

OVERVIEW

Alex is a baseball player. A great one. His papi is pushing him to go pro, but Alex maybe wants to be a poet. Not that Papi would understand or allow that.

Isa is a dancer. She'd love to go pro, if only her Havana-born mom weren't dead set against it . . . just like she's dead set against her daughter falling for a Latino. And Isa's privileged private-school life—with her dad losing his job and her older brother struggling with mental illness—is falling apart. Not that she'd ever tell that to Alex.

Fate—and the New York City subway—bring Alex and Isa together. Is it enough to keep them together when they need each other most?

VOCABULARY

The characters in the book are bilingual. They grow up speaking two languages: Spanish and English. The novel realistically portrays multiculturalism in a cosmopolitan city like New York. It may be helpful to identify and discuss relevant vocabulary and use digital tools, such as Google Translate (translate.google.com) or WordReference (wordreference.com), to listen to the native pronunciation of words in Standard Spanish. However, it should be noted that the characters in the book speak in a Caribbean Spanish dialect. They pronounce words differently depending on the region where their parents came from. It's worth discussing any differences Spanish-speaking students notice between the dialog in the book and how they might say something.

Below are some words that offer insights on the linguistic breadth of the novel:

Montro (Monstruo) – Literally means monster; a term used to describe friends similar to dude

To 'ta frío (Esto/Todo está frío) – Everything is cold or this is cold

¡Guay! – Cool

Ay...lo besó – Oh, she kissed him

Oye – Literally means listen, but it often means “Hey!”

Coño – Swear word

¡Tu 'ta loco! (Tú estás loco) – You're crazy

'Pérate (Espérate) – Wait a minute

Chévere – Cool

No te debo nada – I don't owe you anything

No te preocupes – Don't worry!

Toletazo – A punch; used in reference to hitting someone

Veldad (Verdad) – The truth

Pa'riba (Para arriba) – Expression

¿Qué te pasó? – What happened to you?

¿Cómo tu 'ta? (¿Cómo tú estás?) – How are you?

Oye Pana – “Hey, bud!”

Chuleta – Porkchop

Dame un segundito – Give me a second

Moreno – term used for brown-skinned Hispanic people

BEFORE READING

Use the prompts below to engage students in online research and discussions prior to reading *This Train is Being Held*. Teachers will help facilitate conversation and record questions on an online bulletin board, such as Google Classroom (edu.google.com), Canvas (instructure.com/canvas), or BlackBoard (blackboard.com).

Before starting some discussions of the book, teachers should talk about the importance of Black Lives Matter and police brutality at the high school level. BLM at School (blacklivesmatteratschool.com) is a great resource for teachers and students alike. The materials included in this website are divided by grade and age. The book includes issues of race and class, which border on fear of the police. It is imperative that educators teach lessons about structural racism, intersectional Black and Brown identities, and anti-racism. Additional resources are included at the end of this guide. As teachers, we have the obligation to teach our students to be anti-racist and to fight against the ubiquity of white supremacy.

1. Isa, the main character, speaks Cuban Spanish from her mother's side, while Alex speaks Dominican Spanish that he inherited from his parents. Each dialect has its own distinct features, but they do share some similarities. Listen to these recording of pop culture celebrities speaking Spanish:

Dominican American rapper Cardi B
youtube.com/watch?v=7eHXg0BnB4g

Cuban American actress Eva Mendes
youtube.com/watch?v=GjOlphHWjVU

Compare and contrast some of the differences you might notice. Research the history of Cuba and the Dominican Republic, and learn more about the Caribbean Hispanic population.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.6

2. In any work of literature, readers will encounter new vocabulary. Isa is a ballet dancer while Alex is a baseball player. What might be some technical terms that you might not know? Write down any unfamiliar words or phrases in your notebook to later discuss in class.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.1;9-10.4;11-12.4

3. Browse the New York City subway transit map: new.mta.info/map/5256. Identify the stops where Alex and Isa meet. Think about how the different areas of Manhattan and surrounding boroughs are defined by class and racial differences.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2; 11-12.3

DURING READING

Ask students to keep an interactive notebook to record thoughts, feelings, questions, and concerns while reading *This Train is Being Held*. Use these prompts to facilitate discussion and critical analysis of the text.

