

TEACHER'S GUIDE



The Poet Upstairs

written by **Judith Ortiz Cofer**
illustrations by **Oscar Ortiz**

Juliana is too sick to go to school one cold winter day. So she stays at home in bed and looks out her bedroom window. She watches as a tall lady in a red coat and hat carries her boxes of books and papers upstairs. Her mother has heard that the mysterious woman is a poet writing a book. Juliana loves books and can't wait to meet the poet upstairs.

Juliana listens to the poet's typewriter clicking and clacking all day long, while outside the snow falls and people rush by bundled up in their coats. She dreams of a tiny tropical island "sitting on the ocean like a green button on a blue dress," the island home that her mother and the poet share. She dreams of red hibiscus flowers and beaches of white sand.

The next day, she receives an invitation from the poet to come upstairs. Together, they write a poem about a big river that leads to the sea. As they make pictures with words, the walls of the cold apartment become a beautiful vista of mountains, palm trees, birds and flowers. That special day, poetry takes Juliana from her cold and ordinary apartment to a sparkling island habitat.

Invoking Puerto Rican poet Julia de Burgos' famous poem about the Loíza River, the story demonstrates the power of the written word as Juliana learns that poetry can change the world.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Genre: Fiction

ISBN 978-1-55885-704-9

Hardcover

November 30, 2012

Piñata Books

Ages 5-9

THEMES

Themes: Neighbors, Working Parents, Bilingual Books, Poets, Poetry, Mystery, Writing, Imagination, Nature, Loneliness, Art, Creativity, Rivers, Birds, Memories, El Rio Grande, Puerto Rico, Latino/Hispanic Interest, Fiction



VOCABULARY

The Poet Upstairs has a number of words that your students may not be familiar with. Before or after the reading review some or all of the words listed below.

Content Specific

island, Mami, *hija*, typewriter, El Gran Río

Academic

poet, writer, disappointment, island, grove, grazed, drifted, ocean, mountain range, slush, scraping, brushstroke, tropical, palm frond, invitation, roosted, emeralds, rubies, sapphires, nectar, nightingales, orchards, hibiscus, sea, poetry, book of poems

ELL / ESL Teaching Strategies

Encourage your Spanish-speaking students to translate the Spanish words in the English text for the class. Act out the following words found in text: clicking, clacking disappointment, grazed, drifted, slush, scraping, brushstroke, invitation, and roosted.

Encourage your students to act out these words when they hear them during the reading.

BEFORE READING

(Pre-reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5 and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)*

Pre-reading Questions

1. What is a poet? What does a poet do? Do they have a love of words? A love for books? Do poets make pictures with words?
2. What is poetry? Do poems rhyme? Do poems describe one thing as similar to something else (similes)? Do poems describe one thing as another thing (metaphors)?
3. What types of things do you imagine or daydream about? Where do you imagine you can go?
4. What types of things do you imagine you can do? If you were a bird, where would you fly?

Exploring the Book

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5, Key Ideas and Details, Strand 1, and Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Strand 7)

1. Read and talk about the title of the book. Ask the students what they think the title, *The Poet Upstairs*, means. Ask who and what they think this book might be about. Ask students to make a prediction about where this story may take place.
2. Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: front and back covers, title page, introduction, English and Spanish text, illustration, glossary, dedications, author's and illustrator's notes.



3. Point out the images of the girl and the woman on the cover. Ask the students: Where do you think the story takes place? Who is the poet? The girl or the woman? What types of birds are on the cover? Where are they from?

Establishing a Purpose for Reading

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1-3)

Have students read to find out:

- What is a poet?
- How can we become poets?

Encourage students to consider why the author, Judith Ortiz Cofer, wants to share this story with young people. Have students consider why the text is presented in both English and Spanish.

AFTER READING

Discussion Questions

Use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and facilitate a deeper appreciation of the story. Encourage students to refer to the text and illustrations to support their responses. To build close reading skills, students should cite evidence to support their answers.

Literal Comprehension

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1 and 3)

1. Who moved into Juliana's apartment building? Where does the new neighbor come from? What does she do?
2. What did Juliana dream about? How did it make her feel?
3. What does the typewriter sound like to Juliana?
4. What songs did Juliana sing? What did Juliana draw?

5. What book did Juliana draw herself reading in the story? Where was she?
6. How did the poet invite Juliana upstairs?
7. What did the poet have in her apartment? Why?
8. How did the poet show Juliana how to write a poem?
9. What did the poet write?
10. The poet and Juliana wrote a poem together. What was the poem about? Why?
11. What happened as the poet pulled the paper out of the typewriter? Why?
12. What did the poet tell Juliana about words?
13. What did Mami do when Juliana shared her poem?
14. What lesson did the poet teach Juliana?

