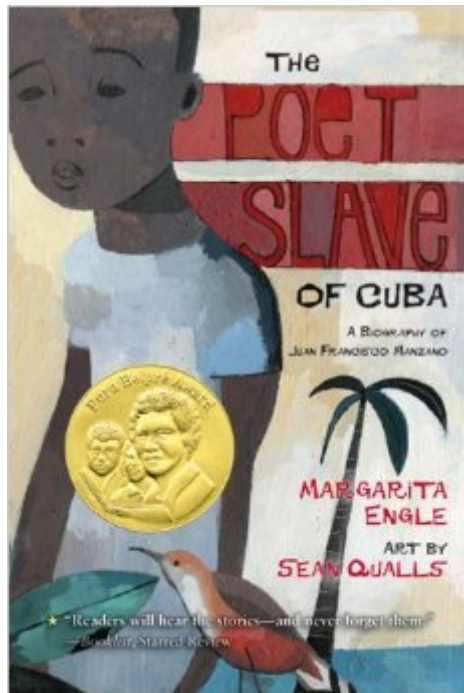


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# The Poet Slave Of Cuba: A Biography Of Juan Francisco Manzano



## Synopsis

A lyrical biography of a Cuban slave who escaped to become a celebrated poet. Born into the household of a wealthy slave owner in Cuba in 1797, Juan Francisco Manzano spent his early years by the side of a woman who made him call her Mama, even though he had a mama of his own. Denied an education, young Juan still showed an exceptional talent for poetry. His verses reflect the beauty of his world, but they also expose its hideous cruelty. Powerful, haunting poems and breathtaking illustrations create a portrait of a life in which even the pain of slavery could not extinguish the capacity for hope. *The Poet Slave of Cuba* is the winner of the 2008 Pura Belpre Medal for Narrative and a 2007 Bank Street - Best Children's Book of the Year. Latino Interest.

## Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (10 customer reviews)

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Age Range: 12 - 18 years

Grade Level: 7 - 12

## Customer Reviews

The verse novel is a tricky fickle thing. Though no one to the best of my knowledge has ever put down the rules that govern the creation of a verse novel, there are always a couple unwritten understandings. No verse novel should tell its tale through poetry when it would make more sense to tell it through prose. Also, just breaking up a bunch of sentences into lines doesn't mean you're writing poetry or anything. The ideal verse novel is one where it makes sense to write a story through poetry AND just happens to have an ear for beautiful language. Such is the case with

Margarita's, "The Poet Slave of Cuba". In the book it says that, "The life of Juan Francisco Manzano haunted her for years before she finally realized that to do justice to the Poet Slave's story, she needed to write it in verse". The result is an achingly beautiful and horrific story that deserves to be read by teens everywhere. Born a slave in Cuba in 1797, Juan Francisco Manzano grew up the toast of his owner Dona Beatriz. His ability to memorize speeches, plays, and words of all sorts made him a kind of sought over pet to the Spanish aristocracy. Though she promised to grant him his freedom when she died and she allowed both his parents to buy their freedom, Juan Francisco remained a slave after Dona Beatriz's death and was handed over to the dangerously psychotic Marquesa de Prado Ameno. The Marquesa resents Juan from the moment he is put into her possession and every attempt he makes at reading or writing is put down with shocking violence. A biography told in poems, this book shows the worst of slavery's cruelties and the sheer will it takes to not only survive under such conditions but escape. The text in the book alternates between different points of view on almost every page.

In *The Poet Slave of Cuba: A Biography of Juan Francisco Manzano*, Margarita Engle beautifully captures the life of Juanito, a slave in Cuba with a talent and passion for words. Juanito is smart. He can memorize verses, songs, plays simply by listening. He can then recite them off the top of his head. His owner, Doña Beatriz, keeps him as an entertaining pet. The other slave owners call him the "Golden Beak" because of his amazing ability to recite from memory. After Doña Beatriz dies, Juanito is given to La Marquesa de Prado Ameno, a woman who does not find him amusing and is instead bent on punishing him. Juanito's family is given freedom, but he remains enslaved. The violence he endures eventually forces him to escape. Throughout all the time, Juanito's love for words never wavered, but instead, he taught himself to read and write. Juan Francisco Manzano's biography in verse is an important contribution to the retelling of Latin American history. At first, his owners found his recitations entertaining because they did not believe that he understood what he repeated, but eventually Manzano learned the power of words and would construct his own poems and stories. However, this new understanding of words led to many years of physical and emotional abuse. Engle does not romanticize slavery in this text. Her verses help readers feel Juanito's innocence and his genuine interest for words. At the same time, Engle's verses feel painful when Juanito gets whipped. Juanito's life story is told through the voices of those in his life. The different voices paint a bigger picture of Juanito's life. His mother's death is more sorrowful, for example, because their voices formed a part in telling Juanito's story. Engle's verses are accompanied by artwork by Sean Qualls.

How would you feel if your former master, who had loved you and cared for you like you were her own child, had said that once she died, you and your family would be free. Happy, right? Well what if no one paid any attention and you were sold to another master who punishes you for crimes you didn't commit? That is the dilemma Juan Francisco Manzano faces when his former owner, who took him to parties and had him wow her guest with his uncanny ability to recite poems and verses from the bible. At his baptism, Dona Beatriz, his former owner, declares that once she dies, he and his family will be free, for the price of 300 pesos, and any new-born babies will be born free. But once Dona Beatriz dies, Juan's family discovers they don't have enough money to buy Juan's freedom. So he is sold to La Marquesa De Prado Amendo, whose son, Don Nicolas, takes a liking to Juan, and befriends him. But La Marquesa frequently and brutally punishes Juan for sneaking peaks at her books. But she is grateful enough to let Juan watch her sons take art classes, and Don Nicholas gives Juan some parchment and a stub of crayon to draw with. Eventually, Don Nicholas helps give Juan the courage to run away, and Juan flees in search of his mother. I really enjoyed this book for three reasons: the poetry, the character development, and the Spanish vocabulary sprinkled into the text. The first reason I liked this book was in was written in free verse poetry form. This made the book very quick and easy to read, which made me like it more. It was also very unique, and was very well done. The second reason I liked this book was the character development, mainly Juan. He grows up a lot in the book, from age eleven to age sixteen.

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