1. Write entries for every character that is introduced in the novel such as Isa, Alex, their family members, and friends. How do you think their stories will unfold throughout the novel?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.3, 9-10.3, 11-12.3

2. On page 29, Alex is reading Pablo Neruda's collection of poems, *One Hundred Love Sonnets (Cien sonetos de amor)*. Read Love Sonnet XI: phys.unm.edu/~tw/fas/yits/archive/neruda_lovesonnet11.html. Underline the parts included in the novel and write down how they fit within the context of the poem. Research different types of sonnets. Keeping in mind that this sonnet is a translation from Spanish, consider the type of sonnet Neruda's Love Sonnet XI is. What do you think Alex means when he says, "Neruda's words are music and color"?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.10, 11-12.10

3. Isa apologizes to Alex for having crossed a line. She says on page 36, "Listen, I'm sorry about that night. What I did, that wasn't cool. I shouldn't have, you know, touched you. Not without asking permission." The novel opens up the question of consent. What do you think about the importance of consent? How were the events leading to this apology structured in the novel?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3, 11-12.3

4. When Alex and Isa meet once again on Thursday, November 24, Alex expresses fear when he sees a police officer examining everyone in the subway. Write down specific evidence from the book that demonstrates Alex's true fear of the police and how it develops throughout the novel.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1, 11-12.1
5. On page 42, Isa's brother Merrit discloses that his ex-girlfriend is dating a Korean American boy named Connor Rhee. Isa thinks to herself, "Please be OK." What do you think this means at this moment? What do you think will happen later in the novel?
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.5, 11-12.5
6. "You said most schools in the city are on the Upper East Side. Most *private* schools are. There are public schools all over the city (page 55)," Alex tells Isa. What does this say about their class difference? How does it speak to Isa's privilege and how unaware she is of it?
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2
7. Alex is concerned that Isa's mother is Cuban, and his friends note, "How is this blondie a Cubana? (page 63)." This passage highlights the difference between race and ethnicity. Research these terms and think about how they come into play in the novel.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2, 11-12.2
8. On page 65, Isa tells Alex, "They could have gotten out of Cuba earlier." What is the importance of "getting out of Cuba"? Research Cuban history during the Fidel Castro regime and find the context for this quote.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1, 11-12.1
9. Food is such an important part of Hispanic culture, especially within each national group. On page 65, the main characters discuss their thoughts on tostones and flan. Research these two different types of food and think about some family dishes that are important to you and your family's cultural background. Write down any other unfamiliar culinary details that the characters in the novel discuss.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3, 11-12.3
10. Listen to the first movement of the Russian composer Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto no. 2 op. 18: [youtube.com/watch?v=rEGOiHjqO9w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEGOiHjqO9w). How does listening to the music help to contextualize Chrissy's comment from page 75, "Do you know he can span eleven keys? That's only one less than Rachmaninoff, who had possibly the biggest hands of any composer." Ballet is a highly technical form of dance that was developed into a concert dance form in Russia and France. Compare the live performance of Rachmaninoff's concert to the live recording of the Mariinsky ballet: [youtube.com/watch?v=NldECSf33Rg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NldECSf33Rg). What is the importance of these different dance forms? What does it tell us about art, beauty and entertainment within the context of the novel?
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.7
11. On page 80, the reader gets a glimpse at Alex's poetry. Closely read his poetry the same way you read Neruda's poem. What are some of the defining aspects of his poems? Do they rhyme? Are they solely written in English? Search for the definition of a free-verse poem and discuss whether or not Alex's poem corresponds with that definition.
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.7, 11-12.4
12. Isa's brother Merrit struggles with a condition called bipolar disorder. The diagnoses for this mental health condition varies. How did the author foreshadow the diagnosis at the beginning of the book? How does Isa deal with her brother's condition?
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.5, 11-12.5
13. Compare Alex's poems from pages 95, 177, and 217 to what is being specifically structured in the plot of the story. What is the significance of each poem depending on what is happening in his life?
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.5, 9-10.7; 11-12.5
14. As you know, the book contains many references to ballet, classical music, baseball, and literature. Watch this scene from *The Nutcracker*: [youtube.com/watch?v=SLI9GxIlurc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLI9GxIlurc). Think about the importance of this artistic medium in Isa's life. How does it compare to Alex's interest in poetry?
CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.7

