

AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO

# LUCKY BROKEN GIRL

Ruth Behar



## Dear Educator:

Meet Ruthie Mizrahi, a rising sixth grader who moves with her family from Cuba to a diverse neighborhood in 1960s New York searching for the American Dream. Ruthie quickly makes friends with a boy from India and a girl from Belgium. She is proud to be “Miss Hopscotch Queen of Queens,” and to know both English and Spanish, so she can translate for her mother at the grocery store. She’s also gotten a fashionable pair of go-go boots. Ruthie’s future seems bright, but when a car accident leaves her in a body cast and confined to her bed, her world shrinks. She grows sad and afraid, and is consumed by anger toward the boy who caused the accident. How will Ruthie heal, both physically and spiritually? *Lucky Broken Girl*, Ruth Behar’s debut novel based on her own life experiences, takes readers on a heart-opening journey that is filled with teachable moments for your students to discuss.

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 Ruthie’s story and open up about their own vulnerability and losses. The creative projects include a Quote Café, writing a letter to Ruthie to offer advice, and researching the exciting historical and fictional characters in the book, who include José Martí, Emily Dickinson, Nancy Drew, and Frida Kahlo. Described as “a celebration of forgiveness and hope,” 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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—Penguin School and Library 

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 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> 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.

## Discussion Guide Pre-Reading:

- This novel takes place in the 1960s in Queens, New York. It is about a ten-year-old girl who moves there from Cuba with her family. Make some predictions: What is going on in the 60s? What might life be like for a young, immigrant girl from Cuba?
- Make a prediction about the book’s title, *Lucky Broken Girl*. How can someone be both lucky and broken? What can you infer about the main character, Ruthie?

Unit Plan Overview			
Unit Title/Overview:	<i>Lucky Broken Girl</i>		
Grade Level:	6 <sup>th</sup>	Length:	5-6 weeks
Essential Question(s):	How do our experiences shape our beliefs and attitudes about ourselves and others?		
Unit Themes:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The immigrant experience</li><li>• Our complicated identities</li><li>• Influences that help us grow</li></ul>		
Main and supporting texts:	<b>Anchor text:</b> <i>Lucky Broken Girl</i> , Ruth Behar	<b>Supplementary texts:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Edie Colón: <i>Good-bye, Havana! Hola, New York!</i></li><li>• Margarita Engle: <i>Tropical Secrets: Holocaust Refugees in Cuba</i></li><li>• Margarita Engle: <i>Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings: A Memoir</i></li><li>• “Cuban Revolution Timeline” <a href="http://www.softschools.com/timelines/cuban_revolution_timeline/77/">http://www.softschools.com/timelines/cuban_revolution_timeline/77/</a></li></ul>	
Final Summative Assessment(s):	<b>Growing and Influences Research Essay</b> Throughout the novel, Ruthie is influenced by music, stories, and artists. Each one of them contributes to her growing and understanding herself and the world. Pick one of these specific influences to research (i.e. Frida Kahlo, José Martí, Baba’s story of emigrating to Cuba to escape the Nazis, etc.). After you have finished your research, write an essay in which you use some of the information you have found to explain why the music, story, or artist was so important to Ruthie.  <b>OR, GO DEEPER:</b> After you finish your research, write a personal essay from Ruthie’s perspective, explaining why that music, story, or artist was important to her and her recovery. <a href="#">CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.9</a> ; <a href="#">CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.2</a> ; <a href="#">CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.7</a>		

**Key Formative Assessments:**

**Views of Immigration Project**

Many of the characters Ruthie describes are immigrants (her family, Ramu and his family, Danielle and her mother, Chicho). Each one views immigration a bit differently. In small groups, collect details about a character to show his or her views on immigration. How does this character dress? What does he or she say about life in America? What do other characters say to him or her? What do others say about him or her? What things are important to this character? Then, draw a picture of your character, illustrating what this character thinks about coming to America, including some of the important quotes you've found.

