

DAILY DIGITAL

Stories and information from
HoustonChronicle.com

BOOKS



Michael P. Farrell / Albany Times Union

Katherine Paterson, author of "Bridge to Terabithia," will discuss and sign "My Brigadista Year" today at Meyerland Performing and Visual Arts Middle School.

Children's author's latest book is inspired by real-life history

By Alyson Ward

It sounds like a story plucked from an author's wild imagination: A 13-year-old girl leaves her family in Havana behind to spend a year in the country living with strangers. She sleeps in a hammock, teaches two whole families to read, then barely escapes with her life when she's targeted by insurgents hiding in the hills.

But author Katherine Paterson didn't make up the plot of "My Brigadista Year," her new novel for middle-graders. It's based on a stunning piece of Cuban history, one she has realized many Americans have never heard.

"I felt like it was an important story that needed to be told," said Paterson, the author of "Bridge to Terabithia," "The Great Gilly Hopkins" and dozens of other titles. She'll be in Houston on Saturday, discussing "My Brigadista Year" as part of Inprint's Cool Brains! reading series for young people.

After Fidel Castro took power in the Cuban Revolution, he declared 1961 to be the "year of education." He stood before the United Nations assembly and swore he'd wipe out illiteracy in Cuba in a year. Instead of funneling everyone into the existing educational system, he decided to use an army of volunteers, recruiting literate Cubans of all ages to fan out across the countryside and teach people, one on one.

More than 250,000 Cubans signed up to join the campaign — and more than half of them were women and girls. In fact, more than 100,000 of the volunteers were between ages 10 and 19.

The volunteers left their lives behind for a year. After a few days of training, they got dropped off in small towns or in the countryside and moved in with poor rural families, in

'My Brigadista Year,' the story of a girl who leaves family behind to live with strangers, is a slice of Cuban history

Author appearance

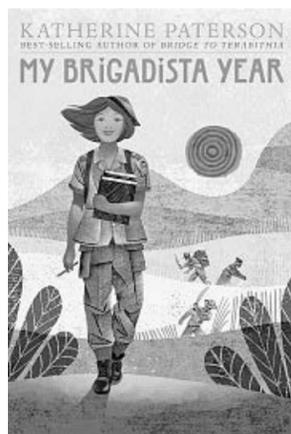
Katherine Paterson will discuss and sign "My Brigadista Year" as part of Inprint's Cool Brain! series.

When: 3 p.m. Saturday.

Where: Meyerland Performing and Visual Arts Middle School, 10410 Manhattan Dr., Houston.

Cost: Free

Information: InprintHouston.org



★ >> Take a planetary journey through NASA's archives. HoustonChronicle.com/nasaplanets

★ >> Picture books help children tackle life. HoustonChronicle.com/picturebooks

★ >> New picture books from local authors. HoustonChronicle.com/newchildrensbooks

homes without running water or electricity. When they weren't helping with work in the fields, they taught each family member how to read and write.

Meanwhile, counter-revolutionaries saw the literacy campaign as a threat to the class system they treasured, and some of them threatened the lives of the brigadistas. One teacher, a

16-year-old boy, was killed by insurgents.

But despite the danger, the program worked. More than 700,000 Cubans learned to read and write that year, and today Cuba has a literacy rate of 99.7 percent.

Paterson first learned about the brigadistas in 2015, when she was getting ready for a trip to Cuba to attend an international books

conference.

"I didn't know anything about the campaign," she said. So she read a book about it, then watched the 2011 documentary "Maestra," which tells the story of nine women who volunteered for the campaign when they were young girls.

"I was so inspired by these women and by what they did," Paterson said. "They all praised that year as a turning point for their lives, when they found out what they could do when they realized they could be strong people and accomplish things."

Paterson's story is fiction but stays true to the experiences of a real-life young girl. Her heroine, 13-year-old Lora, is young and scared but wants the adventure that leaving Havana can offer. "I will always remember the thrill of receiving my uniform and equipment," Lora says. "Dresses with frills and flouncy skirts were from my past life. Even the more severe pleated skirt and white blouse of my school days were left behind. Now I would wear the uniform of a brigadista."

By the end, Lora echoes the words of a real brigadista Paterson encountered: "I taught the campesinos how to read and write," she says, "and they taught me how to be a person."

