	



TEACHER'S GUIDE: USING SUPPLEMENTARY TEXTS

Using Supplementary Texts

There are many texts that describe the plight of children fleeing oppression. These texts provide the opportunity to compare and contrast those experiences and add to student knowledge of the historical context in *Letters from Cuba*.

Supplementary texts	Guiding Questions	Historical Context
<i>Tropical Secrets: Holocaust Refugees in Cuba</i> , Margarita Engle	How do children make sense of the violence of their parents' worlds?	The tragedy of the <i>St. Louis</i> ; Nazi collaborators in Cuba
<i>Refugee</i> , Alan Gratz	What experiences of struggle have child refugees shared across time?	The tragedy of the <i>St. Louis</i> ; Cuban refugees in the 1990s; Syrian refugees fleeing the civil war
<i>Letters from Rifka</i> , Karen Hesse	How do authors use books about writing letters to teach us about the personal experiences of refugees?	Jewish refugees in America
<i>Number the Stars</i> , Lois Lowry	How have communities banded together to protect their Jewish neighbors?	The escape of thousands of Jewish families from Denmark, aided by their friends and neighbors
<i>Making It Home: Real-Life Stories by Children Forced to Flee</i> , Beverley Naidoo	How do contemporary children experience their lives as refugees?	Present-day accounts by child refugees
<i>Lucky Broken Girl</i> , Ruth Behar	How do immigrants learn to navigate their new countries and define what home means?	Experiences of Jewish-Cuban immigrants to New York in the 1960s

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS LINKED TO CCSS GRADE 6

Govorovo, December 2, 1937 (preface)

1. Why are Esther's mother and her sister, Malka, treated differently by people in Poland than Esther and her brothers? What does it mean that her mother and Malka can "pass" for Polish?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9

On Board the Ship to Cuba, January 22, 1938 (1)

1. Why does Esther write letters to Malka even if she can't send them? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6
2. In Rotterdam, Esther meets an old couple speaking Yiddish. They say, "It's a shame we are being forced out of our home" (4). They explain that they don't want to leave Poland because they have lived in Poland their whole lives and even buried their ancestors there. Why are Jewish people like Esther's papa, and this old couple, leaving Poland in the late 1930s? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9
3. On board the ship, Esther says, "I am crossing the ocean. But it feels as if the ocean is crossing me" (5). What does Esther mean by this phrase? What might the ocean symbolize (represent) about her feelings and the journey? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4

On Board the Ship to Cuba, January 26, 1938 (6)

1. While talking with the other passengers, Esther starts to wonder why “some people are rich and others poor” (7). What made her think about these kinds of questions? How are rich and poor passengers experiencing the trip differently? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6](#)

Port of Merida, February 1, 1938 (10)

1. After Esther reassures the older couple that their children will be happy to see them in Mexico, the old man gives her his gold pocket watch as a gift and says, “But even long after you have forgotten our chance encounter, hold on to this watch, and may it bless you with many hours of happiness and hope” (11). What does the gift symbolize (represent)? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#)

Port of Havana, February 4, 1938 (14)

1. Ester writes, “I had arrived with Jacob’s blessing, the man who looked like Papa whom I met on the way to Rotterdam” (15). What do you think happened to Jacob? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#)

Tricornia, February 4, 1938 (16)

1. After Esther’s Papa comes to collect her from Tricornia, she reflects, “I am learning how difficult it is to cross borders. Misfortune or illness can leave a person stranded with nowhere to go” (20). What connections can you make to Esther’s quote today? What types of struggles do people have crossing borders in our society today? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9](#)

On the Train from Havana to Matanzas, February 4, 1938 (21)

1. The first thing Esther notices on the ferry to Havana is everyone’s clothes. What do you learn about Esther by the way she compares and contrasts her woolen clothes to what the people of Havana wear? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#)
2. How does Papa have to adapt his religious practices in Cuba? Why? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#)
3. When Esther is first traveling to Agramonte with Papa, she writes: “It won’t be as magnificent as Havana, but it will be home, and it will be beautiful because I will be with Papa” (27). What does “home” mean to Esther at this point? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6](#)

On the Train from Matanzas to Agramonte, February 4, 1938 (28)

1. In the previous letter, Esther realizes that Cubans call all Jewish people “polacos.” In this letter, she says it “was the strangest sensation to realize I was no longer in Poland, where the word ‘Jew’ hung on the lips of strangers like a curse” (28). Why do you think Esther finds Cubans’ use of “polaco” so strange? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6](#)

Agramonte, February 6, 1938 (31)

1. Why is Papa ashamed of the figurines that he sells as a peddler? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#)

Agramonte, February 7, 1938 (35) / Agramonte, February 15, 1938 (40)

1. Who are some of the first people that Esther meets in Agramonte when she helps her papa sell the religious statues? What does Esther learn about Cuba, Spanish, and her neighbors through these meetings? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6](#)

Agramonte, February 18, 1938 (43)