Extension / Higher Level Thinking

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 2 and 3 and Craft and Structure, Strand 6)

1. What does it mean "I have seen your poems in my head, and I have dreamed about the pictures you make with words"?
2. Why do you think Juliana drew herself reading a book titled *Poemas*? What do you think *Poemas* means? What could the book be about?
3. Why do you think Juliana took her drawings upstairs and slid them under the poet's door?
4. What does it mean that Juliana drew what she "saw in her mind"?
5. Why do you think the poet invited Juliana upstairs using a drawing? What other ways could Juliana have been invited upstairs?
6. Why was the poet's apartment cold? Describe her apartment. What did she have in her apartment? Why?
7. What does it mean that "poetry can get into your head like songs"?



8. What happened as the poet and Juliana wrote poetry? Why?
9. Why did Juliana shiver? How had Juliana felt to have been in the poem?
10. Why did the poet tell Juliana, "First, you have to believe that words can change the world."?
11. How did Juliana and her mom go to El Rio Grande together?

Reader's Response

(Writing Standards, Text Types and Purpose, Strands 1-3 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4-6) (Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1-3, Craft & Structure, Strand 4, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7-9)

1. Which parts of the book do you connect to the most? Why? Describe a time when you met someone who was a poet, writer or artist and what you learned from her or him.
2. Throughout the book there are illustrations of Juliana and the poet. Pick your top three to five favorite illustrations and describe them. Then explain why you picked these illustrations and what story you think they tell.
3. After her adventure with the poet, Juliana became a writer. Pretend that you are Juliana and write a letter to the poet. Thank the poet for inspiring you to write poetry.

what poems or books you will plan to write and why.

4. A part of this story is about the poem "Rio Grande de Loíza," which is also a river in Puerto Rico. How can you describe a river? Write a list of words to describe rivers, water, and the island of Puerto Rico. Then write a poem about a river, real or imaginary.

5. Do you have a favorite poem? What is the poem about? Why do you like this poem? How do you think the poet wrote this poem? What do you think inspired this poem?

ELL/ESL Teaching Strategies

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1-3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4-6) (Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4-7)

Below please find strategies that may be helpful to use with English Language Learner students.

1. Review all of the vocabulary. Have students make predictions about word meaning. Have students create and share an action for each word. Invite students to write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture, or create a list synonyms and antonyms
2. Assign ELL students to partner-read the book with strong English readers/speakers. Students can alternate reading between pages, repeat passages after one another, or listen to the more fluent reader. Students who speak Spanish can help with pronunciation of the Spanish or read the Spanish alongside a student reading the English text.
3. Have each student write three to five questions about the text. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
4. After the reading:
 - Review the illustrations in order and have students summarize what is happening on each page, first orally, then in writing.
 - Working in pairs, have students retell either the plot of the book or key details. Then, ask students to write a short summary or opinion about what they have read.
5. Create a presentation on the poet Julia de Burgos. Have students pick a poem written by her to share with their classmates. Bring photos, instruments, and/or recorded music for your presentation.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

(Introduction to the Standards, page 7: Students who are college and career ready must be able to build strong content knowledge, value evidence, and use technology and digital media strategically and capably)

Use activities below to help students integrate what they have read with other curriculum areas. These activities may also be used for extension activities, for advanced readers, and for creating a home-school connection.

