

MY BRIGADISTA YEAR

KATHERINE PATERSON

ABOUT THE BOOK

Lora, thirteen, has lived in the city of Havana all her life. But in 1961, when she hears the call from the revolutionary movement to spread literacy in Cuba, she answers it—to her parents' dismay. She joins the brigades of young people who move to the countryside, share the farmwork, and teach their host families to read. As Lora changes the lives of Luis and Veronica Santana, their children, and their neighbors, they change her life as well. Despite the threat of violence from insurgents, Lora thrives as a brigadista, growing in strength and confidence. This inspiring novel about the Cuban Literacy Campaign celebrates the power of reading and the ability of young people to change the world.

Common Core Connections

The Common Core State Standards require a close reading of literary texts, with analysis of themes, structure, narrative voice, and use of language. Katherine Paterson's historical novel *My Brigadista Year* lends itself to careful study of its complex characters, vivid historical setting, outstanding figurative language, and themes about change and the power of reading. This teachers' guide includes discussion questions and curriculum activities to be used with grades five through eight in conjunction with reading the book as a class, in small groups, or independently. Notes throughout the guide correlate the questions and activities with specific Common Core English Language Arts Standards. For more information on specific standards for your grade level, visit the Common Core website at www.corestandards.org.



HC: 978-0-7636-9508-8 • Also available in audio and as an e-book

— A Junior Library Guild Selection —

"Paterson weaves in details about Cuban history and the events that led to the overthrow of the Batista regime and the rise of Communism. . . . Paterson's story is without political agenda, focusing instead on an improbable (and successful) literacy campaign and how it dramatically expands the world of one sheltered but determined girl." — *Publishers Weekly*

"A positive study of an amazing moment in history that nonetheless acknowledges the darker political machinations at play. . . . The themes of literacy, freedom, and community stay strong. Educational and inspiring." — *Kirkus Reviews*

"Readers will find that the strength of the book lies not in Lora's adventures but in the critical question she asks: Which country is truly perfect? A fascinating . . . portrayal of a turbulent time in history." — *Booklist*



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describe Lora at the beginning of the novel in terms of her background and personality. What motivates her to join the brigadistas? What does that choice reveal about her character? Relate this decision to her choice to go to an expensive top school.
2. When Lora sees the recruitment poster of a girl in uniform, she imagines “what it might feel like to be truly free” and not spend the next few years preparing “to make a proper marriage” (page 6). What does this reaction show about her and about expectations for girls in Cuban society at the time? Give other examples of how females and males are treated differently in the novel.
3. Describe Lora’s parents and what they value. In what ways are they different from each other? How do they react to her plan to join the brigadistas? How does Lora’s plan to join reflect her parents’ values? Why do they object?
4. Lora calls her abuela “a rare human being—an old woman with young ideas” (page 30). Why does she say that? How does her grandmother help Lora with her goal of teaching literacy? Why does she help her? Describe their relationship and its importance to Lora.
5. “It was to be like an army of young people — not an army carrying weapons of war, but, as Abuela had said, one carrying pencils and books” (page 38). Analyze similarities and differences between the literacy volunteers and the military, giving specific examples. How was Lora’s experience like being in the military? Research the term *brigadista* and discuss its use for the literacy volunteers.
6. Describe how the fear of violence affected Lora, the other brigadistas, and those they were teaching. Explain what happened to Conrado Benítez and Manuel Ascunce. Why were the insurgents “determined to defeat the proposed literacy campaign” (page 39)?
7. Lora’s training as a teacher emphasizes being “open to all the things your students will teach you” (page 43). Why is that considered important? Do you agree that teachers should learn from their students? Why? Discuss some of the things that Lora learns from her students and how she encourages them to teach her. Connect your discussion to the last line of chapter 18: “I taught the campesinos how to read and write, and they taught me how to be a person” (page 177).
8. At the same time that she is learning from them, Lora makes a big difference for her students. “You have given us a new life, Maestra,” Luis tells her when she leaves in December (page 172). Explain what he means and the ways in which Lora’s work has changed their lives.
9. Some governments suppress literacy in parts of the population, such as among females or certain ethnic groups. During the time of slavery in the United States, it was illegal in places to teach slaves to read. Under what circumstances is learning to read revolutionary? Why would a government forbid literacy? Why would a government like Castro’s encourage it?
10. Discuss the epigraph from José Martí (“It is the duty of man to raise up man”) and why the author might have chosen it. How does the novel demonstrate this belief?
11. What did you learn in the epilogue? Did anything in it surprise you? Why did the author create an epilogue instead of leaving the fate of the characters to the reader’s imagination?
12. In the epilogue, the adult Lora says, “My country is not perfect, but, then, is yours?” (page 180). Discuss why she says this and talk about the imperfections of your own country. What can be gained by analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of different countries, including your own?