1. Esther and her papa go to eat dinner at the house of Doctor Pablo and Señora Graciela. Why are they concerned that they might be served pork? What are some Jewish dietary rules? How is it both a relief and a sad occurrence that Doctor Pablo is a vegetarian? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#)

Agramonte, February 22, 1938 (47) / Agramonte, February 25, 1938 (50)

1. Esther and Papa are assaulted by Señor Eduardo, who calls them “judíos” rather than “polacos” like the other Cubans they have met. In her letter, Esther writes, “Cubans have been so friendly to me that I almost forgot about how some people hate Jews. I am worried that if the hatred toward Jews has reached all the way across the ocean to Cuba, things must be getting much worse in Poland” (48–49). Explain Esther’s concern.
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9](#)
2. Doctor Pablo explains that he and Señor Eduardo do not believe the same things. Doctor Pablo “believes all religions should be respected and Cuba should be a place where immigrants can work and progress.” On the other hand, Señor Eduardo is a “Falangista” who “wants everyone in Cuba to be of the Catholic faith, like in Spain” (51). How have Señor Eduardo’s religious beliefs affected his political beliefs? Why do you think he hates immigrants, like Papa and Esther? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#);
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9](#)
3. Doctor Pablo makes reference to the Spanish Civil War when describing the differences between his views and those of Señor Eduardo. Why might a civil war in Spain influence the ways people treat each other in Cuba? Can you think of other examples of the ways that wars across the world have influenced people’s thoughts and behaviors in your community? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9](#)
4. What does Esther learn about Cuba’s history of enslaving Africans in the sugar mills? What does Papa mean when he says, “The slave masters owned their bodies. But they found out they couldn’t own their souls” (52)?
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#)

Agramonte, March 1, 1938 (53)

1. Who is José Martí? When Esther reads one of his poems, she connects to the line that reads, “I come from many places—And to every place I go” (54). What do you think that line means for Esther? How does it connect to the themes of immigration and crossing borders in the novel? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#);
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6](#)
2. Esther writes to Malka about the importance of books: “Books are precious, aren’t they?...They’re powerful too—I guess that’s why there are people in this world who hate books so much that they burn them. Would you believe that happened in Germany a few years ago?” (55–56). What does Esther mean by this? How can books be precious to one person, and dangerous to others? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#);
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9](#)
3. Esther writes “I’m in a place that wasn’t mine but is slowly feeling like it could become my home” (55). How is Esther’s view of Cuba changing her sense of what it means to be “home”?
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6](#)

Agramonte, March 2, 1938 (57)

1. In the synagogue, Esther meets a woman and her daughter who tell her what is happening in Germany. Why did they have to escape? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9](#)
2. Esther says that her papa hides the new letters that come from Mama. Esther says that the letters “come so rarely and arrive so ragged they look as if they’re filled with clumps of sadness” (60–61). What can we infer about the stories that her mother shares in the letters? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#)

Agramonte, March 7, 1938 (62)

1. Even though Papa and Esther have very little money, Papa sells the sandals from Zvi Mandelbaum for little money so the sugarcane workers can afford them. What does this tell us about Papa? How would we characterize him? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#)
2. Ma Felipa and Manuela show Esther the ceiba tree in their backyard. What is the significance of the tree? What does it represent? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9](#)

Agramonte, March 10, 1938 (72)

1. While Papa and Esther are in Cuba, the Nazis are taking over parts of Europe. What happens in Austria?
[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9](#)

Agramonte, March 14, 1938 (70) / Agramonte, March 17, 1938 (76)

1. What do the dresses and the sewing machine represent for Esther? Find a metaphor or a simile she uses to describe her feelings. For example, consider the following: “as a fiddle is to a fiddler” (75); “the most precious gem of all—hope” (82). [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6](#)

Agramonte, March 21, 1938 (83)

1. Why does Esther worry when Señora Graciela compares her dressmaking to “una fábrica” (84)? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#)
2. What does sewing represent for Esther and her new life in Agramonte, including both her challenges and her successes? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#)

Agramonte, March 24, 1938 (85) / Agramonte, March 25, 1938 (92)

1. Why does Señor Eduardo want to hurt Esther and her papa? What does he threaten to do? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#)
2. Even though Señor Eduardo goes out of his way to hurt Esther and Papa, others in Agramonte help and support them. Provide three examples of this. How does Esther interpret these acts of kindness? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#)

Agramonte, March 28, 1938 (98)

1. When Esther goes to deliver the new dress she made for Manuela, she is invited inside to participate in a religious ceremony. After, Papa tells Esther she can never forget that she is a Jew. In reflection, Esther writes, “I could never forget I am a Jew. But the sound of the drums at Ma Felipa’s house was now in my life and I was sure it would never leave me” (101). What does Esther mean? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6](#)

Agramonte, April 12, 1938 (102)

1. In the fancy store, El Encanto, Esther says she felt “small and unimportant, like a fly to be swatted away” (104). Later, on the train, she wonders: “Why is the world divided into rich and poor?” (105). What have the experiences of different characters in the novel taught you about class and equity? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6](#)

