

Letters from Heaven / *Cartas del cielo*

Author Lydia Gil

Line drawings Leonardo Mora and Mora Des!gns

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Curriculum Guide for Reading Rock Stars by Amy Cummins, UTPA English Department

Summary:

Celeste is very sad when her grandmother Rosa dies. Her mother is also grieving but is very busy as a single parent. Then letters mysteriously begin to arrive for Celeste with her grandmother’s advice—and with Cuban recipes, all written in her grandmother’s handwriting! Celeste finds comfort in remembering her grandmother and in helping to prepare the recipes for herself, her mother, and their friends. In the end, she discovers the mystery behind the letters.

About the Author:

Lydia Gil has told about how her family left one Caribbean island to go to another one. After the Cuban Revolution, her family fled Cuba for Puerto Rico. Lydia was born in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, of Cuban parents. She has also written a bilingual children’s picture book, *Mimí’s Parranda / La parranda de Mimí* (Piñata Books, 2007). She teaches Spanish in the Languages and Literatures Department at the University of Denver in Colorado. She earned a Ph.D. in Spanish from the University of Texas at Austin. She writes for EFE, the leading Spanish-language news agency.

Teacher Information:

Author Lydia Gil describes how she wrote both the Spanish and English versions of *Letters from Heaven / Cartas del cielo*. “I did not write the story in one language first and then translate it. I wrote some parts in English and some in Spanish. Once I was satisfied with a scene or chapter, I’d rewrite it in both languages. After I finished the first draft of the book, I spent a long time revising it, reading the English and the Spanish side by side to make sure there were no inconsistencies. This is not the most time-efficient way to write, but that’s just how the creative part of my brain works.”

Texas State Standards:

This curriculum guide includes activities that can help students gain knowledge and skills expected for their grade level in Texas.

Relevant standards for ELAR Grade 3 include: §110.14(b)(8)(A, B, and C)—the reading and comprehension of fictional literary text; §110.14(b)(19)—writing about important personal experiences; §110.14(b)(20)(B)—write letters with language tailored to the audience and purpose; §110.14(b)(29)—about listening attentively.

Relevant standards for ELAR Grade 4 include TEKS §110.15(b)(2)(B)—about using context to determine vocabulary meaning; §110.15(b)(6)(A, B, and C)—about the reading and comprehension of fictional literary text; TEKS §110.15(b)(13)(A)—reading procedural text and following a recipe; TEKS §110.15(b)(18)(B)—about writing letters.

Relevant standards for ELAR Grade 5 include TEKS §110.16(b)(2)(B)—about developing vocabulary and using context to determine vocabulary meaning; and §110.16(b)(6)(A and B)—about the reading and comprehension of fictional literary text, including characterization and plot; and §110.16(b)(8)—about reading comprehension of

sensory language; §110.16(b)(18) (A, B, and C)—about writing expository and procedural texts, writing formal and informal letters, and writing responses to literary or expository texts.

Mathematics TEKS throughout grades 3-5 include developing basic concepts of fractions and decimals. In third grade Math TEKS: §111.15.(b)(3.2)(A-D)—about constructing and using models of fractions and describe fractional parts of objects. In fourth grade Math TEKS: §111.16 (b)(4.2)(A-D)—about comparing fractional parts of objects. In fifth grade Math TEKS: §111.17.b.(5)(2)—about using fractions in problem-solving situations.

Pre-reading activity:

- Have students discuss favorite recipes or tell about an occasion when their family gathers and prepares special foods.
- Show students an illustration in the book (on pages 4, 13, 24, 40, 46, 56), and ask them what they think could be happening or who the people might be.
- Read aloud the first paragraph of the book. Ask whether the story is in first person (“I”) or third person (“he/she/they”). Ask students what the first paragraph suggests about the narrator, Celeste, and what the main conflict of the book will be.
- Identify the location on a map or globe of Cuba, where abuelita Rosa grew up before she moved to the United States, and Puerto Rico, where Doña Esperanza is from.

