

***Mari and the Curse
of El Cocodrilo***
Teacher's Guide



Mari and the Curse of El Cocodrilo

Summary

If Mari Feijoo could, she would turn her family's Peak Cubanity down a notch, just enough so that her snooping neighbor and classmate Mykenzye wouldn't have anything to tease her about. That's why this year, there's no way that Mari's joining in on one of the big-gest Feijoo family traditions—burning the New Year's Eve effigy her abuela makes.

Only Mari never suspects that failing to toss her effigy in the fire would bring something much worse than sneering words at school: a curse of bad luck from El Cocodrilo. At first, it's just possessed violins and grade sabotaging pencils, but once El Cocodrilo learns that he becomes more powerful with each new misery, her luck goes from bad to nightmarish as the curse spreads to her friend Keisha.

Instead of focusing on Mari's mariachi band tryout and Keisha's fencing tournament, the pair, along with their friend Juan Carlos, are racing against the clock to break the curse. But when Mari discovers her family's gift to call upon their ancestors, she and her friends will have to find a way to work with the unexpected help that arrives from the far corners of Mari's family tree. Only will it be enough to defeat El Cocodrilo before he makes their last year of elementary school the worst ever and tears their friendship apart?

Background Information

New Year's Traditions

Mari and her family celebrate the New Year by burning effigies, small sewn dolls meant to get rid of the previous year's bad luck. This practice isn't unique to Cuba. Large stuffed scarecrows called años viejos are burned in Mexico, Colombia, and other Latin American countries. Sometimes the scarecrow is even stuffed with fireworks.

The Bay of Pigs

In January 1959, Fidel Castro overthrew dictator Fulgencio Batista and assumed power in Cuba. Arrests, torture, and executions began immediately. Castro suspended elections and it was clear he planned to remain in power despite pushback from the Cuban people. On April 17, 1961 1,500 Cuban exiles, financed by the CIA, staged an unsuccessful invasion at the Bay of Pigs. It was the last large-scale attempt to overthrow the Castro regime.

The Spanish-American War

The Spanish-American War was a conflict between the United States and Spain that ended Spanish colonial rule in the Americas. Part of the fighting forces in Cuba included Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders who fought in the Battle of San Juan Hill. These cavalry soldiers were assisted by Cuban citizens, like Reinaldo Crespo in *Mari and the Curse of El Cocodrilo*.

Mariachi Bands

Mariachi is native to a region of western Mexico and typically includes, violins, guitars, guitarrons (a large guitar), vihuelas (a round-backed guitar), and trumpets. In Texas, schools often have mariachi as part of their music programs.

Fencing Tournaments

There are three types of fencing- saber, epee, and foil (which Keisha practices). The different types are determined by the kind of blade used and the scoring area on your opponent. For foil fencing, the scoring area is limited to the torso. Fencers wear silver bibs that are attached to an electronic scoring system with a cord. The scoring system registers when your opponent has successfully hit you with their blade.

Pre-Reading Activity

- 1) What are your New Year's traditions?
- 2) In Chapter 1, Mari refuses to burn her family's effigy in the backyard because she knows her classmate Mykenzye is watching and will make fun of her. What would you have done in Mari's situation?

Discussion Questions

- 1) In chapter 2, Mari writes about her cousin Andaluz in her notebook and the inky swirls as if water has been dropped on the page. What do you think this could foreshadow? How does this connect to Andaluz?
- 2) In chapter 3, Mari explains that she hasn't told a teacher about Mykenzye because what she's doing doesn't seem that bad individually; it just all piles up together. Do you think Mari should tell a teacher?
- 3) In chapter 5, Andaluz seems to battle a shadowy figure in the school bathroom. Who do you think this figure is? What evidence do you have?
- 4) In chapter 6, Mari says, "We speak Spanish at home, eat Cuban food, and listen to Cuban music... Why do I have to be the one expert on all things Cuban for everyone in my class? I've never even been there." Do you agree with her opinion?
- 5) In chapter 7, Juan Carlos says, "You could look up Cuba's population or type of government or historical events and then bore everyone to death with your presentation. It's better if you actually know the read stuff about a country, like the people." What do you think 'the real stuff about a country' is?
- 6) Mari feels guilty that Keisha has a mark on her arm and is experiencing bad luck. Do you think it's actually her fault?
- 7) Water was the sign that Andaluz was going to appear. Music was Pipo's sign. What do you think your sign would be?
- 8) At the end of chapter 17, three black worms follow Juan Carlos out of Mari's house after he tells her he doesn't want to be friends. What do you think this might be a clue of?

9) In chapter 21, Mari says that “I carry so much more of Cuba in me than my abuelitos ever imagined.” To what do you think she is referring?

10) In chapter 25, Mari tells El Cocodrilo that she doesn’t have to pick what side of herself to show because all of it makes her who she is. She says she’s proud of every part. What do you think has caused this change from being embarrassed about her family’s Peak Cubanity?

11) In chapter 26, Fautina describes a boy with the Super Ojos and says Juan Carlos gives him a pair of glasses. Who do you think this boy is and what does this mean for the Super Ojos?

Extension Responses

Select one of the following quotes from *Mari and the Curse of El Cocodrilo*. Write an extended response explaining whether you agree or disagree with the opinion presented in the quote.

Be sure to:

- Clearly state your central idea
- Organize your writing
- Develop your writing in detail
- Choose your words carefully
- Use correct spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and grammar

1. There’s no such thing as luck.
2. Sometimes the past is a heavy load to carry.
3. Maybe burning the effigies on New Year’s Eve really does clear a person of all their bad luck and sadness. Or maybe some tears stick to your skin and never dry up.
4. Papi says everybody recovers at a different rate when bad things happen.
5. A country is more than just one man.

For Further Reading

Omega Morales and the Legend of La Lechuza by Laekan Zea Kemp

Los Monstruos: Felice and the Wailing Woman by Diana Lopez

Lupe Wong Won't Dance by Donna Barba Higuera

Miss Quinces by Kat Fajardo

The Curse on Spectacle Key by Chantal Acevedo

About the Author

Adrianna Cuevas is the author of the Pura Belpré honor book **The Total Eclipse of Nestor Lopez**, **Cuba in My Pocket**, **The Ghosts of Rancho Espanto**, and **Mari and the Curse of El Cocodrilo**. She is a first-generation Cuban-American originally from Miami, Florida. A former Spanish and ESOL teacher, Adrianna currently resides outside of Austin, Texas with her husband and son. When not working with TOEFL students, wrangling multiple pets including an axolotl, and practicing fencing with her son, she is writing her next middle grade novel.

Also by Adrianna Cuevas