Agramonte, April 15, 1938 (106)

1. What did you learn about the tradition of the Passover seder? What connections do the different guests at the table make? What lessons do they learn together? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#)
2. After Ma Felipa reminds Señora Graciela that she had once been a slave on her family’s sugar plantation, she asks Papa for an extra slice of guava paste. What does that extra bit of sweetness represent in the seder? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6](#)
3. Who is Fernando Ortiz, and what does he say about the danger of ignorance? Provide an example from society today that supports Ortiz’s arguments. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9](#)

Agramonte, May 5, 1938 (116)

1. Esther says, “I guess when we move to a new place, we become other people” (119). What does Esther mean? Provide a concrete example from what Esther learns from Manuela and Francisco (Li Qiang). [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#)

Agramonte, May 23, 1938 (121)

1. When the lady from El Encanto asks who Esther is, she replies: “‘I am polaca,’ I said. ‘But really I am judía.’ I used the word ‘Jewish’ rather than ‘Hebrew’ so she would not think I was anything but what I am” (123–124). What does Esther mean? Why is this significant? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6](#)

Agramonte, May 26, 1938 (127)

1. When Esther first described the ocean on the boat on the way to Cuba, she said the waves sounded like “the roar of a lion” (5). After she signs the contract with El Encanto, and takes a walk with Papa along the seawall in Havana, she says: “The sea was calm and peaceful and seemed to be whispering to me, *I will bring your family to you. Soon, soon, soon*” (133). What does Esther’s changing relationship with the ocean signify in the novel?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6

Agramonte, June 14, 1938 (134)

1. Rifka Rubenstein tells Esther, “A Jew can never be anything but a Jew.” But Esther replies, “That’s what Hitler and the Nazis want us to believe, but it’s not true. We can be anything we want to be” (135). What do you think Rifka meant? Why might her perspective be different from Esther’s?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4

Agramonte, June 23, 1938 (136)

1. When Señor Eduardo breaks into Esther and Papa’s home to threaten them again, Mario José comes to their rescue. How do Mario José’s and Señor Eduardo’s perspectives about refugees differ? To what extent do these perspectives still exist in our society today? Why?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2;

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9

Agramonte, June 24, 1938 (140)

1. What do the sugarcane workers demand from Señor Eduardo during their strike? What lessons does Esther learn from their compassion?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2

Agramonte, June 28, 1938 (144)

1. Isabel de la Fuente tells Papa, “There are secrets that we keep to do good in the world. And this is one of those secrets” (146). Do you agree with her? Provide one concrete example of a secret that you think has done good in the world.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1

Agramonte, July 19, 1938 (147)

1. What do you think José Martí meant when he wrote the following poem about poetry: “Who cares if this pain / Dries the ocean and dims the sky? / My verse, sweet consolation, / Is born from pain with wings” (148)?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4

Agramonte, August 7, 1938 (150)

1. Thinking about how Jewish people had been forced to move from place to place throughout history reminds Esther that “The world spins round and round” and is like “a carousel and you don’t know where you’ll end up” (150). Why do you think she is making this comparison?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4;

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6

Agramonte, August 18, 1938 (152)

1. What do we learn about Esther’s family in Poland? Why do you think Mama has started to realize that she was too hard on Esther?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2

Agramonte, August 29, 1938 (154)

1. When Esther sees the racks of dresses she designed in El Encanto, she thinks that she would love to touch them all, but doesn’t, thinking “they weren’t mine to touch” (154). How do you think she feels to see her dresses in a fancy store that her family cannot afford to shop in?
2. How are Rifka Rubenstein and Isabel de la Fuente similar? Different?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2

Agramonte, September 7, 1938 (157)

1. What is the significance of the sea and of Yemayá in Ma Felipa’s religion?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4;
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9

Agramonte, September 26, 1938 (160)

1. Esther learns from Francisco that “anger can become courage” in the Year of the Tiger (162). What do you think that means? Provide examples from society. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#)

Agramonte, October 5, 1938 (163)

1. When Esther is watching Rifka Rubenstein praying and tapping her chest, why does she think about all of her family who “had recited these very same words and tapped on their chests?” (165) [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#)

Agramonte, October 25, 1938 (166)

1. Why does Esther feel torn about moving from Agramonte to Havana? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9](#)

Agramonte, November 10, 1938 (173)

1. What is the “Night of Broken Glass” in Munich? How do the people of Agramonte respond when they hear? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9](#)

Agramonte, November 11, 1938 (181)

1. While Esther is feeling sad about leaving Agramonte, why does it make her feel better to think about José Martí writing “I come from many places”? (182) [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#)

Agramonte, November 14, 1938 (184)

1. When Rifka Rubenstein and Esther disagree about how other people treat Jewish people, Papa says, “Both of you are right. There are good people and hateful people—and indifferent people, neither good nor hateful, just waiting to be told how they should think and feel” (185). What does it mean to be indifferent? Why do you think some people are indifferent about violence and injustice? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#)

