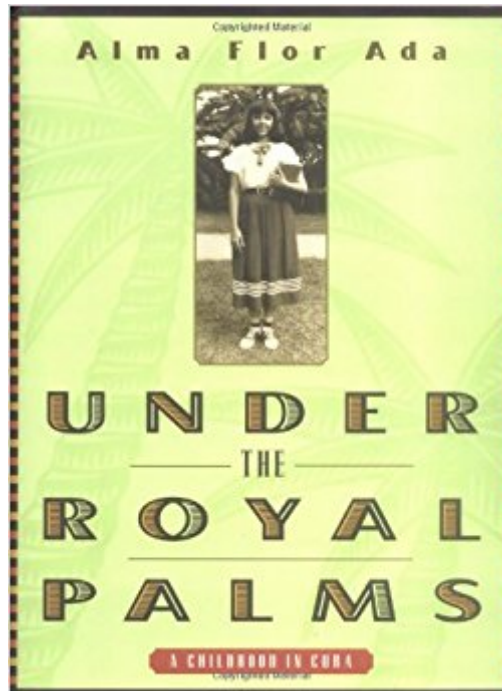




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Under The Royal Palms: A Childhood In Cuba



Synopsis

In this companion volume to Alma Flor Ada's *Where the Flame Trees Bloom*, the author offers young readers another inspiring collection of stories and reminiscences drawn from her childhood on the island of Cuba. Through those stories we see how the many events and relationships she enjoyed helped shape who she is today. We learn of a deep friendship with a beloved dance teacher that helped sustain young Alma Flor through a miserable year in school. We meet relatives, like her mysterious Uncle Manolo, whose secret, she later learns, is that he dedicated his life to healing lepers. We share the tragedy of another uncle whose spirited personality leads to his love of flying...and the crash that takes his life. Heartwarming, poignant, and often humorous, this collection encourages children to discover the stories in their own lives -- stories that can help inform their own values and celebrate the joys and struggles we all share no matter where or when we grew up.

Book Information

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Age Range: 8 - 12 years

Grade Level: 3 - 7

Customer Reviews

In this handsomely designed companion volume to *Where the Flame Trees Bloom*, Ada once again draws upon her experiences growing up in post-war Cuba. In a short introduction, the author describes her hometown, Camaguey, as a "city of contrasts"--diverse religions and education and

economic levels ("some had so much and others had very little"). The 10 stories that follow do not focus on these oppositions so much as the unique experiences of young Alma and her extended family. Several memories poignantly expose the disparity between those who have and those who have not, such as "Explorers," in which young Alma and her cousin get lost in a marabu field and are aided and fed by a poverty-stricken family. Others illustrate life lessons (for example, the impossible but gleeful task of counting bats in flight for their nightly feeding taught Alma to appreciate the process of an endeavor, rather than its completion). But the best of these stories simply recreate a poignant or humorous moment from the author's girlhood: Alma sipping from a porron (a small clay pot) at school, lovingly filled with water by her mother; Alma's pride in her uncle's daring turning to grief when he dies in an airplane crash. Many of the stories stand well alone, but some take a meandering expository path to recount a history or explain a term. These more formal (though often graceful) tangents distance readers from the slices of life. Still, at the core of the collection, there is a heartfelt portrayal of a quickly disappearing culture and a vastly beautiful land. Ages 8-12. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Grade 4-7-This simple and graceful reminiscence of a childhood in Cuba in the 1940s is a companion to *Where the Flame Trees Bloom* (Atheneum, 1994). Although not wealthy, the author's family lived comfortably with aunts, uncles, and cousins in a large, shared family home in the small town of Camaguey. Here any event beyond the ordinary became the focus of everyone's attention and the fuel for many days of conversation. Each chapter includes an early memory or experience of Ada's: nursing the baby bats that fell onto her porch, the production of simple and inexpensive plaster figures for nativity scenes, etc. The author writes about the contrast of wealth and poverty in her country at that time and of the people who made an impression on her, including a ballet teacher who befriended her during a lonely year in a new school, and an uncle and aunt who worked with lepers. Her observations of people lead to a series of revelations that shaped her life. Black-and-white photographs of the author and her family appear throughout. Sylvia V. Meisner, Allen Middle School, Greensboro, NC Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Enjoyed this autobiography for its history and descriptions of Cuba and life in the country's interior there. A look at life before Castro. A realistic description by a high class person about the problems dealing with politics, social class, disease, elderly and other themes. Overall a very interesting book. My mother also enjoyed reading it.

