

## Children's Literature Reviews

Item 51 of 130

### El lector = the reader

*William Durbin.*

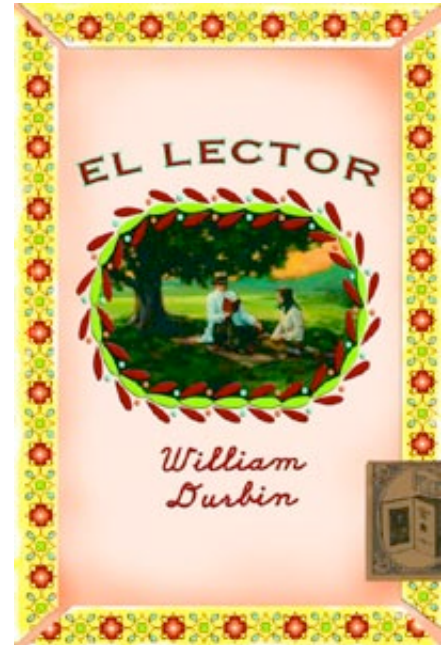
[Contributor biographical information](#)

[Publisher description](#)

[Sample text](#)

New York : Wendy Lamb Books, c2006.

195 p. ; 21 cm.



### Annotations:

Alternate title from back cover.

Bella always dreamed of being a lector, just like her Grandfather, who reads novels, political essays and union news to the workers in a cigar factory. However, circumstances force Bella to take a job at the cigar factory to help support her family instead of getting the education she needs to be a reader. Then, her Aunt Lola is arrested with other workers after a union meeting, and radios begin to replace the lectors in the factories, and Bella must find a way to save her family and her dreams. 010 and up.

### Best Books:

[Amelia Bloomer Project, 2007](#) ; Feminist Task Force SSRT ALA; United States

[Book Sense Children's Picks, Summer 2006](#) ; American Booksellers Association; United States

### Awards, Honors, Prizes:

[Americas Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature](#) Commended 2007 United States

[Minnesota Book Awards](#) Finalist 2007 Young Adult Literature United States

### Horn Book Guide:

Fall 2006 Intermediate Fiction Rating 4, Recommended, with minor flaws.

### Reading Measurement Programs:

Accelerated Reader

Interest Level Middle Grade

Book Level 4.4

Accelerated Reader Points 6

Lexile, MetaMetrics, Inc.

**Reviews:****Jennifer Mattson (Booklist, Feb. 1, 2006 (Vol. 102, No. 11))**

In Depression-era Ybor City, Florida, households receive daily deliveries of milk and fresh Cuban bread, and lectores such as Bella's grandfather entertain cigar workers with readings from literature and politics. But as modern changes reach the factory town, wary officials begin to replace lector podiums with radios ("Owners . . . want workers entertained, not enlightened"), and union unrest is stirred by the arrival of machines. Having set aside dreams of proving that "women can do anything they want" to earn money as a tobacco laborer, 13-year-old Bella witnesses a violently quashed workers' protest, leading to her aunt Lola's imprisonment and a crippling factory shutdown. The vibrant Ybor City atmosphere and Bella's bond with her dignified grandfather are major components of this purposeful narrative, but it is Bella's integrity that will appeal the most to readers, notwithstanding the forced quality of her concluding acts of heroism. Although this may ultimately garner mostly regional audiences, try it as a counterpoint to stories about other young eyewitnesses to labor conflicts, such as Katherine Paterson's *Lyddie* (1991). Category: Books for Middle Readers--Fiction. 2006, Random/Wendy Lamb, \$15.95, \$17.99. *Gr. 4-6*.

**Gwynne Spencer (Children's Literature)**

Durbin's tale is a family story set in the world of Florida cigar-makers living in the early part of the 20th century. In this era before radio took over, many factories had "readers" who performed poetry, novels, newspaper readings, as well as reading aloud the union newsletters to keep boredom at bay. These readers were supported by the workers themselves, and later became the target of union-busters who preferred to keep the workers uninformed. *El Lector* is told from the point of view of a teenager who wants to be a lector like her grandfather. She struggles between making enough money to feed the family and fulfilling her ambition. Durbin has also written *Blackwater Ben* (a really great story!) and *Broken Blade*. Try him. You'll like what you find. 2006, Wendy Lamb/Random House, \$15.95 and \$17.99. Ages 10 up.

**Kirkus (Kirkus Reviews, December 15, 2005 (Vol. 73, No. 24))**

A poor girl with a gift for storytelling refuses to surrender when her dreams and her family are threatened by labor unrest and political corruption during the Depression. Thirteen-year-old Bella lives with her widowed mother and four siblings in the Cuban-American community of cigar workers in Ybor City, Fla. Bright and ambitious, Bella "always dreamed of being *el lector*, just like her Grandfather," who is paid to read novels, political essays and union news to the workers as they roll cigars. But instead of going to high school, Bella takes a job at the cigar factory to help support her family. When her Aunt Lola is arrested with other cigar workers after a union meeting, and the *lectores* are removed from the factories and replaced by radios, Bella finds a way to preserve her family and her dream. Filled with the uneasy spirit of Ybor City in 1931 with its emerging unions and immigrant workers, Bella's engaging story shows what can happen when people believe "in the power of stories to enlighten and transform." (afterword) 2006, Wendy Lamb/Random, 160p, \$15.95. Category: Fiction. Ages 10 up. © 2005 Kirkus Reviews/VNU eMedia, Inc. All rights reserved.

