

A Teacher's Guide for **PILAR RAMIREZ** AND THE **ESCAPE FROM ZAFÁ**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Julian Randall is a Living Queer Black poet from Chicago. His poetry and essays are published in *The New York Times Magazine*, *POETRY*, *The Atlantic*, and *Vibe*. He is the recipient of a Pushcart Prize. Julian holds an MFA in Poetry from Ole Miss. His first book, *Refuse*, won the Cave Canem Poetry Prize and was a finalist for an NAACP Image Award. He was also a contributor to the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Black Boy Joy*. Julian has previously worked as a youth mentor, teaching writing workshops to children on house arrest. *Pilar Ramirez and the Escape from Zafa* is his debut children's novel.

ABOUT THE BOOK:

Twelve-year-old Pilar Violeta “Purp” Ramirez’s world is changing, and she doesn’t care for it one bit. Her Chicago neighborhood is gentrifying and her chores have doubled since her sister, Lorena, left for college. The only constant is Abuela and Mami’s code of silence around her cousin Natasha—who vanished in the Dominican Republic fifty years ago during the Trujillo dictatorship.

When Pilar hears that Lorena’s professor studies such disappearances, she hops on the next train to dig deeper into her family’s mystery. After snooping around the professor’s empty office, she discovers a folder with her cousin’s name on it . . . and gets sucked into the blank page within.

She lands on Zafa, an island swarming with coconut-shaped demons, butterfly shape-shifters, and a sinister magical prison where her cousin is being held captive. Pilar will have to go toe-to-toe with the fearsome Dominican boogeyman El Cuco if she has any hope of freeing Natasha and getting back home.



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Ages 8-12

PREPARING YOURSELF AS AN EDUCATOR

Background-building is an activity we often believe only students need in order to comprehend a novel. However, there are also gaps educators may have when teaching a novel that is unique, written by marginalized authors, and one that explores issues pertaining to being a member of those communities, especially if you are not a member of that community. As such, preparing yourself as an educator becomes necessary in order to effectively teach a novel like Randall's. The novel explores issues of death, imprisonment, dictatorship, feminism, the supernatural, culture, and it features violence. As part of your preparation, you should be ready to answer questions about all of the above, as well as ensuring that you know who your students are and what might be triggers for them. Consider connecting with the school counselor before you read this book with students so you can be prepared to handle some of these delicate conversations correctly. Also, having the counselor available to see students should they need it is a good idea.

Additionally, having supplementary resources as part of your teaching that explore the unique topics embedded in the story would be a wise strategy. One source that can be a deeply helpful tool is the film [In the Time of the Butterflies](#), based on the book of the same title by Julia Alvarez. The book and film tell the story of the Mirabal sisters, who are also featured in Randall's book, and it also captures, albeit lightly, what it was like during the Trujillo regime in the Dominican Republic. Be sure to watch it yourself first to determine if it is appropriate for your students.

Lastly, the book features a large amount of Spanish. Randall beautifully weaves it in frequently, leaving the reader with a clear sense of authenticity and culture. The Spanish used is not the typical Spanish taught in schools or academic settings, since it's a more colloquial Dominican Spanish. Welcome a conversation with students about how the Spanish used in the book is a strength, how it welcomes us into Pilar's world, how it exposes us to Dominican culture, and how it strengthens Randall's narrative. Make sure to celebrate the Spanish and not critique a language that is [often berated in U.S. society](#). This is an opportunity to communicate how languages other than English are important, have value, and can be present in a classroom.

PREPARING YOUR STUDENTS

It is also critical for students to know what topics may come up in this story as they develop their own emotional maturity. Knowing what topics will surface can help them handle the feelings that they may experience. Consider the pre-reading questions below as a way to support your students for engaging with this book.

Additionally, because the book incorporates a lot of Dominican history, culture, and mythology, it's important that students know some of the background. This can be explored by having small groups research and present these topics, or the information can be provided by you as a background-building exercise. These explorations will help with comprehension and appreciation.

Rafael Trujillo, dictator

El Cuco, mythological character

La Cuarenta, prison during Trujillato

Mirabal Sisters and mariposas

Ciguapas, mythological characters

Fuku, mythical essence

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

The following activity is designed to be an engaging and physical exercise for students. This will allow them to explore topics that the story will address, while also digging into their own beliefs and stances on those topics. They will have a chance to define how they feel and to listen to each other.

Activity: Where Do You Stand?

The teacher makes statements (see below) and students decide to stand on one side of the room or the other. One side represents an “I Agree” position and the other side represents “I Disagree.” Each time the teacher makes a statement, students select a side and stand there, taking a stance on the matter at hand. In order to effectively facilitate discussion and learning, the teacher can decide when and how students share.

Statements:

The following statements are all related to issues that surface in the story. These may bring about controversial opinions, but the activity should be fun.

- *I do not believe in witches. They do not exist.*
- *There is no such thing as magic.*
- *Power is a good thing, regardless of who has it.*
- *People who are imprisoned are there for a reason and are most likely guilty of the crime of which they're accused.*
- *Family can be chosen and is not just the group you are born into.*
- *The land of a country or society has stories to tell.*
- *War is a necessary tool for freedom.*

After the activity is complete and the novel is finished, it might be interesting to return to these statements as a class and assess if anyone's opinions have changed.