15. The moment when Isa doesn't meet Alex at the 66th Street station is similar to the Shakespeare play, *Romeo and Juliet*, where Romeo does not realize that Juliet is still alive. What does this turn in the narrative tell us about the construction of the novel as a whole? What does this misunderstanding represent?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.5, 9-10.7; 11-12.4, 11-12.5, 11-12.7

16. Robi saves the poems that Alex had thrown away. He says, "I saved it for you. In case you want it back. You know, when you wrote? You looked happy. I think maybe happier even than when you play (page 212)." What do you think motivated Robi to do this? How does this action help Alex in the future?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3, 11-12.3

17. Reread pages 220 and 221 and provide textual evidence that hinted at Merrit's condition. What does Isa mean when she says, "I never needed to ask him. I already knew the answer. I was just afraid he would tell me the truth"?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1, 11-12.1

18. Alex and Isa go through a very traumatic and eye-opening experience near the end of the book. What are some of the descriptors used in the novel? How do they enhance and escalate the scene?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.4, 11-12.4

19. Once you've reached the conclusion of the book, think about the different plot points that led to that very moment. The novel, unlike Shakespeare's tragedy, ends on an uplifting note despite the arduous moments that the couple faces. How does a comedy compare to a tragedy? How would you categorize this novel in terms of genre?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.4; 9-10.5; 11-12.4 11-12.5

AFTER READING

Research

The novel mentions different Latin artists such as Celia Cruz and Aventura as well as different music genres. Conduct some research on the origins of salsa and bachata and provide specific historical context to each genre. Have students write a report based on their research and provide evidence from the book when these artists are mentioned.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.1;9-10.1, 11-12.1

Comparative Work

The novel was heavily inspired by the Broadway musical, *West Side Story*, which was initially inspired by William Shakespeare's famous play about star-crossed lovers, *Romeo and Juliet*. Compare the following quote from Act II, Scene II of Shakespeare's play to pages 125-128 of *This Train is Being Held*:

JULIET: 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy.
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet.

How do both of these passages relate to one another? How does Juliet mark the differences between her and Romeo? Explain how Isa does not understand Alex's preoccupation regarding his skin color to her family. What universal message does this tell us about families?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.7, 9-10.9, 11-12.7

Contemporary Research

Listen to WBEZ Chicago's story *Having 'The Talk': Expert Guidance On Preparing Kids For Police Interactions*: [npr.org/local/309/2019/08/27/754459083/having-the-talk-expert-guidance-on-preparing-kids-for-police-interactions](https://www.npr.org/local/309/2019/08/27/754459083/having-the-talk-expert-guidance-on-preparing-kids-for-police-interactions). Compare what the experts on the podcast say and the way Alex interacts with police, using quotes and passages from the book.

Theme

The thematic elements of the novel contain an abundance of information on personal issues. As students read, maintain a good discussion by asking them to answer open-ended questions with textual evidence. Guide these conversations responsibly by teaching students about white privilege, police brutality, and racism in the United States. The conversation should be centered around anti-racist ideas. Please read and utilize the resources listed at the end of the teaching guide.

Privilege and Class

From the beginning of the story, Alex clearly understands the differences in socio-economic status between Isa's family and his own. What are some ways in which the novel approaches the subject of privilege and class? Provide some clear examples from the novel where Alex fears something that Isa is oblivious to.

Race in Hispanic Culture

The novel showcases examples of the treatment of race in Hispanic culture from Isa's mom and the way that Alex feels around Isa's family initially. What textual evidence proves this? What are some arguments we could make about the subject?

Racial Injustice

Watch "A Conversation With My Black Son" from *The New York Times*: [youtube.com/watch?v=1XgfX1y60Gw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1XgfX1y60Gw). On page 114, Alex poses the following questions: "What would the cop think if Isa were standing with me? If she were holding my hand? Would he still look at me the way he's looking at me now?" Discuss how Alex might navigate these hypothetical situations.

Letter Writing

Merrit, Isa's brother, is institutionalized due to a harmful interaction between different medications that he purposely took. Write a letter of support to Merrit detailing all the wonderful things about him based on textual evidence.

