

American Girls Short Guide

American Girls by Anilu Bernardo

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

American Girls Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	12
Related Titles.....	13
Copyright Information.....	14



Overview

"American Girls" tells of a problem that many young immigrants to the United States must face—difficulty speaking English in school. Tere's English is heavily accented, and she therefore tries to avoid speaking in the classroom, wishing that her teachers would call on other, more outspoken students. When called upon to give an answer, "It was just too difficult to say it in English." Young people in similar circumstances will find Tere an empathetic protagonist who speaks on their behalf; native speakers of English will be given a glimpse of another point of view regarding school: "The Englishspeaking students had it so easy. All they had to do was study and they had the answer." The idea that just studying is easy may be a novel one for many young readers, but the story is about opening up new ways of viewing experiences, not just for the characters but for the readers, as well.

About the Author

Ann Reynold (maiden name Anilu Bernardo) was born in Cuba and fled as a child to the United States in 1961, her own jumping off to freedom.

She grew up in Miami, Florida and attended Coral Gables High school.

She then earned a B.A. in Spanish from Florida State University, graduating in 1971 and an M.A. in communications in 1980. Like many authors for young people, Bernardo began writing as a youngster, originally writing stories and poems in Spanish, her first language. She lives in Plantation, Florida with her husband Jim and their two daughters, Stephanie and Amanda.

Her first published book, *Fitting In*, is a collection of short stories and was published as part of the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project at the University of Houston. *Fitting In* tied with Margaret Wiley's *Facing the Music* for the Paterson Prize for Books for Young People for grades 7 through 12, and the magazine *Stepping Stones* gave the 1996 *Stepping Stones* Book Award for children's literature to *Fitting In*. Bernardo participates in the Florida Romance Writers organization and meets with fellow writers in a critique group.

Setting

Most of the action in "American Girls" takes place in school, where Tere endures various levels of humiliation as she struggles to make herself understood in English. The school is nondescript and seems typical of suburban schools in Florida. There Tere mixes with teachers who seem to wish to draw her out of her self-imposed seclusion, with Spanish-speaking friends, and with some cruel young adults who single her out for abuse because of her hesitancy to use accented English.

A bridge near the school is also a significant setting. This is where Tere outwits the treachery of some meanspirited boys, where she helps Mary Beth Jackson, and where she perhaps gains a new friend. The bridge physically allows Tere to cross over to make this new friend, but it also symbolizes the social gap bridged between her Spanish-speaking heritage and Mary Beth's English speaking heritage.



Social Sensitivity

The matter of speaking English in schools is presently a hot topic in parts of the United States that have large school-age populations of students whose first language is not English. Should students be immersed in English from the moment they enter an American school? Should they attend classes taught in their native languages while learning English until they can comfortably switch to English-only classes? Advocates of either view may imagine they find support for their views in "American Girls," even though the story does not specifically address the issues involved. Placing Tere in English-only classes may be helping to draw the shy, depressed Tere out of her isolation and into the wider world of her community. When she speaks Spanish with a friend though, she seems to be shutting out her English speaking classmates, isolating her from this community. On the other hand, constant humiliation in class coupled with the frustration of knowing the answers but not being able to express them in English may be discouraging Tere from learning; certainly, school seems to be for her primarily a place of anguish and fear, not a place for education. Even so, Tere's characterization resists being symbolic or being a 4422 American Girls stereotype; her situation is too complex to allow for oversimplification.

After all, the story presents Tere's friend Alicia, also Cuban-American, but who speaks fairly good English and seems well-adjusted to her American school. Furthermore, native speakers of English make mistakes; for instance, Brian says "Medickrreanean" when he should say Mediterranean, which is no better, maybe worse, than Tere saying "Atena" when she means Athens. Her problems with pronunciation may not be much worse than that of her classmates and if she learns this, she may feel less intimidated in class.

Literary Qualities

Bernardo does a good job of painting her characters' situation and feelings in sharp, descriptive passages.

For example, a well-observed analogy conveys the depth of Tere's feelings: Tere's attention wandered. She stared out the window where loud blue jays chased a sparrow off the tree. The little bird flew away and found safety in a tiny hole under the eaves of a school building. Tere understood the sparrow's problem, but she envied him. At least he had a place to hide.

