Among the Volcanoes Study Guide

Among the Volcanoes by Omar S. Castaneda

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Introduction

Among the Volcanoes is a coming-of-age story written for young adults and set in a place far removed from the environments familiar to American readers. Castañeda was able to write the novel in part due to funding from a Fulbright Fellowship for research in Central America that allowed him to study more closely the culture and people of his heritage. Published in 1991 in the United States, the novel is intended for readers between the ages of twelve and eighteen. It is set in the author's native Guatemala and tells the story of a teenager, Isabel Pacay, who experiences the same feelings and uncertainties as any adolescent, but in a very difficult place and time. The political climate is hostile and very dangerous, her mother is afflicted with a debilitating illness, she must stop attending school in order to care for her family, and she is having problems with her fiancé. To make matters worse, Isabel does not always think like the other members of her community. They are very tradition-minded, while she has dreams of taking a different path with her life than the one she is expected to follow.

Although critical response was scant, those who reviewed the novel praised it for its compelling and realistic portrayal of Mayan culture in Guatemala. At the same time, critics felt that the universal themes would appeal to Castañeda's young audience. The book addresses betrayal, love, the difficulties of making decisions as teenagers approach adulthood, the discomfort of not quite fitting in with the rest of the community, discovering one's identity, and the nature of family relationships. The story is about Isabel's responsibility, not just to her family and her fiancé, but ultimately to herself.

Author Biography

Omar Sigfrido Castañeda was born on September 6, 1954, in Guatemala City, Guatemala, but grew up in Michigan and Indiana after his family moved to the United States. Although he became an American citizen in 1986, he returned to Guatemala on numerous occasions to study Mayan life and culture for his novels, short stories, and picture book.

Before becoming a respected novelist and English professor, Castañeda joined the military, where he served for four years in avionics (electronics used in airplanes) communications maintenance. After his service in the military, he attended Indiana University in Bloomington, where he earned a B.A. in 1980 and an M.F.A. in 1983. When he later became an educator, his work took him to Florida, Washington, and China. His wife's work as an anthropologist allowed the couple to travel to foreign countries such as Mexico and China, as well as to return to Guatemala.

Castañeda was an award-winning writer, earning such prestigious honors as an Ernest Hemingway fellowship, a Critchfield Research Award, a Fulbright Central American Research Grant (during which he wrote *Among the Volcanoes*), and a Pulitzer Prize nomination. Some of his work reflects the magic realism style so popular in Central America. His primary literary influences were Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Miguel Angel Asturias.

Castañeda's work is characteristic of the new Latin American style of literature that combines emotions and aesthetics with strong ethnic and political viewpoints. In a *Booklist* article, Rosemary Brosnan quotes Castañeda: "You cannot separate politics from art. One can only ignore or obfuscate the politics in art. Those who try to separate the two are really sanctioning the dominant view." This sentiment accounts for the fact that he often used his writing to express his concern for peace and justice in Guatemala.

Castañeda died of a heroin overdose in January 1997. He was a professor of writing at Western Washington University at the time, and his death came as a shock to the campus. He is survived by his wife and two children.

Plot Summary

Chapters One through Five

Isabel Pacay, the oldest of four children, is a teenage girl taking care of the family because her mother, Manuela, is very ill. She realizes that "by being the first, she was now the last," because she must now put everyone else's needs before her own. One morning her father leaves without breakfast, and Isabel follows him under the guise of going to get the water. She watches him as he sacrifices a chicken to both the native and Christian gods, while praying specifically for Isabel. She returns home and prepares breakfast. After the younger children leave for school, Isabel's mother goes to the altar and performs the healing rituals as instructed by Eziquel Coxol, the town healer. Isabel worries that her mother will never get better, and that she will be forever stuck as the woman of the house. Her dream is to become a teacher, and even though she knows it seems impossible, she is unwilling to give up hope.

When Manuela has another attack, Isabel heads into town to find Eziquel. There she finds many of the villagers gathered around an American imploring the mayor to allow him to do his medical work in their village. Because of the hostile political climate, however, the natives are suspicious of strangers. Isabel, who loves learning, is intrigued by this man who has come from so far away. As the crowd breaks up, Isabel sees her fiancé, Lucas. He is distant and cold to her, leaving her confused as she goes to find Eziquel. Isabel returns home with the healer, and for the first time, Manuela admits how sick she is. When Isabel's father, Alfredo, comes home, the family talks about the strange American. After dinner, Alfredo drinks his rum and tells stories to the children.

The next day, Isabel talks to her best friend, Teresa, about Lucas' strange behavior. Teresa and Lucas were engaged; he broke off the engagement because he was in love with Isabel. Isabel marvels at how Teresa is able to remain friends with her. Teresa agrees to talk to Lucas about his aloof manner.

Chapters Six through Ten

The American approaches Isabel. Nobody will talk to him, and he hopes Isabel will be different. She learns that his name is Allan Waters and that he is a medical student working on an illustrated book of symptoms that will allow patients to communicate with doctors who do not speak their languages. Isabel talks to him briefly, until Manuela calls her away.

On her way into town, Isabel encounters Lucas, and their exchange is cold and formal. When Isabel returns home, she finds many of the women in the village talking to Manuela about Isabel's indiscretion in talking to the American. That night, Alfredo warns her about the dangers of trusting strangers and about the importance of resisting change. Isabel disagrees. Their discussion is interrupted by the sound of a rock hitting

the house. When they investigate, they find a red candle in a circle of pine with a burnt tuft of hair. It is a bad sign, and Alfredo remains watchful all night.

One day, Isabel wanders off by herself, and as she is crouched in a group of rocks in a cave, she sees a small group of guerrillas butcher a local man's steer. She is terrified and stays completely still, but one of the men sees her. He looks right at her but does nothing. After they leave, Isabel stays still for a while longer before going back home.

On Sunday, everyone gathers for Mass, and Isabel goes to confession before the service. She admits to feeling resentful at being forced to stay home and take care of the house instead of going to school as she would prefer. The priest assures her that her feelings are normal and tells her that she has committed no sin.

The whole village turns out for a celebration of the newly installed waterline that will give the village a constant and reliable source of water. The festival includes music and a soccer game in which Lucas, one of Isabel's brothers, and many of the other boys will play. Isabel's family leaves the house to go to the festival, and Manuela sees how badly Isabel wants to go. In a tender moment, she insists that her daughter go. During the soccer game, Lucas makes an incredible but dangerous play, and Isabel rushes out to him. Without thinking about the fact that they are in front of the whole town, they kiss. Isabel's father takes her by the arm and escorts her home.