Agramonte, December 10, 1938 (191)

1. When Esther gives the gold pocket watch to Manuela, does it still represent the same thing it did when the old man gave it to Esther on the boat? Does it represent something new? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#)

Agramonte, December 17, 1938 (195)

1. How has Cuba changed Papa? What does he learn, just like Esther, by being around people who are different from him? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#)

Havana, December 19, 1938 (201)

1. The morning Esther leaves Agramonte, Francisco Chang gives her a small porcelain teacup from China to remember him. What are some of the lessons she learned from her friendship with Francisco? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9](#)

Havana, January 8, 1939 (206)

1. What can you infer about Esther’s new classmates from the way they treated her at first? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#)

Havana, January 16, 1939 (209)

1. Cubans have different opinions about Jewish refugees. What are these opinions and which characters embody those views? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9](#)

Havana, January 22, 1939 (211)

1. Esther prays for different things for each of her family members. Why does she hope for such different things for each person? [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#)

Havana, January 26, 1939 (213)

1. When the family is not released from the ship, Esther looks at the Virgin of Regla and says that she hears drums from Agramonte “calling to Yemayá, asking for help” while Papa is saying his Jewish prayers (214). Why do you think Esther is thinking about all these different religions at this moment?

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4

Havana, January 27, 1939 (215)

1. Why does Esther compare Malka to “a sparrow with broken wings” (218)? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6
2. Esther writes that she hopes Malka will start to write in a journal and “let the paper hold even a bit” of her sadness (221). How has Esther used her letter writing to overcome sadness? Do you think it will work for Malka? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4

Havana, February 2, 1939 (222)

1. When Mama sees the beautiful dresses Esther has made, she exclaims, “You put my thimble to good use!” (222). Why do you think Mama gave Esther the thimble in the first place? What does the thimble come to symbolize (represent) for Mama in this chapter? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4

Havana, February 4, 1939 (225)

1. Why do you think it might make Malka feel better to embroider flowers on the dresses Esther makes? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4
2. When Malka decides that she is ready to start reading Esther’s letters, what might it suggest about how she is feeling about Cuba and her new life? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2

Havana, February 5, 1939 (228)

1. In this last letter, we hear about Malka starting to speak Spanish. How does she learn so quickly? What does this learning represent? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4
2. After Malka stops crying after holding the ceiba tree, why do you think she says “Esther, I am here” (233)? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2
3. On the way back from Agramonte, Esther says “Welcome to Cuba” to Malka (233). What has Esther done to show Malka that Cuba can be their new home? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3
4. Even though Malka is in Cuba at the end of the book, Esther keeps writing her a few letters. Why do you think she does this? What purpose has letter writing started to serve for Esther? How is it similar/different from its original purpose? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4

FORMATIVE ACTIVITIES

1. **Characterization Analysis** (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.1)
Esther and her father meet a lot of characters who help them become part of the community in Agramonte. Pick one of these characters and identify how he or she helped Esther and her father transition to their new lives in Cuba. Or, pick two and compare and contrast the ways they helped to welcome Esther and her father. Characters: Zvi Mandelbaum, Rifka Rubenstein, Doctor Pablo, Señora Graciela, Ma Felipa, Mario José, Manuela, Juan Chang, Francisco Chang, Isabel de la Fuente
2. **Poetry Analysis and Connections** (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9)
José Martí’s poetry plays an important role in Esther’s transition to her life in Cuba. She quotes from his poems several times in her letters to Malka in order to make sense of the new world around her. In a stanza from the third poem of the *Simple Verses* (*Versos sencillos*) that she doesn’t cite, Martí writes:

It's with the poor of the earth
that I would cast my lot:
I find the mountain brook
more pleasant than the sea.

Con los pobres de la tierra
Quiero yo mi suerte echar:
El arroyo de la sierra
Me complace más que el mar.

Imagine Esther writing one more letter to Malka, telling her about this poem. What do you think she would write about?

- 3. Complex Identity Glossary** (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.6.4; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.6.6; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9)
This novel describes many different kinds of cultural and historical influences. Characters come from different countries, religious backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and social classes. Readers learn Jewish traditions and words, Cuban historical information, African religious traditions, and historical events. When the story introduces elements of these influences, record them in your journal to look up information about each of them to help you better understand Esther's experiences and to prepare for your Complex Identities argument.
- 4. Compare and Contrast Complex Characters** (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.9; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3)
Over the course of the book, Esther learns that she is more than one simple identity. Instead, she realizes that she can adapt to her new life in Cuba by incorporating many different elements that she learns from the people around her. Identify one character who helped Esther adapt to her new life in Cuba. What specifically does Esther gain from that character? How does this help her become more than just one simple story? Write two argumentative paragraphs that make an argument about how this character contributed to Esther's growing comfort with her new life by helping her become a more complex character. Use details from the story to support your argument.
- 5. Fostering Creativity in Times of Crisis** (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9)
Esther is inspired to help save money for her family to come join them by sewing dresses. However, she also uses sewing to help her connect to her new community and cope with the difficult challenges she's facing in her new home. What are some ways that individuals adopt creative forms of expression in times of crisis? Do you have any skills that might be helpful to your family if you were in a difficult situation?
- 6. The Search for Home: Connecting to *Lucky Broken Girl*** (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.6; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9)
In *Letters from Cuba*, Esther immigrates to Cuba from Poland in the late 1930s. In *Lucky Broken Girl*, Ruthie immigrates to New York City from Cuba in the 1960s. Using the following discussion prompts, compare and contrast Esther's and Ruthie's experiences. How does each character's identity transform through their immigrant experiences? How do both characters rely on other immigrants in their communities to make sense of their new lives? What does Cuba mean for each character? How do Esther and Ruthie explore their new lives and create new understandings of home? What other connections did you make between the two novels?