[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](#)

**Personal Influences Short Essay**

Ruthie says, "Books saved me during all those months I was in bed". (147) Do you have a particular book that is special to you? Describe your favorite book and explain why the story is so important to you.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.2.B](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.1.B](#);

**Goals and Standards:**

**Unit Goals:**

**Corresponding CCSS:**

**Reading:**

Students will be able to compare and contrast different characters' views on complex topics.

**RL.6.2**

Students will be able to identify characters' opinions and motivations, using both specific detail and inference.

**RL.6.1**

Students will be able to link small details to larger themes.

**RL.6.5**

**Writing:**

Students will be able to make and support claims about characters.

**W.6.1**

Students will be able to explain historical context and its relationship to the story or characters.

**W.6.2**

Students will be able to describe the ways that outside influences have helped them grow.

**W.6.3**

**Listening and Speaking:**

Students will be able to explain the importance of specific details to a given character in small groups.

**SL.6.4**

Students will be able to explain elements of a group project to the whole class.

**SL.6.1**

**Language:**

Students will be able to use context clues to comprehend unknown vocabulary and decipher non-English words.

**L.6.3**

Students will be able to sound out and speak non-English words when reading.

**L.6.4**

**L.6.6**

**Enduring Understandings: Skills and Concepts**

**Skills students will acquire**

- Context clues
- Reading strategies: focus on inference, 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

**Concepts students will understand**

- The complexities of the immigrant experience
- The American Dream
- Symbolism—How do particular things (i.e. go-go boots, the Oldsmobile) help to represent abstract ideas (feelings, concepts, etc)?
- The power of art, music, and stories as modes of self-expression and pathways to healing
- Genre: The coming-of-age novel
- Historical contexts: The Cuban Revolution, 60s New York



## Weeks at a Glance:

Week #1	<p><b>Anticipation Guide:</b> Book tour, Quote Café (students exchange provided excerpts from the book to pique interest and make predictions)</p> <p><b>Contexts:</b> Cuba and the 60s in NYC, Timeline, Introduce Cuba chart to keep track of information learned about Cubans and their experiences while reading.</p> <p><b>Introduction to unit goals and end assessment</b></p> <p><b>Start reading</b></p> <p><b>Explicit skills taught or revisited:</b> Context clues strategies, making predictions</p> <p><b>To read:</b> Part #1 up to “poco a poco” (24)</p>
Week #2	<p><b>Characterization:</b> What is important to Ruthie and how can we tell?</p> <p><b>Symbols:</b> What is the importance of the go-go boots and the Oldsmobile? Are there other important symbols?</p> <p><b>Cuban Information Chart:</b> Keep track of details learned from Ruthie and her family.</p> <p><b>Views of Immigration Project:</b> Begin by working as a class to collect details about Ruthie’s views on immigration.</p> <p><b>Responding to tragedy:</b> Explore what Ruthie is feeling right after the accident and how you can tell.</p> <p><b>To read:</b> Finish Part #1 (1-45)</p>
Week #3	<p><b>People react to the accident:</b> How do different people react to Ruthie’s accident and how does she feel about those reactions?</p> <p><b>Characters’ Views of Immigration Project:</b> Small groups work on developing a character sketch that illustrates that character’s view of their new life as an immigrant in America.</p> <p><b>Presentations of Characters’ Views of Immigration Projects</b></p> <p><b>Stories are important:</b> What is Ruthie getting out of the Nancy Drew stories and all the other reading that she does?</p> <p><b>To read:</b> Part #2 (46-70)</p>
Week #4	<p><b>It takes a neighborhood:</b> How are characters helping (or not helping) Ruthie cope with her injury?</p> <p><b>Coping with sadness:</b> How does Chicho help Ruthie?</p> <p><b>Personal Influences Essay:</b> Stories are very important to Ruthie. Do you have a particular book that is special to you? Describe your favorite book and explain why the story is so important to you.</p> <p><b>Growing and Influences Research Essay:</b> Students choose or are assigned an author, artist, or story to research.</p> <p><b>To read:</b> Part #3 (71-112)</p>
Week #5	<p><b>Having goals:</b> How are Ruthie’s goals for herself changing? How do her friends and family respond?</p> <p><b>Healing is hard work:</b> Ruthie writes to Frida that sometimes she wants to walk and other times she wants to just stay in bed. How does she overcome all the obstacles she faces?</p> <p><b>Developing a claim from research:</b> Students workshop controlling ideas for their Growth and Influences Research Essay.</p> <p><b>Finding supporting evidence:</b> Students develop evidence from their research and <i>Lucky Broken Girl</i> to support their claims.</p> <p><b>To read:</b> Part #4 (113-140)</p>
Week #6	<p><b>How friends help us heal:</b> Danielle and Amara both help Ruthie get back into the world, but they treat her very differently. Explain their approaches and how they affect Ruthie.</p> <p><b>Drafting Growing and Influences Research Essay</b></p> <p><b>Peer Brainstorming and Reviews</b></p> <p><b>Revisions and final essay publication</b></p> <p><b>How our experiences and influences affect our attitudes:</b> By the end of the story, Ruthie is a very different person. How has she changed and what led to those changes?</p> <p><b>What have we learned?</b> About immigration? Growing and healing? Cubans moving to New York after the Revolution? The importance of stories?</p> <p><b>To read:</b> Part #5 (141- 170)</p>