Chapters Eleven through Fifteen

As Manuela's condition worsens, Isabel grieves the loss of the person her mother once was. She was so vibrant and full of life, and now she can barely walk by herself. Isabel suggests to Eziquel that they should take Manuela to Sololá to the Western hospital. He considers it. Alfredo tells Eziquel of the red candle and the other signs that have been left at their house. Isabel's brother runs in to tell them that the army is in town with another proclamation, and the children go to hear it. Isabel recognizes one of the military men as the guerrilla who saw her when she was hiding in the rocks. She wonders why the same man would be on both "sides," and what it could mean.

Alfredo, Isabel, Allan, and Isabel's siblings all accompany Manuela on her trip to the hospital. It is a trip that takes most of the day, and they see strange people along the way. In the hospital, the doctor conducts a basic examination but wants to draw blood and take X-rays to confirm his diagnosis. Manuela refuses, and Allan persuades the doctor to give him the medication for her anyway. Allan asks Isabel to meet him at the soccer field the next day.

When Isabel meets Allan, Lucas sees them together, and his jealousies mount. He wants to fight Allan, but Isabel stops him. Lucas storms away, leaving Isabel emotionally wrecked as Allan explains to her how to use the medication for her mother. Feeling alone, Isabel visits her wise teacher for advice. He tells her how much teaching means to him and that she must find a way to pursue her dream. She feels lost, and he tells her that it is important that she ask herself what it is she really wants and not be afraid of

the answer. Later that day, Manuela has another attack, and Isabel encourages Alfredo and Eziquel to use the Western medicine. They agree. While they take care of Manuela, Isabel goes to find Lucas. They talk, and she discovers that Teresa has been telling Lucas lies, exploiting his insecurities and jealousies about the American. Teresa has told Lucas that Isabel does not want to marry him, and Isabel comes to realize why Lucas has been so cold. She also concludes that Teresa is the one responsible for all the bad signs at the house. Isabel tells Lucas that she wants to marry him, but that she also wants to be a teacher. She only asks that he promise that they will try to find a way for her to be both wife and teacher. He cannot see as way, but he agrees they will try. She is thrilled.

Characters

Lucas Choy

Lucas is Isabel's handsome and athletic fiancé. Because he was in love with Isabel, Lucas broke off his previous engagement to Teresa, Isabel's best friend. Isabel accepted his proposal, and he began planning for their future.

Lucas' belief system is very traditional and reflects the attitudes of the village. He is a hard worker, finding work wherever he can. For a while, he works with the men who are digging the waterline channel that will provide running water to the village. He loves Isabel, and also needs to know that she loves him. When he sees how curious she is about Allan, the American visitor, and sees her interact with him, he becomes very jealous and begins to doubt their relationship. When Lucas is hurt, he becomes stubborn and unwilling to talk.

Lucas' hesitance to work out personal problems almost leads to the breakup of his relationship with Isabel. Confused by jealousy, Lucas allows Teresa, who secretly wants him back, to fill his head with doubts about Isabel. Ultimately, the truth emerges, and Lucas and Isabel realize they are meant for each other. In fact, he loves her enough to agree that they will try to make her dream of becoming a teacher come true, although he cannot see how.

Eziquel Coxol

Eziquel is the sanjorin, or town healer. He is an older man, in his sixties, with as much energy and vigor as an adolescent. His medicine is based on the principles of appeasing the traditional gods, casting spells, and performing rituals. Isabel describes him as "mystical" and imagines him as "someone who spoke directly to the gods and who had power over the bric-a-brac of nature."

Not until he has exhausted every treatment he knows does he agree that perhaps Manuela, Isabel's mother, should visit the Western doctors in Sololá. Due to a fight with Isabel's father, Alfredo, however, Eziquel does not accompany the family and Allan on their trip to the hospital. When the family returns and Manuela has another fit, Isabel implores the men to give her mother the medicine Allan has gotten from the doctor in Sololá. Both Alfredo and Eziquel agree.

Alfredo Pacay

Isabel's father, Alfredo, is a hard-working man who earns just enough to provide for his family while at the same time making himself emotionally available to them. He makes a special effort on behalf of Isabel, as she fills the role of the woman of the house. One morning, Alfredo even sneaks out of the house and sacrifices a chicken to the gods

(both native and Christian) while praying specifically for Isabel. Alfredo knows Isabel would rather be going to school, but also respects her as a maturing woman capable of handling life's difficulties.

Alfredo enjoys telling legends and stories to his children. He also teaches them that there is danger in accepting new things. Even when Isabel expresses her disagreement with him on this point, he explains that he once believed he could enable his children to become educated and to better their lives, but now he sees that there is no use in trying to change the way things are.

Diego Pacay

Diego is the younger of Isabel's two brothers. He is a typical young boy who plays with tops, likes to be with his friends, and admires his older brother.

Isabel Pacay

Isabel is the novel's main character. She is a Mayan teenager who is forced to stay home from school and take care of the family because her mother is ill. Isabel handles all of her usual errands in addition to the work that her mother would normally do. Isabel loves school and misses going every day, but her responsibilities at home prevent her from continuing her education. Already, many of Isabel's friends have left school to get married, as is expected of girls their age. Isabel's dream is to be a teacher, a position that would allow her to fuel her own love of learning while educating and inspiring children. In her village, however, it is unlikely that her dream will ever come true, as she is expected to marry soon and take on the full-time role of wife and mother. As Isabel comes to terms with her own identity, she grapples with the conflict between the tradition of her village and her desire to follow her dream.

Isabel is miserable with her additional responsibilities to the family, and she feels selfish because she is not more willing to make sacrifices. She sees how her mother suffers physically and wonders what gives her the right to feel that she, in perfect health, is really suffering at all. At confession, she is told that her feelings are perfectly normal and that she is doing nothing wrong. Still, she cannot shake the feeling that she is somehow deficient as a woman because of her private resentment.

Isabel is engaged to handsome Lucas Choy, who broke his previous engagement with her best friend, Teresa, because he was in love with Isabel. She is amazed at Teresa's willingness to be her friend despite what happened with Lucas. While Isabel loves Lucas and wants to marry him, she is not ready to give up her dream of being a teacher. She is very sensitive to Lucas' moods and feelings, and when he is upset with her, she is determined to talk to him and resolve their problems.

When the American Allan Waters comes to town, Isabel seems to be the only one who is not afraid of him. She is fascinated by what she can learn from this foreigner and senses that he is harmless and can be trusted. Unlike the others in her village, Isabel is

not afraid of change and seeks ways to combine the old traditions and beliefs with new ways of thinking and doing things. In the end, after a talk with her teacher, Isabel finds a way to make peace with Lucas without losing him, and even does so without agreeing to sacrifice the dream that means so much to her.

