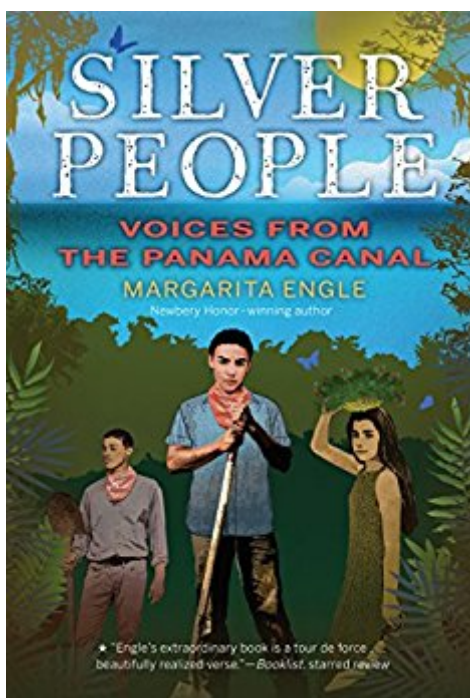


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# Silver People: Voices From The Panama Canal



## Synopsis

One hundred years ago, the world celebrated the opening of the Panama Canal, which connected the world's two largest oceans and signaled 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 back-breaking labor built the Canal to the denizens of the endangered rainforest itself, this is the story of one of the largest and most difficult engineering projects ever undertaken, as only Newbery Honor-winning author Margarita Engle could tell it.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Excellent!

Wanted a book for my child to read over the summer and they loved it. The book is still in great condition even though my child is very rough with everything.

This book is so beautiful. I read it with my family on our cruise to Panama. There is so much information couched inside the beautiful poetry. When my daughter read it aloud it really came to life. BEAUTIFUL>

The term "Silver People" in the title is not a compliment. It comes from the fact that when the Panama Canal was constructed, the white administrators and supervisors were paid in gold, while the workers were paid in less-valuable silver. They were also strictly segregated: whites, light-skinned workers, dark-skinned workers. I enjoyed the author's poetic voice in *The Wild Book*, but for me it's less successful in *Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal*. While this story centers on three main characters, the list of speakers includes 11 people, 22 creatures (insects, birds, animals), and even trees. This variety might have worked, except that the voices are not differentiated. The 14-year-old boy from Cuba who ran away from his abusive father, the man from Jamaica who dreamed of earning enough to support his mother and little brothers and sisters, the orphaned herb-girl raised by a local healer, the educated geologist from Puerto Rico: each one has a unique story and opinions and viewpoint, but their voices all sound alike. For example, when Mateo is hospitalized with malaria, he says this about the nurses: "ÃÃ Â| Most of them were hired on my home island, where they gained their healing experienceduring the war they call Spanish-American, even though it was really our war for independence from Spain, a Cuban war that was seized by the United States for its own purposes." Such complex syntax and vocabulary just don't sound like an uneducated young boy who is feverish with malaria. A few of the poems show interesting variations. The howler monkeys always shriek in ALL CAPS. The silent jaguar has a blank page. A snake has a single sentence printed one letter per line, so that it looks like a vine hanging from a tree. Most of the non-human voices are similar to each other. The frogs sing sing sing. The ants march march march. Overall, I'd have liked the voices to reflect the nature of each creature more. The background to building the Panama Canal could have been a compelling story. The canal was dug by hand, shovel after shovel filled with mud, backbreaking labor in the tropical heat. Workers were lured from far away by promises of good pay plus housing and meals. When they arrived in Panama and discovered the miserable conditions and worse pay, they had no way to go back home. I was hoping that this book would personalize their history.