## Discussion Questions with CCSS Linked to Grade 6:

The book starts with Ruthie saying, “When we lived in Cuba I was smart. But when we got to Queens, in New York City, in the United States of America, I became dumb, just because I couldn’t speak English.” What do we know about Ruthie, based on this opening line? What else can we infer? What kinds of things do you expect from a book after reading this first line?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.5](#)

Ramu is Ruthie’s first friend at school, maybe because they are both new immigrants who feel like they shouldn’t be in the “dumb” class. What else makes them get along so well?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#)

Danielle, one of Ruthie’s new friends, is from Belgium. Ruthie admires everything about Danielle: she can speak French, she has excellent manners, and she is in the smart class. But Ruthie thinks her other friends are plain. She says, “They only speak English. They never dream about a lost beautiful island” (13). List some positive experiences of being an immigrant. What does Ruthie see as the benefit of being an immigrant? As immigrants, what benefits do Ruthie and Danielle enjoy that other kids don’t?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.5](#)

Ruthie really wants a pair of go-go boots like Danielle’s. She’s always walking around singing the popular 60s song “These Boots Are Made for Walkin’.” She can’t believe it when her Papi gets her a pair. What do go-go boots represent (symbolize) for Ruthie?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.5](#)

Ruthie used to be “Miss Hopscotch Queen of Queens.” How does she react to this loss after the accident?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.5](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#)

Ruthie’s mother always cries because she misses Cuba, but Ruthie’s Baba says, “We can’t keep looking back.” What can you infer about the family’s relationship to Cuba? What about their new relationship to the United States? Compare and contrast Mami’s experiences in Queens and in Cuba.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#)

Ruthie has to translate for her mother at the grocery store. What other tasks is Ruthie given because of her unique immigrant experience? How does this add to our knowledge of the immigrant experience?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.5](#)

How has Papi bought into the American Dream? What does it mean that both the Oldsmobile and the go-go boots are lost? In what ways does *poco a poco* (“little by little”) relate to the American Dream? Do you agree?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#)

What does the loss of the go-go boots represent for Ruthie?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.5](#)

At the beginning of the story, Ruthie is placed in the remedial class. Now Joy is her personal tutor and celebrates Ruthie’s work. Yet when Joy gives Ruthie a gold star, she says, “I think maybe part of the reason I am getting it is because Joy feels sorry for me” (56). What can we infer about Ruthie’s confidence based on this statement?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.5](#)

When Ruthie gets sad while she is bedridden in her cast, she often thinks about Cuba (56). How do her memories of Cuba help her to heal? Why do you think she keeps returning to Cuba in her mind?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.5](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#)

Ruthie talks about her big and her small wishes—her small wish is “to look out the window and just see the world” (56). In what ways is this wish bigger than Ruthie realizes?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.5](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6](#)