José Pacay

At twelve, José is the older of the two brothers. He is among the last of his peers to remain in school and is eager to be finished. José dislikes school as much as Isabel loves it. He much prefers working in the fields, cutting wood, and fishing. José is also very athletic and enjoys showing off his soccer skills.

Manuela Pacay

Manuela is Isabel's very ill mother. Her illness is incapacitating, causing her to suffer weakness, fatigue, swollen limbs, severe chest pains, and fits. Her infrequent walks are extremely difficult and taxing. During the course of the novel, the reader only sees Manuela in her weakened state, although Isabel's memories provide occasional flashbacks to the vibrant and joyful woman she once was. Manuela is a very devout woman, carefully performing all the rituals as instructed by the village healer. Not wanting to cause undue trouble, she often says she is fine when it is clear that she is not. Only twice does she admit in front of Isabel how bad her condition really is.

Although Manuela agrees to go to Sololá to the Western hospital, she refuses any tests beyond a basic examination. Isabel stays with her while the doctor listens to her chest and heart, but Manuela refuses to allow the doctor to draw a blood sample or take X-rays. She is stubborn and resolute. Isabel later explains that taking Western medicine is unthinkable to Manuela because it is like something from another world entering her body and staying there forever.

One scene allows the reader to see Manuela's soft and maternal side. Seeing how badly her daughter wants to go with the rest of the village to see the soccer game, she insists that Isabel go. She understands that her daughter spends most of her time in the house or running errands and knows that a young girl needs to have fun, and, moreover, that Isabel deserves it. She squeezes Isabel's hand and says of her daughter's domestic duties, "I know this is hard for you." In this moment, Isabel realizes that her mother is still a loving and understanding person, despite the illness from which she suffers.

Marcelina Pacay

Isabel's much younger sister, Marcelina, helps Isabel as best she can by carrying small bundles, taking food to their brothers in the fields, and flattening dough into tortillas. Marcelina is a playful and spirited child who loves Isabel like a mother.

Teresa

Isabel's best friend, Teresa, keeps her informed of what is going on at school in her absence. Isabel feels she can confide in her good friend Teresa, and when she begins to have problems with Lucas, it is Teresa to whom she turns. Teresa promises to talk to Lucas to try to help resolve matters.

Teresa, however, secretly has feelings for Lucas and tells him lies about Isabel to try to win him back. She says that Isabel does not want to marry him and that she wants an American to take her away from their village. Teresa exploits Lucas' insecurities about Allan, but in the end her schemes do not work. Once Isabel and Lucas talk out their problems, their relationship is stronger than ever.

Allan Waters

Allan is an American medical student visiting Guatemala as part of his studies. His father was a doctor who traveled through Central America on medical projects, and Allan hopes to follow in his footsteps. Isabel is struck by Allan's appearance the first time she sees him: He has long, wavy blond hair and blue eyes that initially make Isabel believe he is blind. Allan gestures broadly to make his points, while the natives keep their arms close to their bodies. His clothes are unusual, and later, when Isabel talks to him, she is aghast at how much he has spent on items like his backpack, camera, and ticket to fly to Guatemala.

Allan hopes to create a book of symptoms that will enable Guatemalan people of all languages to communicate with any doctor to get the medical care they need. The book is to contain pictures of symptoms, so all the patient has to do is point. To create this book, Allan needs to observe and interact with natives to better understand what symbols and artistic styles are most meaningful to them. Unfortunately, Allan is greeted with mistrust and suspicion because he is a foreigner; the political climate is such that trusting strangers can bring disaster.

When Isabel persuades Alfredo and Manuela to go to the Western hospital in Sololá, Allan accompanies them. He hopes to gain their trust while at the same time finding the elusive cure for Manuela's worsening condition. When Manuela refuses to submit to tests, Allan convinces the doctor to give him the medication for her anyway.

Although Allan initially feels that he is doing the Mayans a favor by trying to help them, he learns that he must be patient among people who do not feel they need help. Instead of being arrogant and patronizing, he learns to be respectful and observant.

Maestro Andrés Xiloj

Maestro Andrés is the teacher at the village school. Isabel is very fond of him, and he appreciates her desire to learn. To Isabel, he is a wise and understanding man who can

advise without judging. When Isabel feels most lost and uncertain about what action to take, it is Maestro Andrés who tells her she does not have to sacrifice all of her dreams for the sake of pleasing everyone else. He tells her that he was once jailed for a teachers' strike and how he suffered in jail. Isabel learns that there can be consequences for making unpopular decisions, but that if she is true to herself, she can handle the outcome. Maestro Andrés also tells her that she should ask herself what she really wants and not be afraid if the answer is unconventional. His advice helps her to see what she must do, thus leading her to make a decision that will bring her fulfillment and personal growth.

Themes

Freedom and Responsibility

Although Isabel understands that as the oldest daughter her duty is to take care of the family when her mother is sick, she cannot help but resent the new demands placed on her. In the first chapter, Castañeda writes, "She was the oldest child. She had duties. She was already at an age where marriage was expected, not idle desires to become a teacher. Sometimes, however, the duties were too much for her. She didn't feel smart enough or old enough to handle everything. Not yet, anyway." As Manuela's condition worsens, Isabel feels ashamed, because rather than being concerned only for her mother, she is filled with feelings of resentment and despair. When Eziquel, the healer, tells Manuela how lucky she is to have a daughter such as Isabel to take care of things, Isabel reels: "His words opened for Isabel the floodgate of her dread of never returning to school. . . . She would be doomed to care for her family until they all moved away or died. Even marriage would be postponed."

Torn between guilt and personal misery, Isabel declares her selfishness at confession. The priest, however, assures her that her feelings are completely normal and tells her not to be so hard on herself. She is fulfilling her responsibilities like a good daughter, so she has no reason to feel shame, he says. Still, the priest's words do not ease her guilt.

Isabel often notices the birds around her and wishes "she could be a bird with the power to fly up and away from the problems not only of her village, but those within her own family." Although she longs to be carefree and unfettered, she realizes that she is growing into adulthood, and that with age come responsibilities. By the end of the story, she has learned that freedom and responsibility are not necessarily opposites. When she takes responsibility for herself and talks to Lucas honestly about her seemingly impossible desires to be a teacher, she gains a sense of liberation. In the final words of the novel, all Isabel and Lucas "cared about was that, nestled among the volcanoes of Guatemala, there existed a hope with a secret pair of wings." In embracing her duties as a mature woman, Isabel finds her wings at last.

