

In an engrossing historical novel, the Newbery Medal-winning author of *Bridge to Terabithia* follows a young Cuban teenager as she volunteers for Fidel Castro's national literacy campaign and travels into the impoverished countryside to teach others how to read.

MY BRIGADISTA YEAR

KATHERINE PATERSON

When the newly installed revolutionary premier, Fidel Castro, calls for an army of volunteer teachers to bring literacy to all of Cuba in just twelve months, thirteen-year-old Lora tells her parents that she wants to go. Her mother screeches to high heaven and her father paces like a caged lion. Lora has barely been outside of Havana—how would she survive in a remote shack with no electricity, sleeping on a hammock in someone else's kitchen? But Lora is determined. Didn't her parents teach her to share what she has with others in need?

Inspired by the socially tumultuous and violent real-life events of 1961, internationally acclaimed and best-selling novelist Katherine Paterson makes a brilliant return to historical fiction with this gripping account of a young Cuban girl's coming-of-age. Lora's adventures, as well as her determination and courage, will inspire contemporary readers to think about their own relationship to society, and how, even in youth, they can be powerful agents for change.

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Also available as an e-book and in audio



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KATHERINE PATERSON, a two-time winner of both the Newbery Medal and the National Book Award, has written more than thirty books and is the recipient of many of the highest accolades awarded in children's literature. She is the co-author, with her late husband, John Paterson, of *The Flint Heart*, a wryly retold fairy tale abridged from Eden Phillpotts's 1910 fantasy with illustrations by John Rocco. Her Newbery Medal-winning novel *Bridge to Terabithia*, one of the most beloved children's novels of all time, has spent weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list and was adapted into a major motion picture.

The daughter of American Presbyterian missionaries, Katherine Paterson grew up in China, but the country's internal war and the war with Japan displaced her family before she turned nine. Even after returning to the United States, the family continued to move frequently, giving Paterson great empathy for all those forced to discover new communities of belonging. She often says that books got her through those difficult times as a child and that they still help her during transitions today.

A former National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, Katherine Paterson is well known for her work on behalf of children and children's literacy in the United States and around the world. In 2000, the Library of Congress named her a Living Legend. She lives in Montpelier, Vermont.



Photo by Randolph T. Holhut



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A Q&A WITH AUTHOR KATHERINE PATERSON

What inspired your interest in this period of Cuba's history?

When my friend Mary Leahy heard that I was planning a second trip to Cuba, she told me how envious she was. Her brother Senator Patrick Leahy had been there several times, seeking to mend relationships between our two countries, but she had never been. Early in her experience as the director of Central Vermont Adult Basic Education, Mary had learned of the amazingly successful literacy campaign that, in one year, turned Cuba into an illiteracy-free country. She tried to incorporate ideas from the Cuban model into her work in Vermont, especially the idea of enlisting volunteer teachers who would be humble enough to learn from their students as well as teach them.

I'd never heard about the campaign before, and this conversation with Mary sent me on a quest to find out about it.

Have you had the opportunity to meet or interview any of the real-life brigadistas that were recruited for this effort?

To my surprise, my closest Cuban friend, Dr. Emilia Gallego, who was responsible for both my visits to Cuba, was a brigadista as a teenager. It explains a lot to me about her courage and creativity as an educator and writer.

What made Castro's goal of 100 percent literacy in Cuba so audacious and unlikely, given the events and sociological challenges at that time?

Fidel Castro and his small guerrilla band defeated the dictator Batista's army in 1959. There was widespread poverty and unemployment. Castro's victory was opposed by the United States and the Organization of American States, who imposed an embargo on imports and exports, which made the country poorer still. Nevertheless, Castro believed that in addition to health care and jobs, Cuba needed a literate population if they were to endure as a strong and independent country.

Slightly more than half of the literacy volunteers were female. How did girls' and women's experiences differ from those of male volunteers?

Before the revolution, women and girls were definitely second-class citizens. The prevailing thought was that girls should be protected and groomed to be wives and mothers. Boys had much more freedom and could expect better



education and a choice of careers. The campaign gave girls both freedom and self-confidence. It gave Cuba a whole class of strong, capable women, all of whom point to their brigadista year as the formative experience of their lives.

What were some of the challenges the volunteers faced during the literacy campaign? Why did the campaign make such great fodder for a novel?

These city children were suddenly in the countryside—no electricity, no running water, no indoor toilet facilities, no beds, even. They also had to learn to work alongside the hardworking peasants. They'd never had to do strenuous manual labor in their lives. After an exhausting work day, they had to become teachers . . . a task for which they had less than two weeks of training. And they had to live with the knowledge that there were armed insurgents somewhere out there who would be quite willing, if not eager, to kill them.

Why did you decide to tell this story in a novel form rather than give it a more straightforward nonfiction approach? Was that daunting, and how do you feel about the story you have created now that the book is complete?

I didn't know originally what the best way would be to tell this story, so I did a very clever thing: I asked Karen Lotz, the president and publisher of Candlewick Press. My first idea was a nonfiction picture book with lots of pictures, but Karen said "novel," so novel it became. And the more I wrote, the happier I was about that decision. I fell in love with these characters.

Do you think it is possible for contemporary educators or literacy institutions to take anything away from this historical event in terms of its success? What was accomplished in such a short period of time?

I think, at the very least, they might see how young people love to rise to a real challenge. Young people in this country haven't been challenged like this since the early days of the Peace Corps. I also think any educator needs to remember that learning is a two-way process, with teacher and student respecting each other and learning from each other.

#brigadistayear