When discussing mental health issues with students, please make sure to provide resources such as The National Institute of Mental Health (nimh.nih.gov) and the National Alliance on Mental Health (nami.org) as well as hotlines such as:

- Text HOME to 741741 for 24/7 anonymous, free counseling
- Call Trevor Lifeline (thetrevorproject.org), 1-866-488-7386, a free and confidential lifeline for LGBT youth
- Suicide Prevention Lifeline (suicidepreventionlifeline.org): 1-800-273-TALK

Creative Writing

The novel ends on a happy note. As you think about the differences between tragedies and comedies, write an epilogue to the novel as a whole from the point of view of either Alex or Isa. Think about where their lives have led them and how they've overcome obstacles together.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Articles

What is White Privilege Really? by Cory Collins from Teaching Tolerance
tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2018/what-is-white-privilege-really

Q&A: How to Talk to Kids about Black Lives Matter by Anya Kamenetz from NPR
npr.org/2020/06/04/868600478/q-a-how-to-talk-to-kids-about-george-floyd

A Hard Conversation for the Latino Community by Jorge Ramos from *The New York Times*
nytimes.com/2020/07/03/opinion/ramos-afro-latinos-racism.html

Colorism in the Latino Community by Jasmine Nelson from National Diversity Council
ndcnews.org/2018/08/29/colorism-in-the-latino-community

How to Discuss Mental Health in the Classroom from TCI
teachtci.com/how-to-discuss-mental-health-in-the-classroom

Website

Black Lives Matter at School Resources
blacklivesmatteratschool.com/resources.html

Video

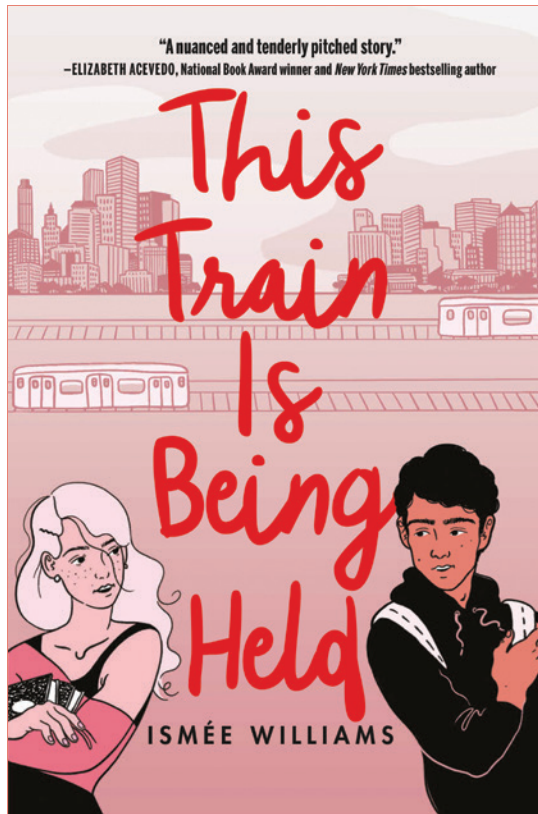
Black Parents Explain How to Deal with the Police from Cut
youtube.com/watch?v=coryt8IZ-DE

Podcast

Latinos and Asians Grapple with Racism, Allyship Amid Ongoing Protests from NPR: The Weekend Edition Sunday
npr.org/2020/06/14/876714190/latinos-and-asians-grapple-with-racism-allyship-amid-ongoing-protests

THIS TRAIN IS BEING HELD

Ismée Williams



ISBN 978-1-4197-3493-9

Ages 13 and up

PRAISE

“A nuanced and tenderly pitched story.”

— Elizabeth Acevedo, National Book Award winner and *New York Times* bestselling author

“Ismée Williams has created an engaging urban romance that tackles difficult subjects such as mental health and racism, while celebrating poetry, dance, baseball, and the complexities of Latino families.”

— Margarita Engle, Newbery Honor-winning author

“We root for these young lovers — the self-conscious poet with the killer fastball and the shy ballerina who would take a bullet for those she loves — as they learn to let their guards down and be more honest with each other, and with themselves. When their story rolls into its final stop we’re sad the ride is over but delighted we caught this train.”

— *The New York Times*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ismée Williams is a pediatric cardiologist by day and an accomplished author by night. Her first book, *Water in May*, received a starred review from *Kirkus Reviews*, praising it for being “full of spot-on cultural texture and packing an emotional punch.” Visit her online at ismeewilliams.com.