Making Choices

Throughout the novel, Castañeda portrays people in different situations faced with difficult choices. Isabel chooses to carry out her duties without complaining, even though inside she feels desperate. Through Isabel's memories of her mother, the reader understands that Manuela made choices out of love for her family. She made personal sacrifices, suffered the loss of two children, and never expected any reward. Isabel realizes that motherhood is "a path without detours, without places to rest. And though there were sister travelers, no one praised those who made the difficult and isolated journey." Manuela's resolve in her decision-making is seen first-hand when she refuses to allow the doctor in Sololá to run any tests on her. She makes a choice that she would

rather suffer from the illness than submit to the full course of Western medicine. Certainly, there are consequences for such a decision, but at the end of the novel Alfredo and Eziquel also make a choice□that they will not sit idly by and let Manuela die when they have the Western medicine available.

Allan makes choices from a different viewpoint than that of the Mayan villagers. He is part of the Western world, and he has made a choice to travel to Guatemala (like his father) and help people get better medical care. He does not understand enough about their culture to consider whether or not his efforts will be welcomed, so he is alarmed when his presence is met with suspicion and hostility. His most daring choice, however, is to give Isabel the medicine for Manuela, when he knows it may not be the cure. Worse, if it is the wrong treatment (Manuela would not allow tests to confirm the doctor's diagnosis), the medicine could harm her and thus end any hope of the Mayans accepting Allan or Western medicine. Castañeda does not reveal exactly why Allan makes this choice. Perhaps Allan feels it is his best (or only) chance to prove his worth to the Mayans. Perhaps he simply feels it is Manuela's best chance to be well again.

Castañeda shows that people make poor choices when they are filled with insecurity and doubt. Because Teresa wants Lucas back, she lies to him about Isabel's feelings. Lucas is plagued with jealousy, so he believes her. In both cases, these characters make choices based on personal insecurity rather than good sense, trust, and loyalty. As a result, Lucas temporarily creates distance between himself and Isabel when he really loves her very much, and Teresa ruins her friendships with both Isabel and Lucas.

Old Ways and New Ways

Among the Volcanoes portrays simple village life in the contemporary world. While modern conveniences are readily available all over the world, the village of Chuuí Chopaló is celebrating the installation of a single faucet in town. Castañeda contrasts the old ways with the new in various instances throughout the book to demonstrate the beauty and value of each in its own way. With regard to religion, villagers maintain their devotion to the gods of their indigenous religions, but also participate in Roman Catholic practices. Manuela's illness brings the blending of religious practices into sharp focus. One woman, for example, suggests that Manuela "pass a fresh egg over her body and say three Our Fathers." At Eziquel's altar, Isabel notices a row of Catholic icons and saints over a row of stone idols, incense, and pine twigs. Similarly, Manuela performs the daily rituals of feeding her altar's stone mouth, but the family also attends Mass on Sunday.

As a parent, Alfredo teaches the children that "anything new is very dangerous." Not until Manuela's condition is serious does he consider going to the Western hospital to try modern medicine. For Alfredo, change on a large scale must be approached with caution, whereas change on a small scale is less frightening. He routinely drinks rum and smokes cigars, even though he admits that traditionally, these were practices reserved for ceremonies. When it comes to interacting with strangers or adopting their

ways, however, he is very suspicious, because the political climate in which he has lived has taught him that trusting the wrong people can have grave consequences.

Style

Point of View

Among the Volcanoes is narrated from the third-person point of view. The novel is Isabel's story, however, and the narration is from her perspective. The reader is allowed into her thoughts and feelings, which makes her realizations and transformations understandable and credible to the reader. The story is told in the present tense, so Isabel's reactions and feelings are fresh. By telling the story in the present tense, Isabel's decision making and growth are more interesting because neither the reader nor Isabel knows what will happen next. By staying in the present moment, Castaneda is also able to describe details of Isabel's surroundings in a way that would not be as authentic if the story were being told from memory. The colors of the birds, the music of the village festival, the excitement of the crowd watching soccer, and the rush of feeling when Isabel sees Lucas are more realistic because they are told as they are experienced.

Setting

Set in Guatemala in the rural village of Chuui Chopalo, *Among the Volcanoes* offers a portrait of daily life among the Mayans. The people of the village are poor; men support their families by laboring in the fields or by fishing. Isabel's family owns chickens and one pig, but they eat mostly beans, eggs, tortillas, and peppers.

Political unrest is a major force in the village's life. There is guerrilla activity combating the military government, and there are horrible stories of local men being taken away and killed. The people of Chuui Chopalo live in fear and are accustomed to living that way. Periodically, the military enters the village with a proclamation, which everyone is required to hear. After they make announcements, soldiers leave their proclamations posted for all to see. The villagers are equally afraid of the military and the guerrillas.

Village life is characterized by a strong sense of tradition. There are time-honored ways of doing things, and those ways are rarely challenged from within. Women are expected to leave school and marry in their middle to late teens. Men generally attend school a bit longer, but ultimately leave to work for their families in the fields. Families occupy the same houses for many generations. Castaneda writes, "In Chuui Chopalo, change always had something of fear housed within its bright skin."

Symbolism

Castaneda writes about birds throughout the story. By describing many different types of birds - eagles, hummingbirds, chickens, vultures, blackbirds, and others - he introduces them into a variety of scenes without being heavy-handed with the symbolism. At the core of the novel is Isabel's desire to leave her cares and responsibilities behind and to

follow her dreams. To her, birds represent all the freedom and flight she desires but cannot have because she must face her responsibilities. She is growing up and becoming a woman, not a hummingbird or an eagle. She speaks of her wish that she had wings, so at the end of the novel when she confronts her difficult decisions with maturity, she has given wings to her hope. In an unexpected way, she feels what she imagines birds feel.

Water is another important element in the story. As Isabel explains, water is a profound symbol of life in her culture. In fact, it is so basic and critical that the Mayans pray to it. The installation of the faucet in the town is a cause for celebration. The village holds a soccer game complete with music to commemorate the day. The fact that Allan's last name is Waters reinforces the idea that it is not the word "water" that holds meaning in the Mayan culture; it is the actual substance that is revered.

Historical Context

Political Instability

Since Guatemala's independence in 1839, it has been subjected to extreme political instability and terror. Guatemala's leaders have been dictators, military presidents, and elected officials, many of whom have been overthrown by coups. The hostility between the military and guerrilla forces has resulted in violence, bloodshed, and panic. In some cases, military regimes were so intent on ending guerrilla tactics that they massacred entire villages. The combined tasks of leading the country, controlling guerrilla activity, and addressing human rights seem overwhelming. This political climate provides the backdrop for *Among the Volcanoes*, where the villagers' daily lives are affected by the harsh realities of danger and violence. Just before the novel's 1991 publication, elections were held in Guatemala. The January 1991 inauguration of Jorge Serrano marked the first time one elected official was replaced by another. Serrano expressed his intention to bring peace to the land by negotiating with guerrillas, holding corrupt officials responsible, and putting an end to human rights violations. Unfortunately, Serrano was removed from office only two years later.