English Language Arts

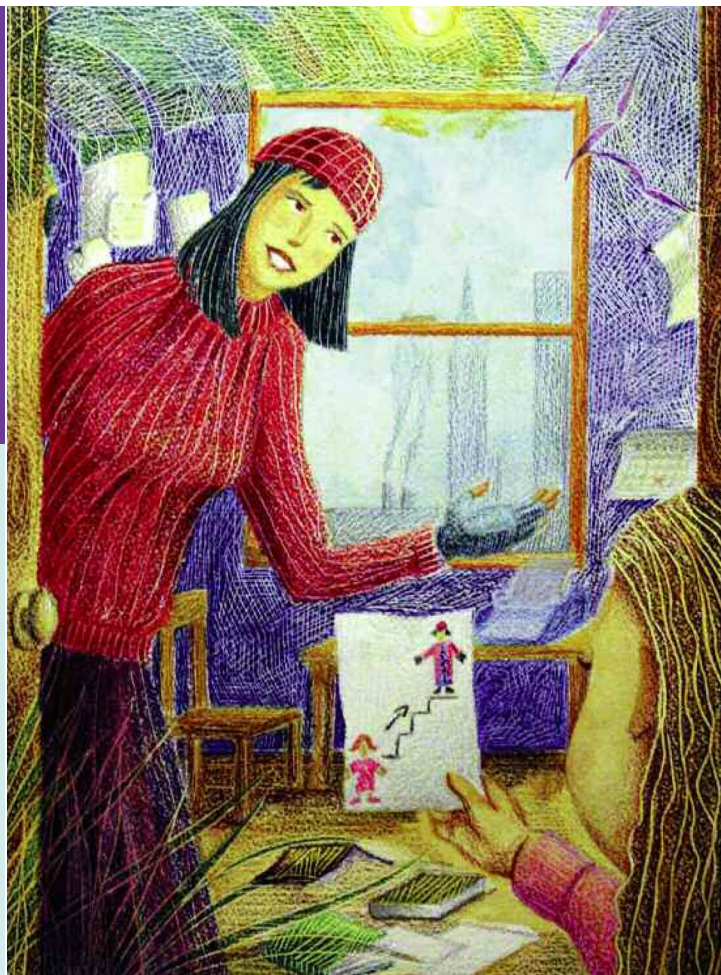
(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7 and 9) (Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1-3) (Writing Standards, Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7 and 8)

1. Together read the poem included in the story then identify similes and metaphors used in the poem. Then, make other similes and metaphors for the island of Puerto Rico and hummingbirds.
2. Invite your child to create their own story about writing a poem with the poet in the story, Julia de Burgos. Looking at a globe or map, find Puerto Rico. Together, research and identify flowers, fauna, and animals from the island. Then, tell or write a story about a magical poem that transports your child and Julia to and from the island.
3. Julia de Burgos wrote many poems about a great river in Puerto Rico. Read some or all of the poem “Río Grande de Loíza” with or to your child (a translated version is included at the end of this guide). Ask your child if the book’s illustrations remind him/her of the poem and why or why not.

Social Studies

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7 and 9) (Writing Standards, Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7 and 8)

1. Together research information about the famous Puerto Rican poet that this story is



about, Julia de Burgos. Point out biographical information that is included in the story about Julia and her life in New York City. Use a poster that shows the growth of the Puerto Rican communities, their struggles for recognition, key accomplishments in organization and institution building, and the most prominent community leaders. Find a link to the poster here: https://centopr.hunter.cuny.edu/poster_series/images/brief_history_P_III_poster.jpg

2. Have a discussion about how Puerto Rican people migrated from the island to the mainland United States. Use a map that shows the United States and the Caribbean, with an encircled close-up view of Puerto Rico. Find the link to the map here: <https://centopr.hunter.cuny.edu/education/heritage-poster-series/diasporas-history-puerto-rican-people-0>

Science

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7 and 9) (Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1-3) (Writing Standards, Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7 and 8)

1. Invite your child to create her own story about writing a poem with the poet in the story, Julia de Burgos. Looking at a globe or map, find Puerto Rico. Together, research and identify flowers, fauna, and animals from the island. Then, tell or write a story about a magical poem that transports your child and Julia to and from the island.
2. Julia de Burgos wrote many poems about a great river in Puerto Rico. Read some or all of the poem “Río Grande de Loíza” (a translated version is included at the end of this guide). Then have the students research and present on one or some of the rivers in Puerto Rico.

Art, Media and Music

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7 and 9) (Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1-3) (Writing Standards, Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7 and 8)

1. Do a picture walk and discuss the book’s illustrations. Then invite the students to draw a picture of themselves with the poet, Julia de Burgos, writing a poem.
2. Look at a map of Puerto Rico and locate the river, Río Grande, that the poet and *Mami* remembered. Then, draw and color a picture that celebrates the island of Puerto Rico or Puerto Rican culture that somehow includes a river in the design.

Home-School Connection

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7 and 9) (Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1-3) (Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strand 2, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7 and 8)

1. Encourage students to research Julia de Burgos’ life. Have students answer the following questions: Where was Julia born? How did this influence her poetry? When did Julia move to New York? Why? Why is “Río Grande de Loíza” Julia’s most famous poem? Have the student incorporate what they

learned into a poster. Hang all artwork on the wall then do a ‘Gallery Walk.’