About four months into having her body cast, Ruthie says, “My bed is my island; my bed is my prison; my bed is my home” (59). Compare and contrast these different nouns. Why do you think Ruthie chose these very different words to describe her bed? What can we infer about her experience being bedridden?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#)

Ruthie loves stories. She asks Baba, her grandmother, about her journey from Poland to Cuba. What is interesting about the story Baba tells? Why might it be important for Ruthie to keep hearing that story, or to write it down?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#)

How does Ruthie use stories to help her cope with her sadness and her fear? For example, she sees Nancy Drew’s confidence and bravery and it helps her to deal with her fears about her injury. She even pretends that she is a part of Nancy Drew’s stories (70). Pick another example and explain how Ruthie uses that story to help her heal and grow.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#)

When Ruthie is talking with Papi about how angry she is with the boys who caused the accident, he tells her, “Even good people can do bad things” (72). Do you agree? What would you say to Ruthie about her anger and hate? Why do you think she says that the anger is “a stone in her heart”?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.5](#)

Ruthie has spent months missing the outdoors, yet when Bobby and Clay take her outside to the ambulance she is scared and says that there is “too much sky.” Why do you think this is the case? How would you react if you hadn’t been out of your bed for five months?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.5](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#)

Ramu says that his mother is worried he and his brother will lose their customs and language if they play too much with the other children. What can we infer about his mother based on her fears? Do you agree? How does this add to our knowledge of the immigrant experience?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#)

Ruthie writes letters to both her God and Ramu’s God, Shiva. She writes to Shiva and asks for help even though she comes from a different religion. How does Ruthie’s friendship with Ramu help her to see from other perspectives? Does Ramu learn to see the world this way too?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#)

How does Avik’s death give Ruthie a new perspective? How does changing her perspective play a huge role in Ruthie’s own healing?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#)

Chicho tells Ruthie that “there’s more time than life”—“*Hay más tiempo que vida*” (128). What do you think this means? Give an example.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#)

At Ruthie’s birthday, a great many people come together to celebrate. What different cultures, languages, and traditions are present? How does this demonstrate a different side of the immigrant experience? What about a different side of the American Dream? (104)

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#)

What eventually helps Ruthie to forgive the *muchachitos* who caused the accident? What can we infer about Ruthie’s own growth and healing because of this?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#)

When Ruthie finally gets most of her cast off, she feels like “a turtle that’s lost half of her shell” (114). After desiring to be free from her bed for so long, why do you think she has this reaction?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#)

Frida Kahlo is the patron saint of injured artists. How does Frida help Ruthie become whole again?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#)

Why does Ruthie want to become a storyteller? What can we infer about her desire to keep people’s stories?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#)

Now that Ruthie is healed she has a new obstacle to overcome, but this one isn’t physical. Why is Ruthie afraid to walk?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#)

After her injury, Ruthie is angry with Danielle for not coming to visit; however, they eventually become very close friends. How does Ruthie’s view of Danielle change over the course of the book?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#)

Why is Amara different from the other nurses? How is her approach to helping Ruthie different? What can we infer about Amara’s character?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.6](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#)

Amara says, “We all have scars. Some of us have scars you can see and some of us have scars that we hide deep inside, hoping no one will ever ask about them” (138). What types of scars does Ruthie have? What types of scars do you have? Are all scars bad?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#)

Amara says that sometimes “you have to dive before you can swim” (154). Do you agree? Give an example of a time you’ve had to dive before you could swim.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#)

When Ruthie puts on Danielle’s old go-go boots, she learns to trust her leg again. Why do you think this is the case? What do the go-go boots represent for Ruthie now?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#)

Near the end of the novel, Ruthie says that she’s gone through a metamorphosis and can never go back to the old Ruthie. Identify two new characteristics that demonstrate how she has changed. What good things have come from her accident? In what ways is Ruthie a lucky, broken girl?

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1](#); [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4](#)

## Activities:

Ruthie meets a lot of characters along the way that help her to get better (both inside and out). Pick one of these characters and identify how he or she helped Ruthie to grow. Aside from healing her broken leg, Ruthie has to learn to heal her sadness and fear, and ease “the stone of hatred in her heart.”