Paterson said she's gotten some pushback for writing a story that casts Castro, a dictator, in a positive light. But she thinks it's important to see the whole picture.

"I just wanted us to realize that it's OK to see that your enemy has done some good things," she said.

While most dictators want the people to remain ignorant, Paterson said, "I think Fidel Castro, for all his faults, knew that in order to have a strong nation you had to have a literate nation."

alyson.ward@chron.com
twitter.com/alysonward



Raul Corrales / Granma

Fidel Castro declared 1961 to be the "year of education" in Cuba and swore he'd wipe out illiteracy.

BBQ STATE OF MIND

Listen: How Pappas is rethinking barbecue.

HoustonChronicle.com/BBQpodcast

NEW TAYLOR SWIFT

'Reputation': A track-by-track breakdown of feuds, relationships and Kanye.

HoustonChronicle.com/Swiftreputation



HARVEY AFTER-MATH

The latest: Houston families who lost housing during Harvey sleep where they can.

HoustonChronicle.com/Harvey

GRAY MATTERS

'We all have an opinion about the city': A conversation with the new executive director of the Rice Design Alliance.

HoustonChronicle.com/GrayMatters

TRENDING STORIES FROM HOUSTONCHRONICLE.COM:

- Galveston man sentenced to life for sex trafficking minors** A judge ordered a Galveston man who led a sex-trafficking ring to serve life in prison. [Read it: HoustonChronicle.com/sentenced](http://HoustonChronicle.com/sentenced)
- Houston title giant Stewart considers possible sale, merger** The Houston title and real estate services firm said Monday it is considering putting itself up for sale. [Read it: HoustonChronicle.com/stewart-sale](http://HoustonChronicle.com/stewart-sale)
- If doubting work of Red Cross, compare facts and rumors** The Red Cross was affected by the flooding just like every agency. [Read it: HoustonChronicle.com/redcross](http://HoustonChronicle.com/redcross)

WHAT WILL PEOPLE BE TALKING ABOUT TODAY?

Sign up for the Chronicle's "Morning Report," delivered to your inbox by reporter Andrew Kragie.

HoustonChronicle.com/newsletters

HOUSTON CHRONICLE
A Hearst newspaper

Subscriber Services
For subscription changes, billing inquiries, and delivery issues
Phone: 713-362-7211 or 888-220-7211
M-F 5:30am-5:00pm
Sa-Su 7:30am-11:00am
Website: www.houstonchronicle.com/subscribe

Subscription offers:
 ▶ Monday-Sunday: \$14 a week
 ▶ Wednesday-Sunday: \$10 a week
 ▶ Wednesday & Sunday: \$6.50 a week
 ▶ Sunday Only: \$5.50 a week
 ▶ Unlimited Digital Access: \$5 a week

Above subscriptions include 24/7 access to HoustonChronicle.com, news and exclusive stories, immediate iPad@ app availability and the eNewspaper.

For information about a mailed subscription please contact Customer Service.

Prices are subject to change.
All subscriptions include delivery of Thanksgiving edition and your account will be charged up to the published Sunday-only rate in the billing period when the Thanksgiving edition is delivered. New subscription orders will be charged a one-time, non-refundable set-up fee of \$5.95. Due to processing costs, balances under \$5.00 will not be refunded.

Postmaster
Send address changes to The Houston Chronicle, 4747 Southwest Freeway, Houston, TX 77027. Periodicals postage paid at Houston, Texas. The Houston Chronicle (USPS 807-680) is published daily by the Houston Chronicle Publishing Co.

Reader Representative
For comments on the Houston Chronicle's coverage, standards and accuracy
Phone: 713-362-6303
Email: readerrep@chron.com
Fax: 713-362-6373
Mail: Reader Representative, Houston Chronicle 4747 Southwest Freeway, Houston, TX 77027

Copyright 2017 Houston Chronicle Co.

Chronicle Advertising
Classified _____ 713-224-6868
Display Advertising _____ 713-362-3565
Outside Harris County _____ 800-735-3815

Other Chronicle Departments
City Desk _____ 713-362-7491
Sports _____ 713-362-7891
Chronicle in Education _____ 713-362-7904