Conflicting Ways of Life

Guatemala is defined by three historical stages Mayan indigenous, Spanish colonial, and modern republican although some scholars note that the distinct lifestyles of each are slowly merging into a cohesive contemporary culture.

As missionary efforts expanded into Central America, religion became a problematic cultural issue for many Guatemalans. Roman Catholicism became increasingly popular beginning in the sixteenth century, and Protestantism reached Guatemala in the mid-1800s, although there were few converts until the growth of Pentecostal sects in the 1960s. While Guatemalans were receptive to the new religious ideologies, they were hesitant to abandon the religious belief systems of their ancestors. Castañeda depicts the ways in which people incorporate the new beliefs and symbols with the traditional ones, a melding that continues today.

Tradition remains a powerful force, particularly among people who live in small rural villages. They prefer to keep to themselves, living a lifestyle similar to that of their ancestors. Modern conveniences are slow to be introduced in this context. As recently as the 1990s, only 54 percent of Guatemalans had access to health care. Further, only 60 percent of Guatemalans had access to a source of pure drinking water and sanitation, which explains why the village of Chuuí Chopaló responded with such excitement to the installation of the waterline channel.

Ethnic Composition and Class Structure

Guatemala's population is composed of indigenous Mayans and ladinos, who are people of mixed native and European heritage. Guatemala is unique among Latin American countries in that it still has a large native population that has preserved its ethnic identity.

There is a wide class gap in Guatemalan social structure, and most of the elite members of society are those who have more European blood, which fuels tensions between the classes. Statistics in 1987 revealed that, in earnings, the top 10 percent of the population held 44 percent of the income while the bottom 10 percent held only nine-tenths of one percent. In the twentieth century, the class gap widened as the population continued to grow and resources were exported rather than kept within the country's borders for its own people.

Education

In Guatemala, public education is free and mandatory, but soft enforcement and lack of resources results in inadequate education for most Guatemalans. At the elementary school level, 58 percent of children attend school, and at the high school level, only 16 percent attend. In rural areas, such as the village described in *Among the Volcanoes*, these figures are lower. In fact, it is not uncommon for a rural school to offer education only through the third grade.

Literary Heritage

Before the twentieth century, Guatemala's literary heritage was defined primarily by a sixteenth-century work, *Popol Vuh,* a Mayan creation narrative and account of world history. The twentieth century, however, expanded the literary base of Guatemalan culture with the work of such writers as Enrique Gomez Carrillo, Rafael Arevalo Martinez, Mario Monteforte Toledo, Omar Castaneda, and 1967 Nobel Prize winner Miguel Angel Asturias.

Central and South American literature has been deeply influenced by magic realism, a style of writing that incorporates magic, myth, dreams, and the supernatural into otherwise conventional and realistic fiction. Magic realism became popular after World War II, and its Latin American roots are most closely associated with the work of Argentine Jorge Luis Borges and Colombian Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Many contemporary Latin American authors, including Chilean Isabel Allende and Guatemalan Omar Castaneda, utilize elements of magic realism in their fiction. Some scholars suggest that the use of magic realism in Latin American literature is a way of reconciling two distinct realities in post-colonial times - the traditional ways and the new ways of the colonialists.

Critical Overview

When *Among the Volcanoes* was published in 1991, it did not attract widespread critical attention, although it was well-received by the critics who reviewed it. The novel appears on educational reading lists for its sensitive portrayal of teenaged Isabel and its vibrant and realistic depiction of rural Mayan life. The critical consensus is clearly that Castañeda made excellent use of the Fulbright research fellowship that enabled him to travel to his native Central America to study the Mayan people and their culture. One critic found the characters and their lives as realistic and informative as educational programming. Critics universally praised Castañeda's reverent treatment of the Mayan culture, acknowledging that the compelling presentation makes it interesting to American teenagers who know very little about Guatemala. Diane Roback and Richard Donahue of *Publishers Weekly* commended Castañeda for his "quietly realistic portrait of life" in Guatemala that includes political upheaval, poverty, and cultural elements. Lucinda Snyder Whitehurst of *School Library Journal* praised Castañeda for not sensationalizing the fact that the Pacays live in times of political danger, but rather showing how their constant fear has become a part of their daily lives.

According to Roback and Donahue, Isabel's life is "both simpler and harder" than the life of a typical American teenager. American culture accepts and welcomes change, making transitions less traumatic to the community. In Isabel's Mayan village, however, change is met with extreme resistance and suspicion. At the same time, the people of the village understand that they must accommodate changes they cannot stop. Whitehurst made special note that the Pacays find ways to reconcile traditional beliefs with contemporary Catholicism, education, and new ideas about women. Impressed with the multidimensional character of Isabel, Whitehurst wrote that she is a "smart girl who respects and cares for her family, but also one who wants more for herself." The critic added that Castañeda's teenage readers will "readily relate to the universal feeling of not fitting in."

Among the Volcanoes is respected among Castañeda's work, although he garnered the most attention for his only picture book, *Abuela's Weave*. All of his writing relates to his Central American heritage, and many of his short stories are solidly in the tradition of magic realism so popular among Latin American authors.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a bachelor's degree in English literature and a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she discusses the central theme of Isabel's complicated journey of self-discovery in Among the Volcanoes*.*

At the center of Omar S. Castañeda's intriguing and richly detailed book *Among the Volcanoes* is Isabel, a teenaged girl who finds herself shouldering responsibilities she is uncertain she can handle. Her mother is extremely ill, so Isabel, as the oldest daughter, must take on the duties of running the household. She loves school and thrives on learning, but her responsibilities at home simply will not allow her to continue attending. While Isabel performs all the tasks expected of her, she resents this burden and fears that she will never be able to return to the life she once knew. Worse, she is terrified that she will be forced to give up her dream of becoming a teacher. She is engaged to Lucas Choy, a handsome young man who loves her very much. He knows she loves school, but expects that once they are married, she will focus all of her attention on being the woman of his house. Isabel is in the difficult position of desiring a path for herself that her village does not accept for her.

In many ways, Isabel is a typical teenager, which allows Castañeda's young American readers to identify with her even though her reality is far removed from their own. Isabel struggles with questions of her identity. Is she destined to be exactly like her mother? Must she conform to the expectations of her community? If she looks within and discovers what she really wants, can she have it? Isabel is very clear about what she wants□to be a teacher□but she is very uncertain about how to achieve this. The only supportive person is her own teacher, who is introduced in only one scene as a wise advisor who genuinely cares about Isabel's feelings and the difficult decisions she must make. Isabel is also typical in her lack of enthusiasm for adult responsibilities that prevent her from leading a social and carefree life. She enjoys talking to her best friend, Teresa, and seeing her fiancé, Lucas. While she performs the tasks around the house, in her heart she longs to be free. Isabel's tendency to trust people and question her father's cynicism is another typical adolescent trait. She feels that she has lived long enough in the world that she knows things her father does not. She perceives his skepticism as unwarranted in some cases and resolves to do things her own way.