**Characters:** Joy (teacher), Chicho, Baba, Ramu, Frida, Nancy Drew, and the other authors: Emily Dickinson, José Martí, Lewis Carroll, etc.

Ruthie says, “Books saved me during all those months I was in bed” (147). Do you have a particular book that is special to you? Describe your favorite book and explain why the story is so important to you.

**Chart:** What do you learn about Cuba throughout the novel? Use a chart to keep track of the information you learn as you read. Later, pick one key element and research it. Report on what you find.

When Ruthie has the accident in her bed, Mami also says that she feels like their apartment is a prison. Ruthie’s grandfather tells her, “*No hay mal que dure cien años,*” which means “There’s no pain that can last a hundred years.” Both Mami and Ruthie are struggling in their own ways. Think about a time when you felt that you were stuck or felt overcome by something you were experiencing. Write a letter to Ruthie or Mami to share your experience and offer some advice for the situation that they’re in.

This story is about many immigrants and their experiences. Every character has a different point of view. How does each one feel about his or her new life in America? How can you tell? Pick one character and draw a character chart, including a picture of the individual and key quotes that help to demonstrate that character’s experiences in America.

## Questions & Answers with Ruth Behar

1. *While Ruthie is confined to her bed throughout much of the book, her Mami is also forced to stay in the apartment for much of the year Ruthie spends in the body cast, leading to a complicated—and not always tender—dynamic between the two. What is your connection to this experience? In your dedication to the book, you write, “For my son, Gabriel, who was also wounded as a child and recovered.” Did you have to act as caregiver for your son during his recovery, and if so, was your approach to this role informed by your experience being bedridden when you were younger?*

Writing *Lucky Broken Girl* brought back many memories of the time when I was bedridden and my mother needed to take responsibility for my care. Mami was only thirty then, a young and beautiful woman, recently arrived from Cuba and trying to adjust to a new life in the United States. I remember feeling sorry for her, even more sorry than I felt for myself, that she had to be cooped up with me at home. Although I recovered and learned to walk again without a limp, I became very sedentary afterwards, and never felt confident enough in my legs to run or play sports. When I became a mother, I watched with pride as my son Gabriel grew and showed great skill in sports. There I was, a bookish woman, a professor, jumping for joy when he scored a goal in soccer, and exhilarated to see how fast he could run. I hoped he'd be the athlete I couldn't be. So I was devastated when Gabriel suffered a ligament injury to his left leg at the age of twelve and could no longer play soccer or engage in any sports that involved jumping. He had to have two surgeries while in high school. Every time we passed a soccer field, I held back my tears. I was thoroughly immersed in caring for him, doing everything I could to boost his confidence, and learning about treatments for ligament injuries. I went with him to physical therapy several times a week, and we traveled around the country together seeking advice from many orthopedic surgeons. I would have done anything to spare Gabriel, to have given him a few more years to enjoy the freedom of moving his body freely, carelessly. We became close through the whole experience, sharing an awareness of the body's fragility, and realizing that in life when one door closes, another opens. Gabriel later went on to study photography and film, though he avidly follows sports, and writes for a Detroit Pistons blog.

2. *Ruthie's neighborhood is populated by a diverse mix of cultures and languages: two of her best friends are also the children of immigrants, from India and Belgium. Is this what your neighborhood was like growing up, and has the area changed over time? Have you stayed in touch with any of your neighbors or friends from this period?*

My neighborhood in Queens, New York, was extremely diverse. There were immigrants from many places who spoke different languages, and represented different cultures, and that seemed totally normal to me.

I actually did have a best friend from Belgium, on whom I based the character of Danielle. I remember her fondly. She moved to Canada when we were in high school and we remained in touch by letter and phone for many years, but it's been a while now since we've connected. I hope I can find her and send her a copy of *Lucky Broken Girl*.