13. The novel uses figurative language to paint images in the reader's mind. For example, Lora's "quiet school was like a swarm of bees whose hive has been disturbed" (page 25). Find other examples of figurative language in the story, identify what's being compared, and discuss the impact of the images. Is the imagery drawn from many areas of life, such as nature or machinery, or just a few?

COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS These questions correlate to Common Core ELA Reading: Literature Standards for Key Ideas and Details RL.5–8.1, RL.5–8.2, RL.5–8.3; Craft and Structure RL.5–8.4, RL.5–6.5, RL.5–6.6; and ELA Speaking and Listening Standards for Comprehension and Collaboration SL.5–8.1.1.

ACTIVITIES

Maestra

After reading the novel, have students watch the 2012 documentary *Maestra*, described in the author's note. An eight-minute version is also available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9rnqR9utE8>. Hold a discussion in which students make connections between the film and the novel, then compare the advantages and disadvantages of each format.

José Martí, Revolutionary Poet

Have students research José Martí, the Cuban poet and journalist whom Lora admires. Each student should find a poem or another piece of his writing to read aloud to the class. Hold a discussion about what Martí did and why he is often considered a hero.

Dear Friends

Ask students to imagine that it is a year after the novel ends and Lora is back in Havana. Have them write a letter from Lora to the children in the Santana family about her life and her plans for the future. Then have them write short letters from each child back to her that convey their emotions and personalities. Afterward, students can meet in small groups and compare letters.

Clouds Over Cuba

The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library's interactive documentary *Clouds Over Cuba* (<http://cloudsovercuba.com>) has video segments on the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the events leading up to them. It incorporates recordings, letters, and other material, enabling students to import these items to their calendars and experience the crisis in real time over thirteen days. Have students participate in the documentary and report back about what they learned.

Welcome to Cuba

As a class, make a substantial list of questions about Cuba that students might like to explore, covering areas like history, geography, important Cubans and Cuban-Americans, music, literature, food, sports, and so on. Then have pairs of students choose a topic, research it online and in print sources, and create a multimedia presentation to share with the class.

The Power of Reading

Have each student write an essay on how reading affects their life and what it would be like, especially outside of school, if they couldn't read. Before writing, they should observe the written word around them for a few days, noticing even small uses of print on cereal boxes, street signs, subway stops, television, and the like. The essay should also address what their future would be like without the ability to read.

Expand the Time Line

Create a classroom version of the book's time line and add events from the same time period in the United States. Each student should choose a year to copy and post the information from the book's time line. Then they should find a significant event from the United States in the same year and add it to the classroom time line. When it's complete, give students an opportunity to look closely at it and compare the information about both countries.

COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS These activities correlate to Common Core ELA Reading: Literature Standards for Key Ideas and Details RL.5–8.1, RL.5–8.2; Integration of Knowledge and Ideas RL.5–8.7; ELA Speaking and Listening Standards for Comprehension and Collaboration SL.5–8.1; Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas SL.5–8.5; ELA Writing Standards for Text Types and Purposes W.5–8.2, W.5–8.3; and Research to Build and Present Knowledge W.5–8.7.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo by Samantha Loomis Paterson

Katherine Paterson, a two-time winner of both the Newbery Medal and the National Book Award, has written more than thirty books and received numerous accolades, including the Hans Christian Andersen Award, the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, and the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award. A former National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, she is well known for her work promoting literacy in the United States and internationally. In 2000, the Library of Congress named her a Living Legend. Katherine Paterson lives in Barre, Vermont.

This guide was prepared by Kathleen Odean. She was a school librarian for more than fifteen years and now presents all-day workshops on new books for young people, including one that focuses on Common Core nonfiction. She served as chairperson of the 2002 Newbery Award Committee and is the author of several guides to children's books, including *Great Books for Girls*, *Great Books for Boys*, and *Great Books About Things Kids Love*.

ALSO BY KATHERINE PATERSON

A Boston Globe Best Children's Book of the Year

A Publishers Weekly Best Children's Book of the Year



★ "The Patersons have done a stellar job of maintaining the book's period feel while creating a fresher, tighter story that feels tailor-made for family reading."

— *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

★ "Told in the voice of a storyteller in the style of A. A. Milne or J. M. Barrie, the tale will make an excellent read-aloud. . . . The Patersons have done a lovely job updating and abridging this tale for today's readers."

— *School Library Journal* (starred review)

★ "Magical adventure. . . . A grand tale skillfully updated and tightened up, this should win the hearts of a new generation."

— *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)



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