PRE-READING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Based on the title and cover, what do you think this book will be about?
2. This story embeds a lot of the history and culture of the Dominican Republic. What do you know about the Dominican Republic?
3. There are moments of and talk about death in this story. What are your thoughts about that? Do you have family traditions related to death and dying? What are they?
4. The story is full of mythical beings and supernatural events. There are demons, witches, and magic, among other mysteries. What are your beliefs about these ideas? Do you believe in magic and the supernatural?
5. The Dominican Republic suffered at the hands of a dictator for thirty-one years. The dictator, Rafael Trujillo, is mentioned in the story and is featured as one of the evil characters. What do you think are the difficulties of living under a dictatorship? Spend some time discussing how you think a dictatorship impacts a country's way of life and culture.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the first two chapters we meet Pilar Ramirez, the main character. How would you best describe her? What are some important details from the text that help you understand who she is?
2. The setting of the story changes drastically when Pilar enters Zafa. Describe El Bosque, the ciguapa, the other characters she encounters, and the events taking place.
3. What do you think the camera symbolizes for Pilar throughout the story?
4. At the end of Chapter 7 we meet the Galipote sisters who are written in honor of the Mirabal sisters. Who were the Mirabal sisters? Based on their true story, what might you conclude about the upcoming events in the story?
5. In Chapter 10, we learn about Trujillo and El Cuco. What do you know about El Cuco? What insight into Trujillo's character might you gain from knowing that he "made a deal" with El Cuco?
6. At the end of Chapter 16, Carmen states, "It's a shame you're from your world. You would definitely be officer material in this one." What does this quotation reveal about Carmen's relationship with Pilar as the story is progressing?
7. On page 179 and for the rest of Chapter 25, Randall describes El Cuco. This is a mythical creature in Dominican culture and Randall places him in the story. What do you notice about his description? What types of words does Randall use to create this character? What symbolism does this character represent?
8. On page 253, Pilar says "It dawned on me all at once; this is what La Blanca was made of. Not truly bricks, but hidden pages full of forgotten names, unfinished stories just like Natasha's." What do you think is the purpose of Randall including this idea and this message in the story?

POST-READING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Determination

Throughout the story there are many moments of determination. What does determination mean to you? Cite moments of it in the story. Also, explain how determination might be related to a theme of the story.

Motifs

A motif is a recurring idea present in a story that aids the theme and often enhances other literary elements as well. What are some motifs in this story? What role do they play in the plot development and other literary elements?

Literary Inversions and Contradictions

There are many inversions in the story, which means that ideas that are often seen in one way, are represented as the opposite. These are often a source of symbolism in a text. An author chooses to invert or contradict commonly held beliefs as a way to communicate a message. For example, typically, black magic is seen as a negative source of magic or supernatural essence. In this story, La Negra (the Black One/Woman) is the source of strength for Pilar and her supporters in Zafa. Consider all of the inversions and contradictions, specifically with the colors of black and white. Discuss their symbolism, their role in the plot, and what message Randall might be trying to convey.

Descriptive Writing

Randall's poetry background is evident in his consistent and thorough descriptions of setting, characters, emotions, and so forth. After discussing descriptive writing and how adjectives and adverbs are an important element of that, invite students into a study of descriptive writing in the story. In small groups, ask students to research, annotate, and document descriptions of Pilar's journey, of Zafa, and of Pilar and Carmen. After they have researched the text for descriptions and annotated it, invite them to write it down or type it in a document. They should have robust and complex adjectives and adverbs. They can use a thesaurus if they want to ensure they have accurate words that clearly represent their thinking.

After their research and adjective-building work, students can create a visual representation of their topic, too, to engage multimodal learning. For example, the group researching Carmen can attempt to draw her based on the details they researched. Once they are ready, they can share their findings with the class.

Symbolism

Considering the heavy use of symbolism in the story, coupled with descriptive writing and connections to culture, invite students into an activity where the three come together. The descriptions of La Negra and El Bosque are rich in symbolism and meaning. Use the following exercise to engage students in an analysis of the two.

Symbolic Analysis of La Negra and El Bosque	
La Negra	El Bosque

**While one is a force and the other is a place, what is their relationship?
What role do they play in each other's existence in the story?**

Explanation: Under the box labeled La Negra, students should note all of the descriptions, actions, events, and information they gather about it throughout the story. Underneath the box labeled El Bosque, students note all of the descriptions, actions, events, and information they gather about it throughout the story.

La Blanca and La Cuarenta

La Blanca is the fictional version of a real place that existed during the Trujillo dictatorship: La Cuarenta. This was a prison where many people were taken when they disagreed with the dictator or whenever he and his regime wanted to “disappear” anyone. It is a staple of the Trujillato and a deep source of pain and trauma in Dominican history. In the story, Randall depicts this prison with deep and detailed symbolic imagery. [Consider this depiction of the real La Cuarenta.](#) Engage in a compare-and-contrast analysis of that depiction and La Blanca’s description on page 235.

Power

Power is one of the motifs present in the story. Use the following questions and quote for a discussion with students:

- *How is power explored?*
- *Who holds power in the story?*
- *Can power be good, or is it always a bad thing?*
- *How is male power depicted differently than female power?*
- *Consider the following quote from chapter 34:
“Pues mija,” Yami said with a half shrug, “men do strange things to their souls to feel like they hold the world in their hands even for a moment.” What does this quote mean and what might it reveal about Randall’s ideas of power, feminism, and morality?*



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