Vocabulary:

“synchronize” (2)—to do at the same time
 “ached” (3)—hurt
 “unexpectedly” (9)—by surprise, without warning
 “broadcasting” (17)—saying loudly
 “disaster” (17)—bad result, adversity
 “exhausted” (18)—very tired
 “occasionally” (19)—from time to time, infrequently
 “simmer” (19)—keep boiling at low temperature
 “immediately” (27)—right away
 “indifferent” (29)—uncaring
 “condolences” (38)—sympathies, sharing sadness
 “fascinating” (42)—very interesting
 “embarrassed” (47)—uncomfortable, self-conscious
 “arrangement” (48)—plan
 “exquisite” (49)—beautiful and superb
 “attentively” (50)—closely
 “elegant” (51)—stylish, fancy
 “subtle” (54)—restrained, clever
 “complement” (54)—balance, go together
 “feast” (55)—great meal in celebration
 “frequently” (57)—often
 “uncontrollably” (57)—unable to stop

Discussion Questions:

- 1) How do Celeste’s feelings change from the beginning to the end of the book? You might compare the first paragraph to the last paragraph of the book. What causes her to feel differently by the end?
- 2) What does Grandma Rosa write about in the letters? For example, in the letter on page 33, what characteristics about Celeste does her abuelita name and admire?
- 3) Celeste loves dance class. And a game she plays with friends Silvia and Karen is “synchronized eating” (12). What are activities you like, or games you play with friends?
- 4) Celeste does not want her mother to keep working the extra job on Saturdays to pay for Celeste’s dance class. So Celeste asks her dance teacher for a job “as a helper” with teaching the little kids’ dance class (47). When did you trade something, so that you and the other person both got something you needed? What skills would you like to develop?
- 5) Why are Doña Esperanza, Celeste’s next door neighbor, and Lisa, Celeste’s mother’s close friend, so important for the book? Do you have older family friends who are important for you? What do they do? When do you see them?
- 6) When you face sad times like Celeste does, who do you talk to about how you feel? How can we express our feelings when we are upset or feel strongly about something? How does Celeste act out when she is feeling sad?
- 7) In the book, Celeste’s Grandma Rosa is known for her wisdom about life. As Lisa says, “When people die, there’s a part of them that stays here, with us. And they continue to talk to us and teach us things” (32). What are some important values or lessons Celeste gets from her grandmother? The following quotations might suggest some of what Celeste learned from her grandmother. “She taught me how to make it by using measurements, so that it would come out right every time” (5). “Grandma used to say that calling ahead was like going to the dentist instead of visiting a friend. But in Cuba, her island, half the fun of visiting friends was to surprise them.... You would know that someone cared about you enough to come by” (9). “It’s harder to ask for help than to give it” (45).
- 8) *Letters from Heaven* shows the importance of specific foods and the joy of cooking together with a favorite recipe. What is a food that has importance for you, and why? Who knows how to cook it? When are you going to learn and practice how to cook that food?
- 9) Celeste feels bad when her classmate Amanda is mean to her. How does she respond in chapter six? What happens as a result? What are better ways that we can respond to people who insult us or act like bullies?
- 10) The letters that Celeste gets in the mail from abuelita Rosa mean a lot to her. Have you ever gotten something in the mail that was very memorable? Have you ever mailed a letter or sent some of your drawings through postal mail? How do you think it is different to get a physical letter, compared to an electronic mail message?

Extensions:

Writing:

(A) Recipes are a type of instruction manual for how to do something. It is important to comprehend multi-step directions. You can also teach other people to do something. Think about something that you know how to do. (A home example is making a bed, setting a table, sweeping, changing a baby’s diaper, etc.) Write a step-by-step

explanation of this skill. Include at least five steps. Draw an illustration of someone doing the activity or how it looks when you are done.

(B) In the book, the six recipes Celeste gets from her grandmother can go together to make a whole meal. For this descriptive activity, write down a meal that you enjoy eating with your family or friends. Think of all the elements that go into it, including drinks, sides, desserts, main dishes, and everything that makes it so good. Describe where you would sit to eat this meal, and tell who might be there, as well as what you are eating.