2. Julia de Burgos wrote many poems about a great river in Puerto Rico. Read some or all of the poem “Río Grande de Loíza” (a translated version is included at the end of this guide). Then, have students identify three to five places in Puerto Rico that have rivers and write an essay or a poem about a river.
3. Search the internet and YouTube to watch and listen to how other people have approached the poet Julia de Burgos and / or the poem “Río Grande de Loíza.” Then, create a plan and describe how you would make a music piece or a video on Julia de Burgos and / or the poem “Río Grande de Loíza.”
4. Julia de Burgos celebrated Puerto Rico’s beauty in a number of her poems. Have students learn about Puerto Rico’s rivers, rain forest, mountains, and beaches. Then, have them create a package for a family trip to the island of Puerto Rico that focuses on ecotourism. Have students create a brochure that answers the following questions: What is ecotourism? Why should families participate in ecotourism? Where would they go? What would they do? Remind the students to refer to a map as they plan their eco-friendly trip.
5. As a class, plan a poetry slam. Have everyone bring in a favorite poem and a poem that they have written themselves. Then have them share their poem. Share with the students the following link: Poetry Foundation: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70281/childrens-poetry>



CENTRO TEACHING RESOURCES

Puerto Rican Heritage Cultural Ambassadors Program

This free, self-paced, multimedia online course on Puerto Rican history, culture, and traditions engages youth and educational institutions in promoting the teaching and learning of our heritage.

<https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/education/puerto-rican-heritage-cultural-ambassadors-program>

Becoming Julia de Burgos: The Making of a Puerto Rican Icon

<https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/events-news/news/becoming-julia-de-burgos-making-puerto-rican-icon>

<https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/events-news/events/becoming-julia-de-burgos>

Julia de Burgos and the Chicago Young Lords Among Topics in CENTRO Journal

<https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/events-news/news/julia-de-burgos-and-chicago-young-lords-among-topics-centro-journal>

Timeline of Puerto Rican History Booklet

This booklet introduces major events, themes and concepts that are important to understand Puerto Rican history.

centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/events_2015/ChronologicBrochure_2015.pdf

The Puerto Rican Heritage Poster Series

<http://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/research-education/education/puerto-rican-heritage-poster-series>

- II. Pioneros(as): Migrant Pioneers to the United States (1898-1930s)
- III. The Great Migration Years (1940s - Mid-1960s)
- History: A Cartography, Part II, Puerto Rican Migrations to the United States and the Caribbean, 1898 - 2012

CONNECT WITH THE INTERNET

Poetry Foundation

- Julia de Burgos <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/julia-de-burgos>
- Children <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70281/childrens-poetry>

National Geographic Kids

- Rain Forest <https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/explore/nature/habitats/rain-forest/#rain-forest-chimp.jpg>
- Animals <https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/animals/>
- Videos <https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/videos/>
- Games <https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/games/>

ADDITIONAL ONLINE LITERACY RESOURCES

Colorín Colorado!

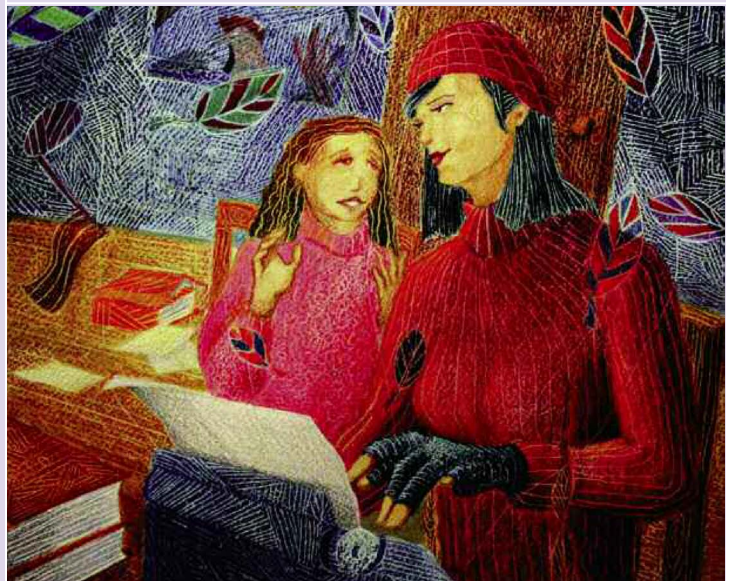
<http://www.colorincolorado.org>

National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL)

<https://www.familieslearning.org>

Reading Is Fundamental

<https://www.rif.org>





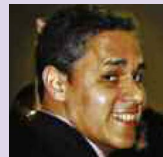
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



JUDITH ORTIZ COFER (1952-2016) was a poet, novelist, essayist and author of numerous award-winning books, including *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio* (Orchid