This passage is an effective visualization of Tere's inner life, making it concrete and understandable. Bernardo's descriptions also create memorable pictures that help put readers into the action of the moment: Tere wished Mrs. Martin would stop looking for answers from the quiet students. She pulled her shiny, brown hair forward like a dark curtain, hiding her face.

Any teacher is likely to recognize this sign of a student who just does not want to be where she is. Those who are not teachers can see the public persona Tere presents, and how it might attract the attention of young thugs who are looking for a victim. Sometimes the image is not only vivid, but funny: Mary Beth Jackson stared at her like a big-eyed chocolate bunny.

She kept her mouth shut to prevent mud from running into it.



Themes and Characters

"I try not to listen, but it hurts when they make fun of me," Tere says to her friend Alicia. She feels like an outsider, that she does not belong with her classmates. As "American Girls" develops, Tere comes to realize that she is an American girl—just as American as her classmates who speak English with ease. It is this central idea, the main theme, that ties the story's events together. As Tere's character grows, she realizes that she may be an immigrant and have trouble with her English, but she is an American girl, regardless.

"It's not as if I'm dumb," says Tere, and there is ample evidence that she is intelligent, that difficulty speaking English makes her feel as though others must think her dumb. "It seemed every time she opened her mouth in class, the sounds came out wrong." It is not surprising that a bright, sensitive person would be touchy about how others perceived her. Tere is also very self-aware, realizing that some of what happens to her is a result of her own behavior: "Messy stuff was the trouble she [Tere] got herself into because she had been so shy, so afraid to speak and be laughed at." Most people do not want to be laughed at, and a teenager who wants to be accepted, to be part of the group ("Right now she [Tere] wished she was like the others"), is likely to be especially shy if she believes that merely by speaking she will bring cruel attention to herself. That Tere learns to overcome her shyness, at least enough to form a basketball team, is a triumph not only over her difficulties socializing but over her own fears.

The young people who torment Tere are stereotypes. Brian and the other boys are just selfish jerks who entertain themselves by being cruel to those who cannot defend themselves. Mary Beth Jackson is given somewhat more depth than the boys, but her nasty, contemptuous behavior toward Tere is so thoroughgoing that her conversion into Tere's friend lacks some credibility. When will she turn on her new friend in order to fit in with the bullies she usually hangs out with? Still, she gives voice to one of the most important reasons why Tere and others like her become targets for abuse: "'I just wish you wouldn't speak Spanish with your friends when others are around,' said Mary Beth. 'It feels like you're trying to keep something from us.'"

And Mary Beth is humanized and given the ability to see into herself: "'I've been picking on you, too,' she admitted quietly." "To which Tere replies, "'It is easy to pick on someone different. My English is not too good.'"

Short stories are limited by lack of space for extensive development of more than a few characters; secondary characters such as the teachers and the bullies tend to be stereotypes—easily recognizable figures that do not require much explanation. Another typical quality of a short story is a single, strong unifying theme. In the case of "American Girls," the theme is alienation; it is particularly appropriate to the story's subject matter and is well developed, showing how a shy immigrant with difficulties speaking English becomes estranged from her community. At first, Tere is all victim; not only does she attract abuse, but she even abuses herself by avoiding chances to shine inside and outside of class. Her teacher is patient and willing to help Tere with her pronunciation. Under such circumstances, she could answer the teacher's questions as



best she could and thereby show that her difficulty with English is not due to lack of intelligence. Instead, she tries to hide herself from view, and even expects to be treated badly. Tere, as an alienated figure, thus has two battles to fight: The obvious one is to win friends, the other is to overcome her shyness.

When Tere participates in the school fair all her awkwardness seems to assert itself, but she shows herself to be a plucky person; she tries to overcome her fears and to do her job at the booth. This helps make credible her eventual triumphs. The same plucky girl is someone who would help Mary Beth out of the mud, even though Mary Beth has been mean to her. The winning of Mary Beth's friendship by selfless action is an important step in Tere's overcoming her alienation. She has shifted from passive victim in the classroom to active risk-taker, and in so doing begins to take charge of her life. Further, she listens to Mary Beth's comments about her English and even tries to imitate the way Mary Beth pronounces *th*. She is beginning to see Mary Beth and other native speakers of English not as sources of humiliation but as people who can help her.