**Betsy Ruffin (Library Media Connection, March 2006)**

Bella longs to be a lectore like her grandfather. A lectore is a person hired by the cigar factory workers to read to them while they work. She must go to high school to be able to do the job, but this costs money, something in short supply in her family since their father was killed. There are also troubles between the labor unions and management over wages, the lectores (who are perceived as stirring up union sentiment), and over replacing jobs with machine work. Grandfather's job is lost when management takes out the lectores' platforms, and he must start selling his beloved books. Bella

uses a new invention, the radio, to help the family and herself. She talks to a radio station manager, arranging an audition for her grandfather. They are both hired to perform for a Spanish story hour. Bella and her family deal with the troubles and changes they face with love for each other and with the help from the unity of the Spanish/Cuban community centered on the cigar factories. The historical details are well researched and give flavor and interest to the plot. The mention of various literary works is good also, as is the hopeful ending. The family love, dealing effectively with changes, and the history all combine to make this a wonderful and interesting novel. Recommended. 2006, Wendy Lamb Books (Random House), 208pp., \$15.95 hc. Ages 9 to 14.

**Hope Morrison (The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, March 2006 (Vol. 59, No. 7))**

Set in Ybor City, Florida, in 1931, Durbin's latest historical jaunt follows the life and times of thirteen-year-old Bella Lorente, granddaughter of Roberto García, one of Ybor's greatest *lectores*. Like his father before him, Roberto makes his living reading to the cigar factory's Cuban-American workers from a raised platform in the middle of the factory floor; novels, news, poetry, and plays are all part of his repertoire. More than anything, Bella longs to be a *lector* like her grandfather; she figures if Amelia Earhart can fly a plane and Jackie Mitchell can strike out Babe Ruth, she, too, can someday have a place at the lectern. Times are about to change in Ybor City, however; the cigar workers' union is getting stronger, the factories growing more corrupt, the radio is gaining prominence, and the bubble is about to burst on the quiet rhythm of Florida life. Since the murder of Bella's father several years earlier, times have been hard for her mother and siblings, so Bella regretfully abandons her hopes to attend high school and instead goes to work in the factory, where she is soon deeply entrenched in the social change happening all around her. The book's early chapters focus a bit too heavily on Bella's gender frustration, but the novel gains traction when it stops being about Bella's personal longings and instead focuses on the greater issues of the time. The development of the union plotline is riveting, as is the description of the symbolism of the *lectores*, who, by novel's end, are silenced as the lecterns are torn down and radios put up in their place. Ultimately, this is a solid read about a little-known tradition set in a context not often represented; the descriptions of Ybor City are stylized without being overly detailed, and the gently interwoven story of family life is carefully crafted. (Reviewed from galleys) Review Code: R -- Recommended. (c) Copyright 2006, The Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois. 2006, Lamb, 160p, \$17.99 and \$15.95. Grades 4-7.

**Horn Book (The Horn Book Guide, Fall 2006)**

In Florida in 1931, Bella wants to become a *lector* like her grandfather, reading aloud to the cigar factory workers. But it's harder for girls to be educated, and factory owners hostile to unions are replacing *lectores* with newfangled radios. Despite dialogue seemingly transplanted from a textbook on Florida history, the story draws readers into its time and place. Category: Intermediate Fiction. 2006, Random/Lamb, 197pp, 15.95, 17.99. Ages 9 to 12. Rating: 4: Recommended, with minor flaws.

**Sherry York (VOYA, June 2006 (Vol. 29, No. 2))**

In 1931, when Cuban American Bella Lorente, the oldest daughter of a widowed mother of five, finishes her last year of elementary school, she hopes to attend high school in the fall. She wants to become a lector like her grandfather, who reads novels, poetry, and news to the cigar rollers at a factory in Ybor City, Florida. Instead Bella finds herself working in harsh conditions in a tobacco factory for pennies a day to help her mother buy food for the family. During that summer, Bella's aunt, Lola, is unjustly jailed for being a member of the tobacco workers union, and grandfather, the most respected reader in the area, is replaced by a radio. Daring to defy convention, Bella manages to find a job for her grandfather and herself at a local radio station. With the support of the community and their family, the two become widely known for the excellence of their Spanish-language broadcasts. They are then able to help the family financially, and Bella will be able to attend high school. This historical novel's setting in depression-era Florida and its Cuban American characters

make it unique in young adult literature. Based on actual events, the workers' struggles, the ruthless disregard of workers' rights, and the tyranny of the Ku Klux Klan are woven through a believable story with realistic details, but the characters are two-dimensional, and the depictions of Cuban culture are superficial and not authentic. VOYA CODES: 3Q 2P M J (Readable without serious defects; For the YA with a special interest in the subject; Middle School, defined as grades 6 to 8; Junior High, defined as grades 7 to 9). 2006, Wendy Lamb Books/Random House, 193p., \$15.95 and PLB \$17.99. Ages 11 to 15.

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Language	Call Number	LCCN	Dewey Decimal	ISBN/ISSN
English (eng)	MLCS 2006/45437 (P)	2006296650	[Fic]	0385746512 (hc.) 0385908881 (lib. bdg.) 9780385746519 9780385908887

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