I have always liked historical fiction as a genre, especially for children's literature. It combines a sense of narrative and imagination that can give readers a better sense of a time and place than a

historical account might do. Having said that, this book did an \*ok\* job of that. Using prose and poetry was a great concept in theory: those devices allow a concise and emotionally compelling story to unfold, using imagery and sound...if the writing is solid. In this case, the book lacked detail and impact. The characters were missing something, and the story could have been helped with pictures or a stronger storyline, more personal details in lieu of flat representations of the different groups that came together in building the Panama canal. They felt like archetypes, not people, which was alienating. Great concept, mediocre execution. The good intentions were there, at least, and there is a lot to use for teaching opportunities, if read with the intent of learning.

Silver People is a historical novel written in verse. Told in alternating perspectives over eight years, each poem is vibrant, unique, and many times heartbreaking. The story starts with Mateo, a fourteen year old boy from Cuba who lies about his ethnicity in order to get passage to and work in Panama. He's mixed, and even though this takes place over 100 years ago, the feeling of not fully belonging to one part of yourself or culture is still relevant. His dark skin and green eyes allow him to pass. Like many of the men who flocked to Panama during this time, Mateo wants to work. But with a new world and new people come many challenges. First, there's the hunger for food. Second, there's a hunger for home. Third, there's a fear of survival. Through his careful observations, we are given a scope of surviving the working life on the canal. A structure of segregation is placed: Americans, Frenchmen, and Dutch./ Spaniards, Greeks, Italians./ Jamaicans, Barbadians, Haitians leaving Mateo wondering how any of them will be able to work together. Although all of the men are doing backbreaking and soul crushing work each day, the white men get paid in gold, the dark Europeans in silver, and the islanders in half the silver as other men. During the night, the monkeys howl and insects bite; Mateo ends up wondering "How can I miss the place/ I was so desperate to leave?" When I read that I thought to myself that even now, that's the immigrant struggle. You long for a place that might give you a better life, a place that could be better, but also a place to belong to. At the end of the day, no matter where the working men came from, whether they wanted home, refuge, gold, silver, they were still joined in one thing: surviving the rain forest. Although physical survival isn't the only thing that bonds them. Henry, a Jamaican worker who watches as the medium-dark Spaniards get to sit for their meals while he has to stand, finds an unlikely friend in Mateo. They find commonality in sickness, mudslides, bitterness, pain, fighting, and a longing for home. Other narratives include that of Anita La Yerbera who becomes a close ally of Mateo's. Also an orphan, Anita was

abandoned in the forest and taken in by an old Cuban woman. Her voice is unique and offers a different perspective to life in Panama. Unlike Mateo and other newcomers who are there to blow up the trees and remove entire landmasses, Anita feels she belongs to the forest itself. It's her home, and we watch with her home is destroyed right before her eyes. I love that in this story of the struggle of humans versus nature, Margarita Engle gives nature a voice. "The Forest" gets its own sections, detailing the point of views of the animals as they watch and howl at the intruders. Okay, so I know this book is told in poems. Don't let this shy you away. What I love about this book is that each poem pulls you to the next. You can't read just one poem; you have to read just one more. This blog post could be 10 pages long because each poem packs such a punch and makes you stop and think about what Mateo, Anita, and Henry are going through. It makes you wonder just how much is different today. I laughed out loud at one of Anita's poems during Teddy Roosevelt's visit to the canal, and the sludge of tourists that "all they want/is hats" "white hats like the American president's, / hats woven in Ecuador, hats that tourists/ insist on calling Panama hats. Don't they/ understand that Latin America/ has many countries? It's not a laugh out loud thing, but 100 years later, still relevant. I wish Silver People had been around when I was in school. From our text books, all we learned about the Panama Canal was that "America built it." I wish I'd known about the Silver People. But when you're little, how do you go about describing the injustices of the world in a way that a child will understand? This is just the book for that. Margarita Engle weaves questions about identity, struggle, and discrimination, all through beautiful poetry. The truth about most of these men is that they didn't go home. Some didn't make it out of the forest alive. But the white Americans, the Italians, the Jamaicans, the Cubans who "passed, some of them stayed in Panama and became locals. Some spread out across the continent. This book reminded me that the history of the world should always be told through many perspectives, and that when pushed together we keep creating new cultures.

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