Unit Plan Overview

Unit Title/Overview:	<i>Letters from Cuba</i>		
Grade Level:	6	Length:	5–6 weeks
Essential Question(s):	How can novels help us see past the “single stories” people tell about themselves and others?		
Unit Themes:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Complex identities - Relationships between individuals and communities - Creating a sense of belonging for immigrants and refugees 		
Main and supporting texts:	<p>Anchor text: <i>Letters from Cuba</i>, Ruth Behar</p>	<p>Supplementary texts: <i>Tropical Secrets: Holocaust Refugees in Cuba</i>, Margarita Engle <i>Refugee</i>, Alan Gratz <i>Letters from Rifka</i>, Karen Hesse <i>Number the Stars</i>, Lois Lowry <i>Simple Verses</i>, José Martí <i>Making It Home: Real-Life Stories by Children Forced to Flee</i>, Beverley Naidoo “The Danger of a Single Story,” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie <i>Lucky Broken Girl</i>, Ruth Behar</p>	
Final Summative Assessment(s):	<p>Writing Letters: Identity Narrative Prompt</p> <p>Like Esther, you get your chance to tell your story by writing an identity narrative that tells your story the way you want it to be told. In <i>Letters from Cuba</i>, Esther tells her own story and pushes back against the dangerous “single stories” that others might have about her and other Jewish communities. In Cuba, she also learns a lot about the other unique cultural and historical backgrounds of other characters she comes in contact with through their stories. Through her letters to Malka, we learned about who Esther is, and what drives and interests her.</p> <p>Your narrative should be your narrative. Tell the story you want others to know about you. But don’t try to tell your whole life story; we don’t have that much time! What is a specific moment or two that will be helpful to share with your audience? What might you want to say about a specific community, about a particular interest of yours, about your dreams and aspirations, about your family? How have you come to see your own complex identity in new ways? What lessons have you learned? While doing so, consider ways that your narrative can address some of the following questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What single story is sometimes mistakenly attached to you? How might your narrative resist that single story? 2. What literary devices (like imagery, word choice, metaphors, or tone) might you draw on to help convey your story in a way that brings your story to life and gets your audience thinking about you in a new way? 3. Who will you address your letter to? Why? CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.1; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.2.; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3; CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.9 		

Unit Plan Overview

Key Formative Assessments:

Creating a Welcoming Community Project

In Agramonte, the community welcomes Esther and her father and makes them feel like a part of the neighborhood. They also come together to protect Esther and Papa from Señor Eduardo. Each community member helps in different ways to make Esther and her father feel like they belong in Agramonte. In small groups, research an organization that helps immigrants and refugees in your own community. Who participates in this organization? What kinds of support do they provide? How do they help people feel like members of the community that really belong? How do they help overcome racism and fear of outsiders to build a more inclusive community? Create a presentation to share your research with your classmates. Compare different organizations and the ways they help create a more welcoming community. [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.9](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.2.B](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.5](#)

Complex Identity Glossary

This novel describes many different kinds of cultural and historical influences. Characters come from different countries, religious backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and social classes. When the story introduces elements of these influences, record them in your journal to look up information about each of them to help you better understand Esther's experiences and to prepare for your Complex Identities argument.

Recommended Glossary List

Kosher
Yiddish (shayna maideleh)
Shabbos
Passover Seder
Matzo
Falangista
Republicano
Year of the Tiger
Yemayá
Ceiba

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.6.4](#)

Unit Plan Overview

	Unit Goals:	Corresponding CCSS:
Goals and Standards:	<p>Reading:</p> <p>Students will be able to make inferences from the text and draw on evidence to support claims about characters, themes, and plot events.</p>	RL.6.1
	<p>Students will be able to identify characters' opinions and motivations and central themes using both specific detail and inference.</p>	RL.6.2
	<p>Students will be able to analyze how characters change over the course of the novel, using both specific detail and inference.</p>	RL.6.3
	<p>Students will be able to analyze figurative devices to support claims about characters and themes.</p>	RL.6.4
	<p>Students will be able to link small details to larger themes.</p>	RL.6.5
	<p>Students will be able to draw on outside historical and cultural knowledge, drawn from supplementary texts and discussion, to support textual understanding and analysis.</p>	RL.6.9
	<p>Writing:</p> <p>Students will be able to make and support claims about the text.</p>	W.6.1
	<p>Students will be able to explain historical contexts and their relationship to the story or characters.</p>	W.6.2
	<p>Students will be able to describe the ways that identities are more complex than a single story.</p>	W.6.3