This realization leads to the story's conclusion when the basketball team Tere and Mary Beth are on includes not only two other Spanish-speaking girls but Kelly as well. The victory in making friends ties in well with Tere's internal victory. She knows that she is shy, but she learns that she can take charge of herself and take action to overcome her fears. By learning to pronounce *th*, she learns that she can overcome her limitations, that she does not have to live her life as the shy person who always gets herself in messy situations because she will not speak up for herself. This aspect of her growth may be seen in the name of her basketball team, American Girls, which suggests that she realizes that she is as much an American as any of the other young people in school.



Topics for Discussion

1. How representative of the problems of young people who speak English as a second language in American schools are the experiences of Tere?

2. Is Mary Beth Jackson trustworthy? Should Tere believe that Mary Beth has actually become her friend?

3. How uncomfortable are people when they hear other people speaking a language they do not understand?

Might they worry that they are being talked about, the way Mary Beth says she worries?

4. What could be done to help Tere with her schoolwork?

5. What could be done to help Tere get along with her schoolmates?

6. Setting up that trap beyond the bridge goes way beyond picking on someone or even bullying behavior.

What should be done about the boys responsible for the trap? Will they eventually seriously hurt someone?

7. Does "American Girls" provide any insights into the experiences of someone who has trouble with English who attends an American school?

8. How should a teacher handle a student who does not want to answer questions in the classroom?

9. "Right now she [Tere] wished she was like the others." How powerful is the desire to conform? Why do young people want to be like those around them?

10. How good is the ending of "American Girls"? Do you think that forming a basketball team is a logical solution?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. If the boys who made the trap beyond the bridge were truly Mary Beth Jackson's friends, they would have warned her before she walked into it. Might Mary Beth realize this?

Write a short story from Mary Beth's point of view, showing how she learns who her real friends are.

2. Tere has trouble making the th sound, which is even considered a rude noise in Cuba. What are the typical problems Cubans have learning English? What techniques do educators use to help them overcome those problems?

3. The matter of what languages to use when teaching schoolchildren is a major issue in states with large immigrant populations. In what states is this an issue? How have communities tried to resolve the issue? Is English only the best approach for teaching nonnative speakers of English? Is it best to teach the students in their native language? Is it best to mix English and native language instruction?

4. "Messy stuff was the trouble she [Tere] got herself into because she had been so shy, so afraid to speak and be laughed at." What are the causes of shyness? Are there different kinds of shyness? Are there scientific names for shyness? How do people overcome their shyness?

5. Violence has long been a problem in American schools, and it is a problem that has been receiving much attention in recent years. Does school-related violence often have causes similar to those that prompt the schoolboys to lay a trap for Tere? How should school authorities deal with such malicious acts? How should the community deal with them? Are there ways to prevent attacks?

6. Immigrant children often have trouble in their new schools. Are there organizations that help them? What help is available from the government, from community groups, or from other institutions?

For Further Reference

Ayres, Annie. Booklist 93, 8 (December 15, 1996): 721. Ayres says that "the stories do speak with a lively and authentic accent about the angst of bicultural, female adolescence," in spite of the protagonists of the different stories in *Fitting In* all seeming to be alike.

Celis, Esther. *Skipping Stones* 9, 2 (March-April 1997): 7. Admires how the characters in the stories of *Fitting In* overcome their fears.

Hudak, Melissa. *School Library Journal* 42,11 (November 1996): 120. Highly recommends *Fitting In* to libraries.

Publishers Weekly 243, 38 (September 16, 1996): 84. The only negative review of *Fitting In*.

Related Titles

"American Girls" is one of several stories published in the collection *Fitting In*. They all focus on young Cuban Americans learning to thrive in Florida. Bernardo has also published a novel, *Jumping Off to Freedom* (1996; see separate entry, Vol. 9), that tells of a harrowing sea-crossing between Cuba and Florida by people escaping the restrictive society of communist Cuba and hoping to find the freedom to build good lives for themselves in a new land.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996