There were two little boys, brothers from India, who lived on our street. I didn't know them well because they kept to themselves, but in the book I tried to imagine what a friendship with the older brother, who was my age, might have been like. Unfortunately, the heartbreaking story I tell in the book about the younger brother's death is true. It was something that haunted me while I was bedridden and was never able to forget.

I didn't go back to my old neighborhood while I was writing *Lucky Broken Girl*, choosing to conjure it through my memories. I finally went this summer for a visit with my husband and son Gabriel. It was very much as I remembered it. The brick buildings looked the same and there were still fences around the lawns. But I was delighted to discover that some of the lawns had been turned into fields of flowers. The flowers were in full bloom and looked beautiful, like the flowers on the cover of my book.

I noticed that there were new immigrants in the neighborhood. I exchanged polite words in Spanish with a family from Peru. Many of the women wore saris and hijabs. People were friendly and smiled as I took pictures and posed for pictures. They were probably wondering, “Who's this woman?” Seeing the children playing in the streets, I thought any of them could have been me fifty years ago.



3. *At the end of the novel, Ruthie has discovered passions for the arts and for writing. Clearly you have gained success as a writer—in the areas of anthropology, fiction, poetry, and memoir—but did you ever think you would be the next Frida Kahlo? What role has the visual or performing arts played in your adult life? Was there an actual person who inspired the character of Chicho, initiating your artistic education?*

When I was growing up in the 1960s, there wasn't as much information about Frida Kahlo as there is today. Her work had just started to be acclaimed in Mexico by avant-garde artists and feminists. So in truth I didn't have Frida Kahlo as a role model at the time I was bedridden. I discovered her afterwards, when I was in my mid-twenties and traveled to Mexico for the first time. I saw an exhibit of her work in Mexico City, and visited her house, which had been turned into a museum. It was very moving to learn about her work and her story as a woman who'd suffered terrible injuries and spent many years bedridden and eventually needed to have a leg amputated. I thought about how I might add Frida Kahlo retrospectively into Ruthie's story, and remembered that we had a kind neighbor who adored art and was very cheerful and would often come over to visit. He and my father made some paintings together that still hang in my parents' house today. He was Cuban, not Mexican, but I decided to make him Mexican in my book, so he'd be the one to introduce Ruthie to Frida Kahlo.

While in college, I had a strong interest in the performing arts. I adored Greek tragedies, and the plays of Chekhov and Ibsen. I took a playwriting course, and after an inspiring semester abroad in Spain, I came back and directed the play, *The House of Bernarda Alba* by Federico García Lorca. I almost flunked out because I put all my energies into directing and didn't study for my exams! But I discovered I was a writer, a storyteller. Being bedridden as a child, I had learned to relish my solitude, to use my imagination to entertain myself. During that time when I was so alone and searching for an understanding of my suffering, I found comfort in books. Authors became my greatest heroes. Little did I know that it was all training for my future life as a writer, for all the moments I've spent alone at my desk praying for the words to come so I can tell the stories buried inside me.

4. *The novel makes meaningful comparisons between Ruthie's family and that of her neighbor Ramu: Ruthie's Papi actively seeks to assimilate into U.S. culture, as symbolized in the Oldsmobile he buys, while Ramu's mother doesn't allow her children to play outside or enter the homes of their neighbors, fearing the “foreign” American customs will rub off on them. What are some of the costs and rewards of assimilating into one's adopted culture?*

This is a complicated question! It is difficult to hold on to one culture while trying to become part of another. The cost of assimilating is that you may lose a language, a way of thinking, a way of celebrating. The place you're from starts to fade away in your memory. You acquire a new language, a new way of thinking, a new way of celebrating. You become accustomed to life in a different place. But despite all your efforts, you may feel uneasy. You haven't totally mastered that new culture, or you're still looked upon as a foreigner. You end up betwixt and between, uncertain of where you belong. That's why Ramu's mother tries to protect her children from the effects of assimilation, so they won't forget their Indianness, in the hope that American culture will slip past them, not make too much of an imprint. Yet there are rewards to adopting a new culture. You grow and become doubled—now you have more than one language, more than one way of seeing the world, more than one way of celebrating life. I feel grateful I have two languages, Spanish and English, in which to

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## Questions & Answers with Ruth Behar

think and feel. I can read José Martí and Emily Dickinson in their original languages. I can feel at home in Havana and New York City. Where do I belong the most? I'd rather not have to choose. I come from many places and belong to all, as José Martí once said in his *Simple Verses*.