Unit Plan Overview

Goals and Standards:	Unit Goals:	Corresponding CCSS:
	<p>Listening and Speaking:</p> <p>Students will be able to explain elements of a group project to the whole class.</p> <p>Students will be able to explain the importance of specific details to a given character in small groups.</p>	<p>SL.6.1</p> <p>SL.6.4</p>
	<p>Language:</p> <p>Students will be able to use context clues to comprehend unknown vocabulary and decipher non-English words.</p> <p>Students will be able to sound out and speak non-English words when reading.</p>	<p>L.6.3 / L.6.4</p> <p>L.6.6</p>

Enduring Understandings: Skills and Concepts

<p>Skills students will acquire</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Context clues • Reading strategies: Focus on inference and text-to-self connections • Identifying and using characterization; analyzing how characters change over time • Identifying themes and analyzing their development • Text evidence and analysis • Researching a topic 	<p>Concepts students will understand</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The complexities of personal identity • Immigrant experiences • Symbolism: How do particular things (e.g. the ceiba tree or the gold pocket watch) help to represent abstract nouns (feelings, concepts, etc.)? • Genre: The epistolary novel • Historical contexts: 1930s Jewish diaspora
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Weeks at a Glance:

<p>Week #1</p>	<p>Anticipation Guide: Four Corners Activity, Book Tour</p> <p>Contexts: Introduce the Complex Identity Glossary to help students keep track of the information they learn about Jewish refugees, Cuba, former slaves, religious influences, and historical information.</p> <p>Introduction to unit goals and end assessment: View “The Dangers of a Single Story” TED talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to contrast “single stories” with more complex ideas about identity.</p> <p>Explicit skills taught or revisited: Context clues strategies, making predictions</p> <p>To read: pages 1–20</p>
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Weeks at a Glance:

Week #2	<p>Characterization: What do characters' actions tell us about their identities?</p> <p>Identity Glossary: Keep track of religious and cultural identities illustrated by characters that Esther and her father meet in Agramonte.</p> <p>Creating a Welcoming Community Project: In groups, begin researching organizations that support new immigrants and refugees.</p> <p>To read: pages 21–52</p>
Week #3	<p>Stories and books matter: How does José Martí help Esther think about her new life in Cuba?</p> <p>Creating a Welcoming Community Project: Small groups work on developing a presentation of information they learned about an organization supporting immigrants and refugees.</p> <p>To read: pages 53–101</p>
Week #4	<p>More than a single story: What can characters teach us about how different influences shape identities?</p> <p>Identity Glossary: While keeping track of things students learn about all the different religious and cultural identities depicted in <i>Letters from Cuba</i>, students should begin to make notes about how characters are also learning about each others' identities.</p> <p>Present Creating a Welcoming Community Group Projects</p> <p>To read: pages 102–135</p>
Week #5	<p>Learning from children: Esther often brings together people who do not usually interact. How does she help those adults learn to find common ground?</p> <p>Developing a claim from reading: Students identify characters to discuss in their Compare and Contrast Complex Characters paragraphs.</p> <p>Finding supporting evidence: Students identify key details from <i>Letters from Cuba</i> to support their claims about complex identities.</p> <p>Brainstorm: Students identify the topic of their Identity Narrative and consider the audience of their letter.</p> <p>To read: pages 136–172</p>
Week #6	<p>Draft Writing Letters: Identity Narrative Prompt</p> <p>Peer Brainstorming and Reviews</p> <p>Revisions and final essay publication</p> <p>How our experiences and influences affect our attitudes:</p> <p>What have we learned? About immigration? Growing and healing? Jewish refugees in Cuba prior to World War II? The importance of stories?</p> <p>To read: pages 173–end</p>

Q&A WITH AUTHOR RUTH BEHAR



1. How did you decide to represent the different cultural and religious practices that Esther encounters in the novel? What do you want readers to take away from these representations/encounters/practices?

Cuba is a place of tremendous diversity, where cultures and religions intersect in fascinating ways. With my training in cultural anthropology, which teaches us to observe and document and immerse ourselves in the vastness of the human tapestry, I am drawn to this diversity. I also see myself as forming part of this diversity as a Cuban-born writer.