(C) In the book, Celeste’s grandmother Rosa is known for her wisdom about life. She teaches her grand-daughter a lot about how to consider others. Think of an elder that you admire. This could be a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or a neighbor, church member, or friend of your parents. Interview the person, and ask them about lessons or ideas for how to live life. Or tell you a story about an experience when they learned a valuable lesson.

(D) Write a letter to a family member. Consider your purpose for writing the letter, planning ahead about what you want to say in the letter. Put a date, salutation, and closing on your letter. Put the letter in an envelope, and write the address on the envelope. If the person lives near you, then give it to them secretly. If the person does not live here, mail the letter. (Have an adult take you to a Post Office to make sure you have the right postage stamp so it reaches its destination!)

Mathematics:

(A) Prepare students for helping cook and doing math by practicing standard cooking measurements or doing conversions of units used in recipes.

(B) Use Celeste’s flan example in the book to inspire work on fractions—and maybe a lunchtime treat. “A trick Grandma taught me is to think of fractions like the number of pieces you’d cut out of a flan: the number that would add up to a whole flan is the number on the bottom; and the number of pieces that I’m going to eat is the number on top” (7).

Art Ideas:

(A) This book has six full-page pictures that tell what is happening. Draw a picture that shows someone in your family or that portrays something that happened in your life.

(B) Draw a picture to illustrate an example of figurative language in the book. Celeste is distracted at school, so “The rest of the day goes by in a fog” (31). Celeste is a little nervous to ask her dance teacher for the job, and her “voice trembles” (47). Lisa can make dogs “immediately calm down, as if by magic” (32). When Doña Esperanza brings over needed groceries to make *ropa vieja*, “She’s like a walking supermarket” (34).

Literary Allusion:

(A) Celeste’s grandmother used to quote from a poem by Spanish poet Federico García Lorca (1898-1936) when she urged Celeste to eat her vegetables: “Green, how I want you green” (2). This is the first line from the poem “Romance Sonámbulo.” García Lorca’s accessible short poems “Seashell” and “The Lizard Is Crying” are available online in English and Spanish.

Fun Facts from Author Lydia Gil, In Her Own Words:

* “Even though the main character of my book, Celeste, is a fantastic dancer and finds in dance a way to connect to her cultural roots, I can’t dance at all!”

* “When I left home for college, I didn't even know how to fry an egg. My grandmother had always cooked for the family, so I didn't learn how to prepare any of the traditional recipes in the book until I was in my late twenties.”

* “Spanish is my native language and the main language of Puerto Rico, where I grew up, so I spoke it exclusively until I came to the U.S. for college. While I had taken English classes throughout school, I was not particularly fluent in English. The first semester of college was very hard! I had to record my classes and listen to them at night to figure out what the professors had said. But after a few months, it all started to make sense. I then majored in French, and also studied Italian and Latin.”

Further reading:

* Lydia Gil’s previous book, *Mimi’s Parranda / La parranda de Mimi*, illustrated by Hernán Sosa, is a great picture book about Christmas traditions, Puerto Rico, and friendship.

* Books with the topic of grieving for grandmothers include Nancy Luenn’s *A Gift for Abuelita: Celebrating the Day of the Dead* (for 1st to 4th grade readers), Alma Flor Ada’s *Love, Amalia* (for 3rd to 7th grade readers).

* Readers in 3rd to 5th grades who liked the mystery of who was mailing the letters to Celeste might also like *The Missing Chancleta and Other Top-Secret Cases* by Alidis Vicente, and René Saldaña, Jr.’s Mickey Rangel detective series of three books. These are also bilingual flip books (English and Spanish works printed back-to-back and inverted) from the same publisher of this book, Piñata Books, an imprint of Arte Público Press at the University of Houston.

* To continue with the cooking theme, some appealing picture books with cooking storylines are *The Empanadas That Abuela Made* by Diane Gonzales Bertrand, *Magda’s Tortillas* by Becky Chavarría-Cháirez, *Tea Cakes for Tosh* by Kelly Starling Lyons, *Cook-a-Doodle-Do* by Janet Stevens, *Valerie and the Silver Pear* by Benjamin Darling, *How Mama Brought the Spring* by Fran Manushkin, and *Growing Up with Tamales* by Gwendolyn Zepeda.