5. *Food is an important cultural signifier, and a link with tradition, for Ruthie and Ramu, as well as their families. What culinary traditions have you kept alive as a Cuban-American, and what personal associations do they have for you?*

I grew up in my mother's kitchen with the rich scent of onions, garlic, and green peppers frying in olive oil, the *sofrito* that is used in many Cuban dishes, from *frijoles negros* (black beans) to *tamales* and *arroz con pollo* (chicken and yellow rice). Those dishes still bring back childhood memories whenever I have them. But I especially love to make *flan* and that is why I write about Ruthie and her mother making a *flan* together. I adore burning the sugar in the bottom of the pan, watching as the white sugar crystals are transformed into the dark rich syrup that hardens and becomes the bittersweet crust. I'm also a fan of sweet guava pastries and coconut ice cream. All these flavors, savory and sweet, remind me of vibrant times with my Jewish-Cuban family. We held on so faithfully to Cuban culture because that culture embraced our grandparents when they arrived in Cuba in the 1920s, fleeing poverty and discrimination. I have also inherited Jewish culinary traditions from my two grandmothers, Baba who was Ashkenazi and from Poland, and Abuela, who was Sephardic and from Turkey. They both found their way alone to Cuba as young women, bravely beginning a new life. After we resettled in New York, they held on to food customs from the Old World. Baba made *blintzes* and Abuela made *borekas*. These were different kinds of turnovers, one filled with farmer cheese and the other with kashkaval cheese, and I found them equally delicious. In *Lucky Broken Girl*, I write about Baba's *kijalas*. These were cookies so hard that you had to dip them into hot tea not to break your teeth. I remember long afternoons with Baba, dipping cookies into hot tea while she told me stories. After we were done, she'd clear the dishes and say, "*Bueno, ya arreglamos el mundo.*" We could "fix all the world's problems" sitting together dipping cookies into tea.

6. *Ruthie's mother cries when she thinks about the life she left behind in Cuba, but Ruthie's Baba says, "We can't keep looking back." Recently there has been a thaw in US Cuban relations, and this past year you even made a visit there with renowned poet Richard Blanco (who was invited to read his work at the inaugural ceremony of President Barack Obama). Can you speak to the feelings Ruthie and her family might have about these historic changes? Is it ever possible to "go home again" after so many years of divisive political rhetoric?*

I've been visiting Cuba for many years. Growing up hearing about Cuba all my life, I had to see it for myself. I had to find the park where I played as a child under the banyan tree. I had to find the places in Old Havana where my parents lived. I had to find the streets where we'd strolled. I had to find the ocean we'd gazed upon. But my parents and grandparents didn't feel the same way. They didn't want to look back. That didn't mean they ever forgot about Cuba. They spoke Spanish, and watched melodramatic *telenovelas*, they told Cuban jokes, and kept up with the news about Cuba. Baba, even though it gave her terrible indigestion, still relished a bowl of *arroz* and *frijoles negros* until the end of her days. But leaving Cuba had been painful. They had found a deep happiness there, and they didn't want to repeat the experience of returning, only to have to say goodbye again to the beloved island. Baba, seeing me planning yet another trip to Cuba, would say, "What did you lose in Cuba?" She didn't understand my obsession with Cuba, my desire to claim a place for myself in the island I had left as a child. That's why it was so special to go to Cuba with Richard Blanco, who is an old friend, and share our fascination with Cuba, and also explore together how Cuba has changed and become a different country from the one our families held on to in their memories. Ultimately, it's not possible to go home again because the places we leave behind inevitably change, and we ourselves change and become different people. Richard once said that the only real home is the one we lose. I think he may be right.

