



Teacher Resource Guide

The Little House of Hope/La casita de Esperanza

by Terry Catasús Jennings

To turn a shabby little house into a welcoming home, all it takes is a big-hearted family eager to help others. . . and a little hope. La casita offers a home for those who don't have anywhere to go. It's a safe place in a new land, and Esperanza is always the first to welcome them. An inspiring, semi-autobiographical story of how immigrants can help each other find their footing in a new country, accompanied by the rich and vivid illustrations of award-winning artist Raúl Colón. A Junior Library Guild Selection readers of all ages will enjoy.

On September 11, 1961, **Terry Catasús Jennings** landed in the United States with her family after a short flight from Cuba. Their only possessions were \$50 and one suitcase each. Her family, including her father, who had been jailed during the Bay of Pigs invasion, was now in a free country. On September 12, Terry found herself enrolled in seventh grade, drowning in a sea of English she didn't understand. With time and help, the family thrived. Terry was a late bloomer in her writing career. The Definitely Dominguita series was named SLJ, Kirkus, and Parents Latina Best Books of 2021. Her biography in verse, Pauli Murray, The Life of a Pioneering Feminist and Civil Rights Activist released in February 2022. In **The Little House of Hope**, illustrated by Pura Belpré medalist Raúl Colón, Jennings portrays her immigrant experience, showing how a helping hand in a new land can make a life-saving difference for a family. She encourages us all to embrace our common humanity. She lives in Reston, Virginia with her husband, and enjoys visiting with her five grandchildren, often encouraging them to bring their parents along. She is a member of SCBWI, Las Musas Latinx Collaborative and the Children's Book Guild of Washington, DC.

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Historical Context

An autocrat, Fidel Castro, was allowed to take power over the government of Cuba on January 1, 1959. Soon after his take over, he squelched dissent and freedom of speech. Eventually, he banned religion. He wrecked Cuba's economy and became a puppet of the Soviet Union. At first, Jennings' father was not allowed to leave the country because he worked for the Cuban equivalent of the Federal Reserve System, but in April of 1961, he was jailed during the Bay of Pigs invasion. People yelled for him to be executed by firing squad behind their house for the two nights he was in jail. Luckily, he was freed by Ché Guevara after three days. Their family came to the United States soon after that with \$50 for their whole family to begin a new life. They lived with one uncle for a while and a second uncle for a while longer. They were one of those families who lived twelve or fourteen people in the same house. Jennings' father finally found a job at the Richmond Federal Reserve Bank two years after they reached the United States. It was not at all at the level at which he worked in Cuba, but it allowed their family to thrive.

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At its heart, **The Little House of Hope** shows we are all human and we all have hopes and dreams and needs. Immigrants don't leave their home countries on a whim, they leave when conditions in their home countries worsen. When they arrive in the United States what they hope to make is a new home, a place where they can feel safe, most of all, but also welcome and respected as a human being.

As students discuss possible themes in the book, have students look for evidence in the story to support these themes.

Text-to-Text Connections - Have students brainstorm other books they have read with similar themes. How are they similar? How are they different?

Text-to-Self Connections - Have students think about a time in their lives when they felt unrecognized and looked over. Have students think about a time they might have done that to someone else.

Common Core

(list of standards covered in this guide)

3rd Grade: ELA RL 3.3, 7, 9; W 3.3,4, 5, 6

4th Grade: ELA RL 4.3, 9; W 4.3, 4, 5, 6

5th Grade: ELA RL 5.3, 7, 9 W 5.3, 4, 5, 6

6th Grade: ELA RL 6.3, 9; W 6.3, 4, 5, 6

Illustrations

As you read the book, make sure you pause and take a closer look at the illustrations. The illustrator, Raúl Colón, captured how the author's family and friends looked without ever having met her family! The father in this book looks like Jennings's father even though Raúl and the author have never met, nor has Raúl seen pictures of her father.

Bonus: Before you read the book, do a picture walk through of the book (go through the book and only look at the pictures). What feelings do the pictures give you? What do you notice about when color is used in the story and how much color is used? Do you notice pages without much color?

