

Children of Flight Pedro Pan, by Maria Armengol Acierno, takes us back to 1961 in Cuba. Ten-year-old Maria Aleman and her younger brother, Jose, have been put on a plane by their parents, who have decided to send the children to Miami to get them away from Fidel Castro's Cuba. Maria and Jose have no idea what to expect in the strange new country that awaits them just a short flight from their home. Clutching only a few belongings and her set of paints, Maria tries to catch a last glimpse of her mother and father as the airplane lifts from the runway and turns toward Florida.

This historical fiction novel is part of the *Stories of the States* series - historical novels whose intent is to show how America's diverse heritage and culture has been shaped by events of the past.

Children of Flight Pedro Pan concludes with a short "historical post-script" section that tells more about the real events and people depicted in the story.

BACKGROUND

The Postscript section of the book points out that the characters in this novel are fictional, but the historic events portrayed are indeed true. Thousands of Cuban children *were* secretly flown to the United States when Fidel Castro seized control of the Cuban government. The Caribbean island of Cuba gained its independence in 1901. At first, Cuba did well, making money by exporting its sugar crop. But after world sugar prices fell, many Cubans experienced economic hardship. Cuban democracy was very frail and weakened by widespread corruption. There were elections, but votes were bought openly. After 1933, a man named Fulgencio Batista dominated Cuban politics. When Batista became president in 1940, the government worked to improve the lives of poor Cubans, but landowners and their friends still dominated. Corruption worsened after 1946. Batista returned to power again in 1952 as a dictator, using violence to silence his enemies. Many Cubans began to seek change. In 1953, Fidel Castro, a law school graduate, led an armed attack on an army barracks. It failed, but after he was released from jail in 1956, he continued to fight in the Sierra Maestra Mountains. Castro's forces entered Havana on January 1, 1959, and ousted Batista. At first, many cheered him. Castro promised to help the poor, to build schools and hospitals, and to limit the influence of the United States. In a decade, the number of teachers tripled. Education was made free and available to everyone through the university level. He took steps to end racial discrimination in Cuban life. Rents were lowered, and new housing built for those who formerly had to live in tenements. But the new government also seized plantations, farms, factories, banks and businesses from their owners. Claiming that

his government was for young people, Castro took away the property of those who had lived well under Batista—people like the parents and relatives of Maria and Jose.

Today, some of the real Pedro Pan children keep in touch through Pedro Pan organizations. The members of one organization, based in Miami, have pledged to help today's children who immigrate to America unaccompanied by adults.

FACT, FICTION, AND HISTORICAL RESEARCH

- Share with students that *Children of Flight Pedro Pan* is a novel of historical fiction, and that this form of literature mixes real and made-up characters and events. Discuss with students aspects of historical fiction that make it so exciting and interesting to read. Help students realize that this type of novel brings readers closer to another time period through the experiences of the characters. Instead of just reading about an event, readers can "live" it with the characters.
- Point out that authors of historical fiction often let readers know in an introduction or postscript which events and characters are real and which are fictional. After students finish the story, be sure they read the Postscript section to learn about the real events of this time period.
- Engage the students in a discussion about how a reader can tell what is fact and what is fiction. Be sure the students understand that facts can be checked in the reference books, in newspapers, magazines, historical documents and other official public records, and in personal accounts such as journals and diaries. Photographs and paintings from the past can also serve as an historical record.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What did you learn about this time period in Cuba, and the experiences of Cuban children that this story described, that you didn't know before?
2. What kind of story does the title suggest?
3. What kind of story does the cover of the book suggest?
4. What language does the title suggest?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Break the class up into groups and have them research Cuba and America in the 1960's. Their sources may be written, or they may choose to interview adults they know:
 - What were the current social and political problems in both countries? Were they similar?
 - When did these major political events take place: Cold War, Bay of Pigs, Cuban Missile Crisis?
 - Who was Fidel Castro? Why was he able to rule Cuba the way he did?
2. Have the students write an account of what they would have done if they were Maria, Jose or their parents. How would they have felt?
3. Break up into groups and discuss freedom. What is freedom? How is freedom granted? Should freedom be given or is it something you are born with? Also, the students might make a collage of what freedom means to them.

TEACHERS GUIDE

Children of Flight Pedro Pan

by Maria Armengol Acierno

- Everyone has obstacles to overcome in his or her life. These hurdles are difficult, but many people can overcome them and lead happy, fulfilling lives. In *Children of Flight Pedro Pan*, many of the characters face obstacles. Select one character from the book and answer the questions below:
 - What obstacle did your character face?
 - How did your character deal with this obstacle?
 - How would you have advised your character to deal with this difficult situation?
- Imagine that you are in the same situation as Maria and her brother, Jose. The political situation in your country is critical and you have to leave as soon as possible with only one suitcase. Make a list of ten favorite things that you would pack, draw a suitcase and the items that you would bring. Then compare it with your classmates' suitcases.
- Compare Maria's life in Camaguey with her life in Miami. Also note the ways her life remained the same in both countries.
- The author uses many Spanish words in the text. She includes an English translation of most of the words. But to understand the meaning of the words not defined, she expects you to use the context of the story. Write down the English translation for the Spanish words by going back to the story and reading them in context;
 - Cana* (Ch. 1) • *Pelota* (Ch. 1) • *Soldado* (Ch. 2) • *Niños* (Ch. 3) • *Playa* (Ch. 3) • *Pargo* (Ch. 5)
 - Hermanito* (Ch. 5) • *Nochebuena* (Ch. 6) • *Nacimiento* (Ch. 6) • *Por favor* (Ch. 8).
- Use a map and scale of miles to answer the following questions. Use a piece of paper or your pencil to measure the distances and then use the scale to estimate the number of miles.
 - How many miles is the capitol of Cuba, Havana, from Miami?
 - Which city or town in Cuba is closest to Miami?
 - How far was Maria and Jose's home in Camaguey from Havana?
 - If the Aleman family drove from Camaguey to Havana traveling 50 miles per hour, how long would the trip take? (Use the equation $\text{Time}=\text{Distance}/\text{Rate}$).



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