As Isabel matures during the course of the story, she comes to better understand her relationship to the family and the village. When her mother, Manuela, is rendered unable to help at all around the house, Isabel must step in to take her place. As a result, Isabel comes to understand her mother better. Castañeda wrote, "Then she understood that it was the insignificant events that spoke more strongly of what parenthood meant. Like leaving school, to some. These small sacrifices told her that motherhood was not a grand landscape dotted with large and poignant markers, but was mostly a simple, everyday road with no real beginning and no end in sight." Still, Isabel's insights into her mother's world do not change the fact that her own future is closely tied to Manuela's ability to take care of the family. When Manuela refuses to submit to additional tests by

the doctor at the Western hospital, Isabel is secretly devastated. She thinks, "If she would simply submit, then she would live. But her mother's decision was final. At the base of this refusal, Isabel's own future, her vision of teaching, lay broken. Also shut out was Alfredo's dream for his children, his family. All of them lay besieged by the calamity and by her mother's refusal to consider possibilities. But this refusal was one demanded by the forces of the village itself." This moment shows the reader that the village is an integral part of each family. The strong sense of community and tradition affects even the most personal and important decisions. For Isabel, she is not struggling just with her family's expectations and rules, but also with those of the entire village. The theme of balancing the community and family with the self is central to Isabel's journey. In order to decide for herself what her path should be, she must take the larger context into account. Perhaps in the United States a teenager could ultimately decide to cast off concerns for the whole in favor of the individual, but in Isabel's culture, this is not an option.

Although critics generally credit the arrival of Allan Waters in the village for Isabel's ultimate ability to take a stand for her dreams, the teacher seems to be the real catalyst for her decision. Allan reinforces what Isabel already believes□that it is important to keep an open mind about possibilities outside of one's familiar context. He is fascinating to her simply by virtue of the fact that he comes from a foreign land. In the first chapter, Castañeda tells readers that Isabel loves learning about faraway places "with names like Orlando, New York, or the tongue-twisting Indianapolis." Although the political atmosphere fosters deep distrust of strangers, Isabel feels that Allan is harmless and truly wants to help. She is right about him, and so his presence reinforces her faith in her intuition about people. Her eventual refusal to abandon her dream, however, comes from her conversation with her teacher, Maestro Andrés Xiloj. Desperate and confused, she goes to talk to her teacher about what she should do with her life. Her mother refuses to take the medicine, her fiancé is angry, and she feels trapped in her own life. She knows that she can talk to Maestro Andrés without his judging her. He explains that when he was a child, he wanted nothing else but to teach. He wanted to help his country in this way, and even though it has been an extremely difficult way of life, he continues to do it. He tells her about a teacher's strike that landed him in jail, where he suffered until his release. His path has been challenging, but he is satisfied with the choices he has made. He tells Isabel, "It was something like finding a new way to be what I wanted to be. And understanding the danger of being different. . .And not trying to be more than I had a right to be, not trying to be superhuman. It was compromising, I suppose." Maestro Andrés advises Isabel to talk to Lucas about their troubles, but first she must ask herself what she really wants. Once she knows herself well enough to understand what she wants, she will be able to explain it to him. Maestro Andrés's parting words are, "Understand it with your bones, Isabel. Understand it with your blood. What matters most is the strength to accept myself. . .I mean you. Each of us□accepting ourselves. Each of us. You and me. . .And then holding on no matter how hard it gets."

After talking with Maestro Andrés, Isabel is able to tell Lucas that she loves him, which are words he desperately needs to hear. She is also able to tell him that while she wants to marry him, she wants him to promise her that they will at least try to find a way

for her to become a teacher. He is resistant because he does not see any possible way, but she assures him that she will also be a wife and mother, and that all she is asking is that they try. He agrees, and Isabel finally feels all the freedom she had longed for throughout the story. She learns that, for her, freedom does not come from casting off all her responsibilities, but from embracing them as long as she is also true to herself. In the end, she finds courage to give words to her desires without apology. She also learns that she is capable of imagining something different for herself beyond what is expected of her according to tradition.

Throughout the novel, Castañeda uses bird imagery. Everywhere Isabel goes, there are birds of all shapes and sizes. Birds are meaningful to Isabel because they represent freedom from worry and duty. She wishes she could be a bird and fly away from her difficult life. Living in the lush environment of Central America, Isabel would encounter a variety of birds on a daily basis, so their inclusion in the story is realistic. Castañeda refers to them subtly throughout the book as a constant reminder of Isabel's longing to be free. The scene in which her father sacrifices a chicken is very significant because his prayer is for Isabel, which frightens her deeply. As she watches him sacrifice a bird, her personal symbol of freedom, he prays for his daughter, indicating that she will be shouldering the household responsibilities indefinitely. Much later in the book, she goes to visit her teacher in a state of panic and despair. Castañeda writes of "her heart battered inside its cage." As Maestro Andrés talks to Isabel, he reveals that he always wanted to be a roadrunner. This surprises Isabel, as the roadrunner is regarded with contempt in their village, but Maestro Andrés explains that the roadrunner is smart because it chooses not to fly most of the time. If it flew, people would likely shoot it, so instead it runs very fast. It is also a bird that has not been domesticated like chickens and turkeys, waiting to be eaten. He remarks, "It has chosen neither to fly too high nor to always grovel on the ground in fear." This analogy helps Isabel see that in order to find happiness, she will have to find a way to compromise. At the end of the novel, when Lucas has agreed that they will try to find a way for her to teach, Isabel is thrilled. A group of boys passes by Lucas and Isabel, and their "movement past them was like the blur of hummingbirds, their shouts the cawing of crows." Castañeda then closes the story by writing that "all they cared about was that, nestled among the volcanoes of Guatemala, there existed a hope with a secret pair of wings." As Isabel's journey of self-discovery is fulfilled, the liberated feelings she associates with birds move from the external world to her internal world, leaving the reader with a great sense of hope.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Riser has a master's degree in English literature and teaches high school English. In the following essay, she discusses themes and historical context in Among the Volcanoes*.*

In Omar Castaneda's *Among the Volcanoes*, the main character, Isabel Pacay, is a typical adolescent girl, faced with issues similar to those of many teenagers the world over: She has boy problems, family pressures, a deceitful best friend, dreams and fears for the future. However, she also is placed in a setting where she experiences a variety of conflicts, some of which she is conscious of and some of which she is too isolated or too young to see. These can be seen through the historical context, the themes, and the imagery Castaneda employs.

