



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2000 Volume I: Women Writers in Latin America

Exploring Character and Culture in the Lives of Three Remarkable Women of Latin America

Guide for Curriculum Unit 00.01.02
by Christine A. Elmore

In her formative study, *Women of Smoke* (1989), Marjorie Agosin tells of the legacy of Latin American women writers who courageously defy their government's censorship and refuse to be silent. Relentlessly they speak on behalf of those people in their society, who suffer deplorable conditions caused by repressive dictatorial regimes. Some writers disappear and others are exiled but the words they write serve as keys or secret codes that "seek to open the doors of silenced cities and countries" (p. 12). All of this could be said of the evocative paintings of Mexico's Frida Kahlo, the articulate activism of Guatemala's Rigoberta Menchú, and the poetry of Chile's Gabriela Mistral.

In my curriculum unit I plan to have my third-grade students read about the lives of these three important Latin American women from very different walks of life. Biography is the ideal genre by which they can learn about the courage of these women in meeting the challenges of their times and the creative contributions they were able to render to their societies. The great appeal of biographies as a pedagogical tool is in their ability to make history come alive for young readers. Written like fiction, often with dramatic action and excitement, these stories feature factual accounts of real events and real people whom we can admire and emulate, or abhor, and about whom we can seek further information in other sources. Biography is also an ideal introduction to the study and appreciation of 'foreign' cultures.

I have gathered numerous reference sources on the lives of Kahlo, Menchú and Mistral. Using these sources, I have written simple but interesting biographies appropriate for the age group I teach. Using a "think-along" format (used by the Steck-Vaughn Company), I have inserted key-questions at regular intervals in the texts that I have composed. This will encourage young readers-as Dr. Roger Farr, program author of *Steck-Vaughn Think-Alongs* writes-to take "think breaks" as they read. Thus, while reading these biographies in small group settings, students are encouraged to regularly to pause, think, and discuss the text they are reading. In this way, active reading-strategies of thinking along while reading are reinforced.

I have developed extension activities in this unit that will help students respond meaningfully to their reading in both oral and written ways. They are called upon to compare and analyze what they have read and to more closely examine the subject's traits, challenges, achievements, and important life events.

(Recommended for Language Arts, Reading, and Social Studies, grades 2-5.)

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>