Books 1995, Penguin, 1997), recipient of the 1995 Pura Belpré Award, ALA's Best Books for Young Adults and The Horn Book/Fanfare Best Book of the Year List. *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* (Arte Público Press 1991) received a PEN citation, Martha Albrand Award for non-fiction, and a Pushcart Prize for the essay "More Room." She was the recipient of the 1999 Paterson Prize for Books for Young People for the book *The Year of Our Revolution*. Her most recent publications include a bilingual book for children, *¡A bailar! / Let's Dance!* (Piñata Books, 2011); *Animal Jamboree: Latino Folktales / La fiesta de los animales: leyendas latinas* (Piñata Books, 2012), a bilingual collection of Puerto Rican folktales for middle readers; and *The Poet Upstairs* (Piñata Books, 2012), an inspiring picture book that demonstrates how poetry can change the world. The Spanish version, *La poeta del piso de arriba*, was published by Piñata Books in 2014.

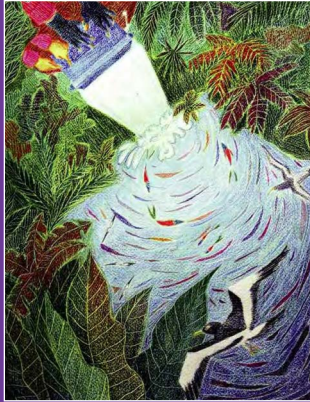
ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR



OSCAR ORTIZ was born in Manhattan, New York, USA in 1964. He started painting and selling his pieces back in 2002. Eventually he moved into selling prints and licensing

his art all over the world, represented in part by the Bridgeman Art Library and similar venues. Oscar's paintings have graced calendars, CDs, magazines, posters and others. Organizations, like UNESCO, have used his images for several purposes. Among his most recent projects are: illustrating an award winning children's book, *The Poet Upstairs*, by Judith Ortiz Cofer, published by Arte Público and released on November 30th, 2012. He also illustrated a text book for National Geographic Learning.

Learn more about *The Poet Upstairs* at: <https://artepublicopress.com/product/the-poet-upstairs/>



Río Grande de Loíza

Río Grande de Loíza!... Elongate yourself in my spirit
and let my soul lose itself in your rivulets,
finding the fountain that robbed you as a child
and in a crazed impulse returned you to the path.

Coil yourself upon my lips and let me drink you,
to feel you mine for a brief moment,
to hide you from the world and hide you in yourself,
to hear astonished voices in the mouth of the wind.

Dismount for a moment from the lion of the earth,
and search for the intimate secret in my desires;
confuse yourself in the flight of my bird fantasy,
and leave a rose of water in my dreams.

Río Grande de Loíza!... My wellspring, my river
since the maternal petal lifted me to the world;
my pale desires came down in you from the craggy hills to find new furrows;
and my childhood was all a poem in the river,
and a river in the poem of my first dreams.

Adolescence arrived. Life surprised me pinned to the widest part of your eternal voyage;
and I was yours a thousand times, and in a beautiful romance
you awoke my soul and kissed my body.

Where did you take the weather that bathed my body in a sun blossom recently opened?
Who knows on what remote Mediterranean shore some fauna shall be possessing me!

Who knows in what rainfall or what far land
I shall be spilling to open new furrows;
or perhaps, tired of biting hearts
I shall be freezing in icicles!

Río Grande de Loíza!... Blue. Brown. Red.
Blue mirror, fallen piece of blue sky;
naked white flesh that turns black
each time the night enters your bed;
red stripes of blood, when the rain falls
in torrents and the hills vomit their mud.

Man river, but man with the purity of river, because you give your blue soul when you give your blue kiss.

Most sovereign river mine. Man river. The only man
who has kissed my soul upon kissing my body.

Río Grande de Loíza!... Great river. Great flood of tears.
The greatest of all our island's tears
save those greater that comes from the eyes of my soul for my enslaved people.

The Center for Puerto Rican Studies (Centro) is the nation's leading university-based institution devoted to the interdisciplinary study of the Puerto Rican experience in the United States. Centro is dedicated to understanding, preserving and sharing the Puerto Rican experience in the United States. Centro invites Centro Voices contributors to make use of the extensive archival, bibliographic and research material preserved in its Library and Archives.

The Centro Library and Archives is devoted to collecting, preserving and providing access to resources documenting the history and culture of Puerto Ricans. The Centro Library and Archives was established in 1973 as a component of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies. The collections include books, current and historic newspapers and periodicals, audio, film & video, manuscripts, photographs, art prints, and recorded music. The Library and Archives provides services and programs to the scholarly community as well as the general public. Constituents are diverse and come from the United States and abroad. The Library and Archives facilitates access to information on its holdings through the City University's online public catalog or CUNY+. It also provides research and information assistance via phone and email.

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