It is useful to put the novel in its historical context in order to better understand Isabel's situation. While knowing the history is not necessary to understanding the basic storyline, it helps to deepen one's understanding of the novel's setting and themes. Isabel's family lives in a Quiche village in central Guatemala. The Quiche are descendants of the Mayans, whose complex and extremely advanced civilization collapsed around 900 A.D. In the sixteenth century, Spanish conquerors arrived in Guatemala, bringing their religion and customs, which to some extent have been incorporated into the Quiche lifestyle (remarkably, however, the Quiche have retained their language and many of their traditional religious practices). The twentieth century in Guatemala was characterized by civil war, military coups, revolutions, and violence. At the same time, the gulf between the very rich and the very poor increased dramatically. As the population increased, a large amount of resources were committed to producing exports rather than to helping the poor, mostly rural, citizens. In the 1990s, the majority of Guatemalans lived on less than one U.S. dollar per day. Isabel Pacay lives in this world - an impoverished Quiche village, with the backdrop of guerrilla warfare and government unrest - while at the same time enjoying a pride in her culture's rich history and spiritual beliefs.

The author of the novel, Omar Castaneda, was born in Guatemala but grew up and lived his adult life in the United States. Much of his work, including *Among the Volcanoes*, reveals his position on Guatemalan politics. In fact, Castaneda told Jonathan Harrington that "you cannot separate politics from art. . .Those who try to separate the two are really sanctioning the dominant view." It is clear that Castaneda has strong opinions on the Guatemalan government's treatment of the impoverished Quiche villagers and the government's catering to European and American interests. This is most clear in the trip the Pacay family takes with Allan Waters, an American medical student, to the city, where Isabel's father and Waters discuss the scenes of villagers forced to sell items that do not reflect the true national heritage but rather are what the tourists think look like native crafts. Additionally, Castaneda implies that the guerrillas whose shadows are constantly present in the lives of the villagers are really agents of the Guatemalan government, and are there to keep the villagers in fear and submission to the government.

In the novel, it becomes clear that Isabel is being pulled between two worlds: the western or American world in which a girl can become an independent woman with a career, but often sacrifices close family ties and traditions, and the native Guatemalan world in which a girl gets married at a young age and is expected to take care of her family. Isabel's story presents several other serious, seemingly unresolvable conflicts: Allan Waters' insistence on modern medicine versus Isabel's mother's reliance on the medicine man; the struggle between Isabel's desire to be a teacher and her desire to marry Lucas Choy; the dichotomy between male roles and female roles. Addressing these sorts of ambiguous conflicts, in an interview with Jonathan Harrington, Castaneda said, "Because I am Guatemalan, but have always lived in non-Hispanic communities in the U.S., I have had to deal with conflicting views of the world. I've always been concerned with bi-culturality." In *Among the Volcanoes*, this notion of bi-culturality is dealt with through Isabel's quest to reconcile all of these competing worldviews. The miracle of the story is that she does appear to resolve many of these seemingly irreconcilable conflicts.

The title *Among the Volcanoes* is literal and figurative: The village is placed geographically on the slopes of volcanoes; at the same time, Isabel is placed among many forces that threaten her in the same way a volcano does - with the promise of eventual catastrophic eruption. She fears that she is being selfish when she becomes "convinced that she could be an exception to the volcanic forces that smelted people into acceptable molds," and yet she desires more than anything to defeat those forces. She does not want to be like all of the other girls in her village. She has her own dreams, but these conflict directly with what is expected of her.

Through nature imagery, especially imagery of birds, Isabel is shown learning to deal with her situation. In the first chapter, Isabel furtively follows her father to the inlet of the lake and spies on him as he makes a prayer and sacrifices one of their family's hens. As he kills the chicken, he frightens Isabel by praying for her, his eldest daughter: She realizes then that her mother's illness is worse than she thought, and that her father fears for Isabel for some reason. She is not surprised that her father prays not only to the Christian god, but to the "old gods," the gods of the Mayans, since even the Catholic priest mixes the two religions during Mass (a reconciliation that she might find reassuring, since she is struggling so much with the incongruities between the old traditions and the western ways). The death of the hen is contrasted with Isabel's perception of the name of her village, Chuui Chopalo, which sounds to Isabel like "birdsong on her own tongue," and

> echoe[s] the call of some unknown bird - the bird she might become. . .The chirping of the name Chuui Chopalo gave her the sensation of a bird that flew high above the waters, soaring free above any danger, any misfortune.

She imagines herself as this bird, with wings growing out of her shoulders and soaring above the lake.

Much later in the novel, Isabel's teacher, Andres Xiloj, tells her that when he was a child, he dreamed of being like a roadrunner. This surprises Isabel, because "usually he said the students should be like quetzales, flying high and free. She had never heard him or anyone else mention the [roadrunner] with anything but disdain." Xiloj explains that he believes the roadrunner is the smartest bird because people would try to kill it if it flew, so instead "it stays low, hidden secretive. And it isn't like other birds - turkeys or chickens - who give themselves up to people and peck around the house until they are eaten. Those birds have become slaves." Isabel thinks that Xiloj means that as a child he wanted to be like the guerrillas; however, he explains that he did not want to cause trouble:

> It was something like finding a new way to be what I wanted to be. And understanding the danger of being different. . .Knowing that there is danger, but not cowering like everyone else because of it. . .It was compromising, I suppose. Like the roadrunner: It chooses to be different, but not so different that it gets attacked.

This is the image that Isabel needs to understand how to compromise and still stay true to herself. Until this point, she has wanted to be the quetzal, with no responsibilities and flying free above the lake-sea. Now she realizes that she does not have to be the quetzal; instead, she can be the roadrunner, taking part in the world and compromising with the forces that surround her, rather than giving in to them, to get what she needs to be fulfilled and happy.

References to the *Popol Vuh*, a Maya-Quiche book of history, religion, and mythology, can be found in *Among the Volcanoes*. The *Popol Vuh*, written secretly in the sixteenth century to record sacred Mayan myths, also reflects the clash of cultures between the Spanish conquerors and the native Mayans in Guatemala. Just like Castaneda's novel, the Mayan text shows a suspicion of the foreign influence, but at the same time acknowledges that change in the culture is inevitable. The challenge is to reconcile these two forces in a satisfactory way; this is Isabel Pacay's personal struggle as well. In an interview with T. L. Kelly, Castaneda said that his female characters "have allegiance to some of the traditions they have been raised with and they realize that those same traditions are hurting them, damaging them, and they try to invent some new possibilities for themselves. They fight against the easy acceptance of foreign views." Isabel creates this new possibility for herself through deciding to follow her heart and the traditions she knows by marrying Lucas Choy, but at the same time asserting that she will pursue her dream of becoming a teacher. Because of the strength of her character, there is no doubt left at the end of the novel that she will be successful. Indeed, in *Imagining Isabel*, a sequel to the novel written in 1994, Isabel does succeed in her quest.