What predictions do you have about the book?
Do you think you could read the book if the words were not there?

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Behind the Scenes with the Author

The Little House of Hope has been five years in the making. It was born in a moment of anger and dismay. A realtor friend told me that he never rented to Mexicans because they would live four families to a house and always destroyed the property. At first, I was baffled. How could he say that? More importantly, how could he say something like that in front of me? Did he forget I was Cuban? He was so wrong! I tend to chew on things that bother me, and I did. And then I remembered. Wait! I was one of those immigrants who lived in a multi-family house when I first came to the United States. Two of my uncles had come to the United States before we had. We lived with one for a couple of months and then we moved in with the other for almost a year. In this second house, which was in Largo, Florida, there were twelve of us during the week—three families, and fourteen of us on weekends, when my aunt's brother's sons came to stay with us. We would have been homeless in the United States if they hadn't taken us in. My parents didn't have jobs. We had \$50 for our whole family.

What that realtor got so, so wrong, is that the parents all eventually got jobs—even if they were a shadow of the jobs they had had in Cub. They were able to get homes of their own, all the kids went to college, got jobs. We all became citizens. And we never trashed that house or any other home where we lived.

What that realtor didn't understand, is that we didn't come to the United States on a whim, or to better our economic standing. We came to the United States because our lives in Cuba were untenable. Because in Cuba we were in danger. This was a very difficult and heart-wrenching decision that our parents made. We left everything behind, including our grandmother, who died twelve years later without any of us seeing her again.

Our realtor friend wasn't alone in his beliefs about immigrants. I had to do something. And to me, the best way to change the conversation is to write a book. It may not get published, but if it does, it has the chance to change hearts and minds.

I wrote the book very quickly, it sort of wrote itself. Normally I have gobs and gobs of rewrites and versions, and my agent sends a picture book manuscript back a couple of times. But this manuscript was more about tweaking than about rewriting. There was a version where the evil American neighbors were just miserable people—that one was nixed by my husband and one of my critique partners, but the story stayed pretty much the same. It is grounded on the truth of our experience, but some things are fictionalized. When I got the manuscript to my agent, Natalie Lakosil, we only had one rewrite, and I was delighted that Neal Porter agreed with us. He expressed interest within two hours of Natalie sending out the submission and made an offer within two weeks.

Once we started the editing process, Neal and I batted around some ideas. We added the evil Americans back in and took them out again. Instead of making room for more family, which is what happened in the real casita, we had them make room for other immigrants in need whom they really don't know. The original story spoke of the old country, the final version is very much about Cuba (and this just warms my heart). In the end, what Neal's magic helped me find was that the heart of the story was hope. The name of the protagonist changed to Esperanza, which means hope in Spanish. When that happened, I knew that we had something very special.

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The first page of the book is an illustration of the little house. Use the space below to create an illustration of where you live using **colored pencil etching**, which is the style the illustrator, **Raúl Colón**, uses in his drawing of the house. You can do this by making etch lines in the drawing.

NAME: _____

Think About It

Consider what it would be like to move to the United States.

How would you feel if everyone around you was speaking in a language you don't understand?

How would you feel if people didn't think you were as good as them, only because you couldn't speak like them, or you didn't look like them?

Reading List

Create a list of books you can read about the immigrant experience. There are several books listed to get you started and you can ask your teacher, librarian, parents, or friends for more suggestions to add to the list

The Cot in the Living Room by Hilda Eunice Burgos

Inside Out + Back Again by Thanhha Lai

Cuba in my Pocket by Adrianna Cuevas

Brainstorm

What ideas do you have for how you can help support immigrants in your community?

The Plan

Review your ideas and put together a plan for how you can help support immigrants in your community.

Note for Teachers/Parents: This information is designed to help students extend their understanding of the immigrant experience and brainstorm ways they can support immigrants in their community. The questions are designed to be discussion starters.

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Think about your hometown or country. What things do you think about? What things do you find yourself wanting to tell others about where you're from? Create a collage representing all the things you love/remember/value about your hometown or country.

NAME: _____