It fascinates me to think of Jewish immigrants like my grandparents who arrived in Cuba on the eve of World War II and found a tropical island so completely different from the world they knew in Europe. My maternal grandmother arrived from Poland as a young woman, and I wondered what it must have been like for her to adapt to a diet of tropical fruits, to remove her woolen garments and put on light dresses more appropriate in a lush and humid climate, to learn to speak Spanish, and to hear the rhythm of the sacred batá drums used in Afro-Cuban rituals. What did she make of Cuba's unique fusion of cultures and religions? That fusion brings together Spanish Catholic traditions and West African Yoruba traditions, and Chinese traditions as well, and many other traditions, including Jewish, which arrived later and were absorbed into the great Cuban stew, or "ajiaco," as it was called by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz. In my novel, I wanted to bring this diversity to life while addressing the complex debates taking place in the years before World War II around Jewish refugees and whether they should be allowed into Cuba. Writing as another refugee crisis was taking place in the present, I hoped that shedding light on refugees in another time and place might open people's hearts.

Imagining a young Polish Jewish girl like Esther arriving in Cuba, curious and wide-eyed, I wanted to see how she'd interact with a range of people very different from her who welcomed her to the island in various ways. She meets other Jewish immigrants who have adapted to life in Cuba, but have stayed within their Jewish enclave in Havana, not venturing out to the rest of the island and to the countryside. But Esther, along with Papa, go to live in Agramonte, a rural town in the province of Matanzas, where they are the only Jews.

Unlike Papa, who keeps to himself and stays faithful to his Jewish prayers, only engaging with other people when he's peddling, Esther makes friends in the town. She meets Manuela, an Afro-Cuban girl, and Francisco, a Chinese-Cuban boy. Through her friendship with these children and their families, she learns about the history of sugar and slavery and the injustices suffered by the sugarcane workers.

Esther also learns that religious traditions brought by enslaved Africans are still very much alive. Manuela's grandmother is a renowned santera in the town and her father is a drummer of the sacred batá drums. Never renouncing her Jewish identity, Esther immerses herself in these traditions and finds comfort. She also comes to understand that among Cubans of Spanish background, there are diverse religious and political positions. Papa is renting their house from the town doctor, Don Pablo, and his wife, Señora Graciela; she is a devout Catholic, while he is an atheist and believes only in kindness. Though they are warm and generous to Esther and Papa, and feel no prejudice toward them for being Jewish, Señora Graciela's brother, Señor Eduardo, is anti-Semitic, makes no effort to hide his hatred toward them, and openly supports Nazism.

Ultimately, my hope is that readers will take away a multidimensional view of Cuba. Esther, I think, can show readers how you can hold on to your own traditions while honoring and respecting the traditions of others.

2. What other books did you turn to for inspiration? What other sorts of perspectives do you think are important to understand alongside Esther's?

One of the books I read that inspired me to write *Letters from Cuba* was Karen Hesse's *Letters from Rifka*. Hesse wrote a lyrical, spare novel about Rifka's immigrant journey from Europe to the United States, a story inspired by her own aunt's story. I loved how Hesse used the epistolary genre to tell the story and I thought it would be fun to try my hand at that genre. By writing letters to her cousin who has stayed in Europe with

her family, Rifka bares her heart, and finds the courage to face the many obstacles along the way. I thought it was lovely that Rifka gathers the letters inside a book of Pushkin's poetry to send to her cousin once she is finally ready to begin a new life in New York. Reading Hesse's novel, it occurred to me that stories of Jewish immigrant journeys to the United States are quite well known, but how many people know about similar journeys to Cuba? I thought of the immigrant journeys my four Jewish grandparents had made to Cuba in the years before World War II, which led to my eventually being born in Cuba. My maternal grandmother Esther, to whom I was very close, had often talked to me about her journey from Poland to Cuba. I realized her story could be a fascinating contrast to Rifka's story and expand our understanding of how Jews found their way to different parts of the Americas. Some, like my family, became Latin American before they became American.

There were also books I'd already read that I reread as I pondered how best to tell my grandmother's story. Margarita Engle's verse novel, *Tropical Secrets: Holocaust Refugees in Cuba* and Alan Gratz's *Refugee* offered moving insights into the lives of young people who experienced the tragedy of the *St. Louis* vessel, which brought hundreds of German Jewish refugees to Cuba in 1939, fleeing the Nazis, the majority of whom were not allowed to remain. While Gratz's *Refugee* drew attention to Jewish immigrants who were turned away from entering Cuba, I realized that my story would be about Jewish immigrants who found a new sense of belonging and home on the island. In talking to historians, I had been frustrated by how little was recorded about the day-to-day lives of these immigrants in Cuba. The novels of Engle and Gratz inspired me to think deeply about how to craft historical fiction to tell stories that can't be found in archives or history books. And reading Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars* inspired me to reflect on how non-Jews have helped Jews in times of hatred, fear, and persecution. This led me to think about how I might show the relationships between Jewish immigrants and the diverse range of cultural and religious communities they came into contact with in Cuba.

3. A deity who figures prominently in the novel is Yemayá. Can you discuss the importance of this figure and what she represents in the novel?

