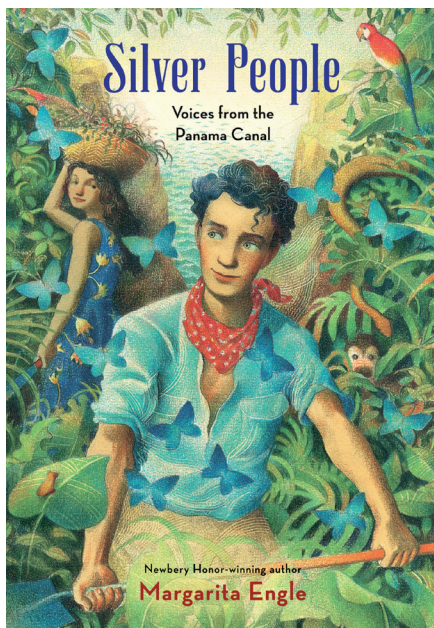


# Silver People by MARGARITA ENGLE



## About the Book

One hundred years ago, the world celebrated the opening of the Panama Canal. On August 15, 1914, the Panama Canal opened, connecting the world's two largest oceans and signaling America's emergence as a global superpower. It was a miracle, this path of water where a mountain had stood—and creating a miracle is no easy thing. Thousands lost their lives, and those who survived worked under the harshest conditions for only a few silver coins a day.

From the young “silver people” whose backbreaking labor built the canal to the denizens of the endangered rainforest itself, this novel in verse tells the story of one of the largest and most difficult engineering projects ever undertaken.

## Background Building

To set the stage for reading this novel in verse, identify the time frame (1906–1914) for the story's setting, as well as the place and geographic location (Panama). Talk about what was going on in the world during Theodore Roosevelt's presidency and prior to World War I and locate Panama and the surrounding countries (particularly Cuba and Jamaica) on a map. Look for Bottle Alley, Gatun Lake, the Chagres River, the Gaillard Cut, and the island now known as Barro Colorado, which has been extensively studied by the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute. Look for historical photos and documents that help provide

a context for understanding the building of the Panama Canal. One resource is a jackdaw of facsimiles of primary source documents available at Jackdaw.com, specifically this collection: “Panama Canal: Building the 8th Wonder of the World.” This includes many maps, blueprints, ships' dockets, personal letters and telegrams, ledgers, health records, period postcards, etc. The poet also provides a bibliography of selected references and acknowledgments to seek out, including the following:

- Isthmian Historical Society
- Panama Collection of the Canal Zone Library-Museum
- Silver People Heritage Foundation
- United States National Archives

Work together to make a list of the countries that are involved in the creation of the Panama Canal referenced in the poems on pages—pp. 4–8, 11, 12, 14, 46, 165, 182, 213–215.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.7; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7]

## Characters

As students read or listen to this novel in verse, encourage them to visualize each of the main characters and talk about what they look like, what country they are from, what language they speak, how they feel about these events, and what dreams or goals they each have. Work together to draw character sketches or find magazine or web-based images for these characters:

1. Mateo, from Cuba (our protagonist and a canal laborer who aspires to be an artist)
  2. Anita, from Panama (an orphan and herb girl, sweetheart of Mateo)
  3. Henry, from Jamaica (digger, friend of Mateo)
  4. \*John Stevens (chief engineer), p. 43
  5. Old Maria (surrogate mother to Anita), p. 83
  6. \*Theodore Roosevelt (U.S. president), p. 95
  7. Augusto (New York scientist and artist originally from Puerto Rico), p. 115–117
  8. \*George W. Goethals (chief engineer), p. 149
  9. \*Jackson Smith (manager), p. 151
  10. \*Gertrude Beeks (Welfare Department), p. 163
  11. \*Harry Franck (census enumerator), p. 213
- (\*These characters are actual historical figures.)

Students could also each choose a favorite character and

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read aloud the poems from her/his perspective, readers' theater style.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.3; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.6; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.6]

## Animals of the Panama Jungle

Each of the following animals is featured with a poem from its perspective. Students can choose one of these to prepare for oral reading, researching (online) images and sound effects to accompany their reading. One helpful resource is [Animals.NationalGeographic.com](http://Animals.NationalGeographic.com).

1. Army ants, p. 137
2. Bullet ants, p. 138
3. Capuchin, p. 200
4. Crocodile, p. 105
5. Giant hissing cockroach, p. 104
6. Giant swallowtail butterflies, p. 201
7. Glass frogs, p. 26
8. Howler monkeys (see next section)
9. Jaguar, p. 106
10. King vulture, p. 202
11. Monkey-eating eagle, p. 58
12. Mosquitoes, p. 172
13. Poison dart frogs, p. 231
14. Poison dart tadpoles, p. 245
15. Quetzal, p. 244
16. Ruby-throated hummingbird, p. 136
17. Scarlet macaws, p. 230
18. Three-toed sloth, p. 59
19. Tree viper, p. 60
20. Vampire bats, pp. 173–174
21. Violet-green swallows, p. 175

Other animals mentioned in the poems in *Silver People* include:

1. Beetles, moths, p. 59
2. Bellbirds, woodpeckers, honeycreepers, p. 208
3. Boa constrictor, whiptail lizards, agoutis, capybaras, quetzal birds, p. 131
4. Blue frogs, p. 188
5. Butterflies (clearwing, swordtail, daggerwing, swallowtail, owl), p. 119
6. Coatimundi, p. 120
7. Fireflies, p. 209
8. Insects, pit viper snakes, p. 85
9. Leeches, p. 68
10. Mosquitoes, biting ants, stinging wasps, ticks, tarantu-

las, scorpions, snakes, p. 74

11. Orioles, hummingbirds, egrets, owls, butterflies, puma, snake, crocodile, shark, pp. 98–99
12. Parrots, macaws, orioles, fruitcrows, p. 118
13. Peccary, tapir, p. 201
14. Toucans, p. 16
15. Tree frogs, crickets, night monkeys, screech owls, jaguar, p. 79
16. Vultures, p. 84
17. Yellow frog, p. 78

If time allows, collect the images of each of these animals and create a collage of animal pictures in a jungle mural along one wall.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1a; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1a]

## Howler Monkeys

At regular intervals, Engle includes poems from the perspective of howler monkeys, on pages 25, 57, 103, 135, 171, 199 (two voices), 229, 243. These poems lend themselves to reading aloud with two groups alternating lines, particularly the poem for two voices on page 199. Discuss with students why Engle features this animal in particular among all the other animals referenced in the novel. What do they bring to the story of the building of the Panama Canal? To hear what a howler monkey sounds like, visit [www.youtube.com/watch?v=REPoVfN-Ij4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=REPoVfN-Ij4).

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1a; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1a]

## The Trees

The poet also offers several poems from the point of view of the trees in the jungle of Panama (pp. 28, 61, 107, 139, 176, 203, 232, 246). Invite students to read, revisit, and discuss these “tree” poems and how they fit in the overall story. Students can collaborate with a partner to use Glogster.com and create a quick glog, a digital interactive poster that pulls together images and key words from the “tree” poem of their choice in a new visual representation of their selected poem. Challenge them to explain their choice of poem, key words, and visual images and their importance to the story. Talk about what the perspective of trees adds to the story of the building of the Panama Canal.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.5; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.5]

## Poem Titles (and Subtitles)

This novel in verse unfolds one poem at a time, told from various points of view. Once students are familiar with each of the major characters and their roles in the story, talk

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about what each point of view contributes to the narrative, particularly the perspectives of Mateo, Henry, Anita, and Augusto. How does the poet use the poem title and subtitle to guide the reader?

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.5; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.5]

Another important component in understanding the characters is the role of language in communication. Several poems (on pages 40, 44, 45, 112–113, 120, 210, for example) explicitly reference language—whether one speaks English or Spanish (or another language) and how that affects one’s place in society. Discuss the place of language in the power dynamic in this story and in our own place and time in society. Is speaking a language other than English an advantage or a disadvantage? When and why and how?

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.9-10.3; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.11-12.3]

## Figurative Language

Margarita Engle frequently incorporates figurative language throughout the poems in this book, particularly similes and alliteration. Challenge students to identify examples of each. Then discuss the impact of each example they find. What does a simile offer in each case? What does the use of alliteration add to the poem? (Examples of similes can be found on pages 36, 40, 65, 66, 68, 78, 79, 91, 97, 115–117, 123, 148, 154, 157, 167, 215, 217. Examples of alliteration can be found on pages 3, 58, 79, 83, 154, 155, among others.)

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4]

## STEM Connections: Engineering, Machinery, Math

There are several STEM connections to make in this novel in verse (with STEM = Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). Challenge students to research the “Bucyrus steam shovel” (referenced on page 95). Share images and YouTube videos to understand how this equipment was used to build the Panama Canal. Why is this important in a novel in poems? Compare the rate of pay earned by the workers (Mateo earned “twenty cents per hour,” p. 41; Henry earned “ten cents per hour,” p. 42) and talk about the inequity in pay for workers depending on their skin color that is described in the novel. How does that compare with how wages are calculated and paid today?

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RST.9-10.6; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RST.11-12.6]

## Themes

As the reading comes to a close, invite students to consider the themes that emerge in the novel. What message resonates from the perspective of each of the narrators? Here are a few key poem examples to revisit and reread together:

- “Anita,” pp. 161–162, 181, 226
- “Henry,” p. 210
- “Harry,” Franck pp. 213–215
- “Augusto,” pp. 219–220
- “Mateo and Anita Together,” pp. 235–240
- “The Trees,” pp. 246–247
- “Epilogue,” pp. 249–250

How does Engle weave together the multiple perspectives (of fictional characters, historical figures, animal voices, and the trees themselves) to communicate with the reader? What unique element does each perspective offer? Why is the book titled *Silver People*? Why is it important to revisit the building of the Panama Canal one hundred years ago?

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.2]

## Literature Links

If time allows for further study, compare this novel in verse with other works that offer a similar focus. For example: \*Connect this novel with Laurence Yep’s historical novel *Dragon’s Gate* about Chinese workers who helped build the transcontinental railroad across the western U.S. in the 1860s.

\*Link this novel with another by Margarita Engle, *The Surrender Tree*, a kind of prequel tale set in Cuba in 1896. Here Rosa, a nurse who, like Anita, knows herbal remedies, tends the sick and wounded of every race and culture as Cubans fight three wars for independence.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.2; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.2]

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