Source: Emily Smith Riser, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

In their very brief review of Castañeda's Among the Volcanoes*, Diane Roback and Richard Donahue describe a novel that offers the reader a "quietly realistic portrait" of a girl struggling to make a life for herself in contemporary Central America.*

In Guatemala, life is both simpler and harder for teenagers than in the U.S. Isabel Pacay wants to go to school and become a teacher, but not only is her family very poor, no one in the village, not even her boyfriend, seems to see beyond tradition. When her mother becomes ill, Isabel is expected to stay home, take care of the family and give up her dreams. With the help of an American medical researcher, however, Isabel finds the courage within herself to do what she believes is right. More than anything, the novel offers a quietly realistic portrait of life in Central America: the poverty, ever-present political unrest and proud cultural background make Isabel's dilemma compelling.

Source: Diane Donahue, "Among the Volcanoes," (book review) in *Publisher's Weekly,* Vol. 237, No. 51, December 21, 1990, p. 57.

Topics for Further Study

Research guerrillas to determine the main reasons why they emerge in unstable political climates. Whose interests do they represent? Think about the scene in which Isabel recognizes one of the military men as the guerrilla who saw her the day she was hidden in the rocks. Propose two possible reasons why this man is "on both sides."

Look through books featuring Latin American art, and find at least three works that complement *Among the Volcanoes*. What do the similarities between the book and the artwork reveal about the culture or lifestyle? How do the colors, faces, landscapes, or other features of the artwork enhance your ability to understand the novel?

Read about shamanism in Native American cultures. Consider shamans' practices, belief systems, medicines, and roles within their tribes. Compare and contrast your findings with what you know about the character Eziquel Coxol. What conclusions can you draw about human nature and communities?

Castañeda includes bird imagery in *Among the Volcanoes* because birds are an integral feature of the jungle environment in which the novel takes place. Isabel speaks of having wings, and to her birds represent freedom from responsibilities, problems, and fear. Imagine that Isabel lived in another part of the world. What might symbolize freedom if she lived in Australia? Japan? Europe? the United States?

In Western medicine, there is a trend toward considering the roles of both body and mind in the healing of physical disease. In other words, a growing number of doctors believe that our thoughts and attitudes can affect our bodies. Assuming that Manuela's disease is not fatal, what would a modern-day doctor, who advises patients based on the body-mind model, say about her chances for recovery?

Compare and Contrast

Guatemala: Illiteracy rates are among the highest in Central America in 1998: 44 percent of all Guatemalans over the age of fifteen are illiterate (51.4 percent of women and 37.5 percent of men).

United States: Illiteracy has been widely eliminated by 1998. Still, 2.4 percent of Americans over the age of twenty-five are functionally illiterate. This means they cannot read or write well enough to perform daily tasks.

Guatemala: Only 58 percent of primary-school aged children in 1998 attend school, despite the fact that it is free and mandatory. At the secondary level, this number drops to 16 percent.

United States: Education is more available than ever in 1995: 82 percent of Americans over the age of twenty-five have completed high school, and 23 percent of the population has finished at least four years of college.

Guatemala: In 1990 girls are expected to marry as early as their middle to late teens.

United States: The median age for women to marry in 1990 is twenty-four.

Guatemala: Because girls do not work in the fields, their "usefulness" to the family is limited. They are valued more when they marry and take care of their own families.

United States: American girls have more opportunities than ever. Within the family, children are not generally expected to contribute substantially to the family's income, so girls and boys are regarded equally. While there are still areas in which women are limited in the workplace, these situations are constantly being challenged.

Guatemala: In 1990, eighty percent of Guatemalans live below the poverty level. The gap between the lower class and the upper class is wide, causing tension and resentment.

United States: Fewer than 14 percent of American households have income below the poverty level in 1996. The top 20 percent of households earned 49 percent of the nation's income, while the bottom 20 percent earned 3.7 percent. This indicates a gap between the upper and lower classes, but it is not as severe as the one in Guatemala.

Guatemala: In 1998, 60 percent of the people live in rural areas, and 40 percent live in urban areas, primarily Guatemala City.

United States: In 1998, 25 percent of the people live in rural areas, and 75 percent live in urban areas.

What Do I Read Next?

Castañeda's *Imagining Isabel* is the sequel to *Among the Volcanoes*. In this book, Isabel has married Lucas and has an opportunity to accept a teaching position, but doing so will involve her in guerrilla activities.

Across the Great River, a novel by Irene Beltran Hernandez, tells the story of a young girl who must help care for her family when they are separated while illegally crossing the Mexican- American border.

E. Jean Langdon and Gerhard Baer published *Portals of Power: Shamanism in South America* to introduce Western readers to the roles and practices of healers in twelve different South American societies.

I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala is Menchu's personal account of her experiences in Guatemala. This book was published in 1987, before she was awarded the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts at publicizing her country's human rights violations.

The Forty-Third War is Louise Moeri's novel about a twelve-year-old Central American boy who is sent for military training at a guerrilla camp. His experiences teach him about death, fear, and conflict.

Further Study

Ashabranner, Brent, *Children of the Maya, A Guatemalan Indian Odyssey*, Dodd, 1986.

This is an illustrated nonfiction book about a group of Guatemalan Mayans who flee their native land to escape the political situation. They come to the United States and settle in southern Florida.

Carlson, Lori M., *Where Angels Glide at Dawn: New Stories from Latin America*, Econo-Clad Books, 1999.

A collection of ten short stories, this book provides insights into a variety of people's lives and their situations.

Castañeda, Omar S., *Naranjo the Muse: A Collection of Stories*, Arte Publico Press, 1997.

Castañeda's use of magical realism brings intrigue to this collection of interrelated stories.

—, *Remembering to Say "Mouth" or "Face"*, Black Ice Books, 1993.

This award-winning collection of short fiction includes magical realism, social harshness, and surrealistic elements in stories about often-uprooted characters.

Jenness, Aylette, *A Life of Their Own: An Indian Family in Latin America*, Crowell, 1975.

This nonfiction book describes the daily life and rituals of a Latin American family. It focuses on Guatemalan Indians and is written for adolescents.

Tadlock, Dennis, trans.,*Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life*, Touchstone Books, 1996.

This book provides a respected translation of the ancient Mayan text that relates the creation narrative and an account of world history.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LDNfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and

undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LDNfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LDNfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LDNfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LDNfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LDNfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literature of Developing Nations for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literature of Developing Nations for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literature of Developing Nations for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LDNfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LDNfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literature of Developing Nations for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literature of Developing Nations for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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