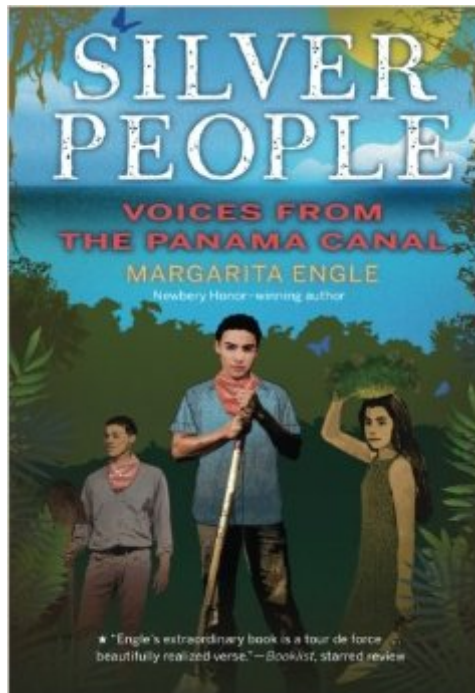


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# Silver People: Voices From The Panama Canal



## Synopsis

In 1914, the world celebrated the opening of the Panama Canal, which connected the world's two largest oceans and signaled America's emergence as a global superpower. It was a miracle, this path of water where a mountain had stood "and creating a miracle is no easy thing. Thousands lost their lives, and those who survived worked under the harshest conditions for only a few silver coins a day. From the young "silver people" whose back-breaking labor built the Canal to the denizens of the endangered rainforest itself, this is the story of one of the largest and most difficult engineering projects ever undertaken, as only Newbery Honor-winning author Margarita Engle could tell it.

## Book Information

Lexile Measure: 1310 (What's this?)

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Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars See all reviews (30 customer reviews)

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Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

## Customer Reviews

The term "Silver People" in the title is not a compliment. It comes from the fact that when the Panama Canal was constructed, the white administrators and supervisors were paid in gold, while the workers were paid in less-valuable silver. They were also strictly segregated: whites, light-skinned workers, dark-skinned workers. I enjoyed the author's poetic voice in *The Wild Book*, but for me it's less successful in *Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal*. While this story centers on three main characters, the list of speakers includes 11 people, 22 creatures (insects,

birds, animals), and even trees. This variety might have worked, except that the voices are not differentiated. The 14-year-old boy from Cuba who ran away from his abusive father, the man from Jamaica who dreamed of earning enough to support his mother and little brothers and sisters, the orphaned herb-girl raised by a local healer, the educated geologist from Puerto Rico: each one has a unique story and opinions and viewpoint, but their voices all sound alike. For example, when Mateo is hospitalized with malaria, he says this about the nurses: "ÃÂ Â| Most of them were hired on my home island, where they gained their healing experienceduring the war they call Spanish-American, even though it was really our war for independence from Spain, a Cuban war that was seized by the United States for its own purposes." Such complex syntax and vocabulary just don't sound like an uneducated young boy who is feverish with malaria. A few of the poems show interesting variations. The howler monkeys always shriek in ALL CAPS. The silent jaguar has a blank page. A snake has a single sentence printed one letter per line, so that it looks like a vine hanging from a tree. Most of the non-human voices are similar to each other. The frogs sing sing sing. The ants march march march. Overall, I'd have liked the voices to reflect the nature of each creature more. The background to building the Panama Canal could have been a compelling story. The canal was dug by hand, shovel after shovel filled with mud, backbreaking labor in the tropical heat. Workers were lured from far away by promises of good pay plus housing and meals. When they arrived in Panama and discovered the miserable conditions and worse pay, they had no way to go back home. I was hoping that this book would personalize their history.

This is a beautiful, evocative collection of poetry--not a poetic novel or prose broken into weird line spacing. I suppose if your idea of poetry is limited to iambic pentameter or sonnets you might find it easy to dismiss this collection, but if you understand poetry as a freer form that pays attention to the sound of language, the effect the words have, and the ability to evoke a moment, you have to respect this work. Thankfully, it is typeset for ease of reading, and the language is not dense, so it is a very quick read--probably under an hour for most people. Given that the audience of this book is comprised of middle-grade readers, I think this is an absolute triumph: an approachable, compelling book they can quickly read and come away with a better understanding of a period in history, the importance of conservation, and the nature of poetry. It tells a story and develops authentic voices, characters, and relationships. I loved it. My only hesitation about this book is that it is so unremittingly negative about the construction of the Panama Canal. Most accounts of the project describe it as a triumph both for engineering and for global commerce. The point of this book is to give voice to the systematic racism and apartheid-like conditions of the construction, not to mention

the wholesale destruction of an irreplaceable jungle habitat. Only a few times does she give voice to those who are not actively being harmed by the construction of the canal, and even then she has them express either frustration or obtuseness. If only she had given a few poems to those who could express why we were doing this whole project. I don't think it would have ruined the effect of this collection to include a few counterpoint poems; perhaps one from the point of view of the President of the United States or other visionary. She makes her point about the harm and horrific racist history of the canal very, very well, and it's hard not to end the book without feeling that the Panama Canal was a horrible mistake. Yet I suspect that that point of view is an uncommon one, and I think middle-grade readers would be able to handle a few shades of grey on this matter.

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