

THE POET SLAVE OF CUBA, a Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano
Gracias, y gracias a Dios. Thank you.

My mother is from the beautiful town of Trinidad in Cuba, and my father is an artist from Los Angeles, California. He traveled to Cuba after seeing pictures of my mother's town in National Geographic. When my parents met, they did not speak the same language. They communicated by drawing pictures. I grew up in Los Angeles, but my mother was homesick, and she told me stories about her homeland. The stories worked their magic. During childhood visits to my grandmother great-grandmother, and Cuban cowboy cousins, I fell in love with the tropical island, and with my extended family. After the Missile Crisis of 1962, travel to Cuba was prohibited, and I did not return until 1991. It was an emotional reunion, and ever since then, I have devoted my life to writing about the island.

I wrote *The Poet Slave of Cuba, a Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano*, with hope that Manzano's courage and perseverance would serve as an inspiration for young people. As a slave during the 1800s, Manzano craved the chance to learn how to read and write. His life demonstrates the profound, universal longing for self-expression. He became a renowned poet, even while he was still a slave. His poems and autobiographical notes were smuggled to England by British abolitionists. They were translated and published, and had a powerful effect on public opinion regarding slavery, partly because they were the only known slave narrative written by a Cuban slave while he was still held in bondage, and partly because they were so powerful, and so moving. After reading Manzano's notes about his childhood, I felt haunted by an image he described, of a time when he used his fingernail to slice words into the leaves of a plant in the garden, because he was not supposed to be writing, and he had to practice in secret. I could smell the fragrant leaf, and see the tropical flowers. I experienced a sort of time travel. For ten years, I struggled to write about Manzano in prose, but it never worked. Until I switched to free verse, the story of this brave poet's childhood simply did not spring to life. To my knowledge, there had never been a youth biography of a poet written entirely in poetry, but I had read Karen Hesse's multiple-voice free verse novel, *Witness*, so I knew there was room for unusual formats. I felt compelled to try again, and once the story was told in verse, I was able to focus on Manzano's spirit of wonder, and his hopeful emotions. In his autobiographical notes, he mentioned that he hoped to write a novel about his life, but he never had the chance, so I felt like I was doing it for him, with his spirit watching, cheering me on. I believe the story worked in verse rather than prose primarily because poetry is a suitable vessel for expressing the inner life, a secret life, a life of hidden hopes. I feel that Manzano's paired longings for freedom from bondage, and freedom of expression, are just as relevant today as during Cuba's tragic centuries of colonialism and

slavery. All people, regardless of time or place, know what it feels like to yearn for a way to communicate the inexpressible. Words are as close as we can come.

Read p. 3-4, and p. 104.

THE SURRENDER TREE, Poems of Cuba's Struggle for Freedom

Novel in verse about Rosa la Bayamesa, a self-taught nurse who was born into slavery, freed at the onset of Cuba's first war for independence from Spain, and spent 30 years hiding in caves and jungles in the wilderness, using her knowledge of wild plants to heal the wounds of soldiers from both sides.

Read p. 25-26, and p. 30-31.

TROPICAL SECRETS, Holocaust Refugees in Cuba – H. Holt. April, 09

During the early years of WWII, when ships filled with European Jewish refugees were turned away from New York and Toronto, they sailed to Cuba, and anchored in Havana Harbor, until most were given asylum. Cuban teenagers volunteered to help the refugees learn Spanish. Even though this is a story of desperation, it is also the story of survival, safe harbors, and the kindness of strangers. In that sense, it is a celebration, a festive book, about the triumph of hope.

Read p. 84-87, 94, 99