Yemayá is a major female deity, or "orisha," in the religion popularly known in Cuba as Santería, "the way of the saints," or, as it is known to practitioners, Regla de Ocha. She is one of several deities from the Yoruba religion brought to Cuba by enslaved Africans. These deities were remembered through a spiritual system that created parallels between them and deities from Catholicism, which was brutally imposed upon enslaved Africans. Considered the mother of the sea, Yemayá is associated in Cuba with Our Lady of Regla, whose shrine is near the entrance to the port of Havana. Yemayá cares for the souls of those who have perished at sea and safeguards the passage of those making sea crossings. She is a protector of women and her colors are blue and white. Yemayá is widely venerated in Cuba, surrounded by the sea on all sides.

In the novel, Yemayá plays an important role on several levels. For Esther, whose Jewish beliefs are centered around monotheism and a single divine male figure, Yemayá represents a departure from her idea of the sacred. When she first arrives in Cuba, she discovers that her father is selling Catholic icons. But she doesn't yet know that African deities coexist with the Catholic deities in Cuba. As she learns about Yemayá, and other Yoruba deities, like Babalú-Ayé, she is awed by them. She gradually realizes there is a connection between how Jews have held on to beliefs passed on to them by their ancestors and how people in Cuba of African heritage have held on to their ancient religion.

Yemayá becomes magical in a special way in Agramonte. The town is not close to the sea, yet a part of the sea resides inside Ma Felipa's house, which is built around a natural spring that spouts water. Ma Felipa is a santera whose spirit protector is Yemayá. In the rituals held at her house, she becomes Yemayá and leads in the singing calling for Yemayá's blessing, while her son, Mario José, plays the sacred batá drums. Esther witnesses all this and feels that she has been changed profoundly. Although she remains faithful to her Jewish identity, she embraces Yemayá and comes to see her as a symbol of hope and that she will be able to save her family and bring them across the sea to Cuba so they can be reunited again.

4. You shared that this novel is inspired by your family's history. What did you want to share about the experience of Jewish immigrants in Cuba? What did you want readers to learn about Cuba?

I hoped to show that there were many Jews who found a sense of belonging and home in Cuba. The island became their dream of America, even though many went to Cuba with the fear that they were going to live in a jungle. Yet I also wanted to make clear that it wasn't easy to start anew. We see how much Papa struggles in Cuba. He has trouble learning Spanish, and as a religious man, he feels inadequate at making money. He'd rather be praying than peddling, but he has to work in order to bring his family to safety from Poland. In contrast, Esther, a young person determined to help save her family, dives into her new life in Cuba, and is able to let go of her past in Poland and look ahead to a brighter future. This intergenerational difference was something I thought important to highlight. Father and daughter adapted differently to life in Cuba, but each came to feel gratitude to the island that gave them and their family refuge.

Most readers aren't familiar with the history of Jewish immigration to Cuba, and I thought my novel could fill a gap and introduce readers to how Jewish Cuban identity came into being. I also thought it was important to remind readers that the United States has closed its doors to refugees at various moments in history. My novel takes place during one of those moments, when the United States closed its doors to Jewish refugees. But Cuba opened its doors. If not for Cuba, most of these refugees would likely have perished in the Holocaust. For this reason, as the descendant of Jewish immigrants to Cuba, I often say that I am Jewish because I am Cuban.

5. Can you tell us a bit about your writing process? What stood out to you in writing *Letters from Cuba*?

The most difficult thing about writing, for me, is getting started. Until I know who my main character will be and the situation the character will be in, I feel lost. Once I have that much figured out—in this case, knowing Esther would be my main character and her aim would be to help bring the family to Cuba—I can sit down to write. Even then, I can't make much progress unless I have decided on the structure for the story. Choosing to write the novel as a series of letters gave me a delightful structure. It was an exciting challenge to know that each time I was at my desk, I had to write a letter. What would Esther reveal to her dear sister, Malka? What feelings, experiences, disappointments, hopes, and dreams would she confide? The letter is a generous form. You can put anything you like in a letter. I felt very free to write whatever came to mind. A letter is one person trusting another, whispering secrets.

I truly enjoyed the writing process. The first draft came pouring out onto the page, even though I was teaching full-time and traveling often to give talks. Afterwards, I put a lot of energy into the revisions. I love revising. I go back over the text word by word, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph.

I agonized over the ending. I wasn't sure if Malka would make it to Cuba. I thought maybe she'd stay behind in Poland, taking care of their beloved bubbe, their sweet grandmother. Maybe Malka would survive, maybe she'd die. For the longest time, I couldn't decide. Finally, I envisioned Malka going to Cuba and arriving with the weight of all the sorrow on her shoulders. She'd slowly come out of her shell, return to Agramonte with Esther, and choose life. It seemed like the right ending, a mix of sad and hopeful.

Throughout the writing, I felt my grandmother's spirit near me. I was telling the story for her and for all immigrants who have bravely made journeys across oceans and deserts, dreaming of a better future for themselves and their families.

6. What advice do you have for young writers?

Read, read, read.

Enjoy books and take them with you wherever you go.

Keep your secrets in a notebook.

Hold on to your favorite stories, the ones that made you laugh and cry.

Listen to the stories of your elders.

Care about other people's struggles.

Memorize the words of a poem, a speech, or a song.

Fall in love with words.