A candid view of life in Cuba from the perspective of a resident. It brings to mind some of the anecdotes that makes life with family an oral tradition. Ada captures a sense of nostalgia and longing for days gone by and brings to mind the idea that life is a series of struggles in which respect, love, and hope always triumphs. A great read!

Interesting book

This is a lovely book. But I am glad I bought it for myself because every photo is damaged with graffiti. I can ignore it but my grandchildren should not see it.

Under the Royal Palms: A Childhood in Cuba, by Alma Flor Ada, is the second of two memoirs covering the author's childhood. *Where the Flame Trees Bloom* was published in 1994. Both books are now available in a single volume entitled *Island Treasures: Growing Up in Cuba*, which also contains a new, shorter section called "Days at La Quinta Simoni." This review is based on the *Island Treasures* edition. *Under the Royal Palms* was also published in Spanish, as *Bajo las palmas reales*. Written in clear prose charged with poetic flavor, *Under the Royal Palms* is a lovely collection of autobiographical stories that paint a rich picture of life for a 20th-century child in the riverside city of Camagüey, Cuba. Located in the interior of the island nation, Camagüey is an ancient city of narrow, winding streets, paved in stone. Most of the stories are set in the large, multi-generational family home of Alma Flor Ada's childhood, known as La Quinta Simoni. Often humorous or joyful, occasionally sobering, each story in this collection captivates the eye and ear through sharp characterizations of place, time, and emotion. By bringing to life feelings ranging from deep loss to transcendent joy, the author succeeds in reaching across cultural and generational gaps to connect to the heart of young readers today. In "Explorers," we meet cousins Jorge and Virginita. As the oldest of these three children, Jorge wears a mantle of authority that his two younger cousins, Virginita and Alma Flor, honor to a fault. Part of Jorge's reputation comes from the fact that he read the adventure stories that we all later reenacted. We trusted his words completely and followed him without hesitation. One day, the girls blithely follow Jorge into a marabú field. Marabús are prolifically spreading trees, which form a dense and thorny thicket. Jorge somehow manages to nimbly scramble his way through the nearly impenetrable network of branches that cover the vast marabú field, but his cousins lose sight of him and are forced to crawl along at inchworm pace, snagging their hair and dresses on the thorns. When Jorge arrives back at La Quinta Simoni without

the girls, and hours later they have still failed to appear, the adults imagine the worst and begin to search high and low for them. The girls finally emerge from the marabú field, with their clothes in tatters and our faces covered with muddy tears. Other stories reveal the web of family relationships and the interplay of competing interests. Broken Wings is a stunning account of an uncle's passion for aeronautic flight and the dear price that he and his loved ones pay for it. Uncle Medardito is the only brother of Alma Flor's mother and maternal aunts. His dynamic personality charms everyone that knows him. So do his exploits. When the Río-Tuñima floods, Uncle Medardito braves the rushing waters to save a drowning person. His flair for daring is not limited to emergencies; at times, he walks like a tightrope artist along the railing of a high bridge, purely for the adventure. Then he is bitten by the flying bug and purchases a lightweight wood-and-canvas plane, powered by a single motor. Family members worry for his safety and dread the days when he goes flying, rising above the red tile roofs and the winding streets that had so restricted his world, gliding like the mighty auras, the Cuban buzzards, over the plains where the royal palms stood majestically. Of all the family, Alma Flor alone, a young girl at the time, does not try to dissuade her uncle from taking his plane up. She identifies with his longing to soar and secretly hopes he will not bend to the fearful misgivings of the others. On a particular Sunday, Alma Flor is in the bathtub, with her hair in a white cloud of shampoo, when a ruckus draws her attention. Looking out the window, she sees hundreds of people rushing toward the river, shouting. Without rinsing off, she jumps into her clothes and dashes outside, joining the throng. A plane is approaching. Instead of the usual healthy sound of a working engine, there's an ominous sputter. Running at full speed in the same direction as the descending plane, Alma Flor is the first to reach it after its deafening impact with the ground. Up to this point, the story has unfolded in such a way that Uncle Medardito's fate is never in question. But what happens next, in young Alma Flor's response to the crash, took me by surprise and provides an unforgettable, emotional climax. Under the Royal Palms is a treasure chest of similar accounts, one that should be dusted off and introduced to a new generation of readers, many of whom have yet to discover the horizon-expanding possibilities of memoir.

Ada's book gives readers a unique look at life in Cuba. Her writing style is quite poetically descriptive yet I often got confused as to whether I was hearing the young child Ada or adult author Ada. As an adult I found her story interesting, but as a child I'm not so sure I would enjoy this book.

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