

Baseball in April and Other Stories Study Guide

Baseball in April and Other Stories by Gary Soto

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Broken Chain

Broken Chain Summary

In the short story titled Broken Chain, Alfonso lives in an urban area with his Hispanic family that includes both of his parents and an older brother. Alfonso is in seventh grade and his older brother Ernie is in ninth grade. Alfonso's mother appears to be a typical mother. She is caring, protective, and somewhat demanding. Alfonso's father is conservative, introverted, and devoted to a local baseball team. Alfonso's father's moods vary in conjunction with his baseball team's current successes. During the story, the team appears to be losing a lot. The story is set in November, about a week after Halloween. On Halloween, Ernie and one of his friends meet a couple of girls and arrange to meet again later the next day. Unfortunately for Ernie however, the girls never show up, leaving him feeling somewhat foolish and disappointed. For his own part, Alfonso recently has started doing sit-ups and has a new haircut. He hopes to attract the attention of girls. Alfonso also has crooked teeth. When he asks about braces, his mother tells him they are prohibitively expensive. Alfonso begins to use his thumbs for about an hour every night in an unsuccessful attempt to push his teeth into better alignment.

Alfonso then goes for a walk and meets Sandra and her little brother. Sandra's brother has snagged his pants climbing over a schoolyard fence and dangles upside down and helpless. Alfonso rushes to assist and helps the boy down. He then walks Sandra and her brother home. Alfonso and Sandra realize they go to the same school, live a few blocks apart, and are both in seventh grade. Feeling adventurous, Alfonso asks Sandra if she would like to go on a bike ride the next day and she accepts but says her bike is broken. Alfonso says he will bring two bikes. He then goes home and asks to borrow Ernie's bike. Ernie says no. Alfonso then cleans his own bike and accidentally breaks the bike chain. He gets angry but realizes there is nothing he can do. The next day he walks over to Sandra's house and wonders how to tell her he has failed to secure even one working bike. Just before he approaches her, Alfonso sees Ernie riding up on his own bike. Ernie hands over the bike, says Alfonso is free to use it, and walks away. Alfonso talks to Sandra. She climbs onto the handlebars and they go for their bike ride.

Broken Chain Analysis

In the short story titled Broken Chain, Alfonso appears to be a fairly insightful and typical thirteen-year old Hispanic boy who likes to take things apart. His neighborhood is urban. His family life appears settled, predictable, and typical. Alfonso's overriding concern during the period of two days described in this story concern his personal appearance and how that will be accepted by Sandra, his new interest. Alfonso takes care of himself and styles his hair after a magazine icon. His crooked teeth bother him and he tries to push them into place by exerting pressure with his thumbs for about an hour each night. Alfonso's meeting with Sandra is a fairly banal and typical boy-meets-girl scenario. The



heart of the story focuses on Alfonso's relationship with his older brother Ernie. Both boys have bikes but Alfonso breaks his own. The twice-broken chain and Alfonso's minor injury during the breakage are symbolic of his need for fraternal support. Ernie initially refuses to let Alfonso borrow his bike, which initially affects their relationship. This puts Alfonso in a tight spot with Sandra. Ernie's initial reaction is one of jealousy. He has had no luck finding a girlfriend and does not want to be eclipsed by his younger brother Alfonso. Ernie takes a little while to come to terms with Alfonso's success with Sandra and in the nick of time, delivers his bike to Alfonso. This story is the second-longest story in the collection.



Baseball in April

Baseball in April Summary

In the short story titled *Baseball in April*, Jesse is a nine-year-old Hispanic boy who lives with his family in a typical urban area. He practices baseball with his eleven-year-old brother Michael. In early spring, they go to the Little League tryouts. Michael has tried out twice before but has never made the team which Jesse finds surprising. During their tryouts, Jesse performs poorly but Michael performs well. Jesse notes that several coaches put a mark by Michael's name when he bats. The two boys then return home and wait for several days, hoping for a telephone call. The call never comes however and neither boy is selected to play on a team. Disappointed, they learn that a local independent coach is putting together a team to play in an unofficial league just for fun. They try out for that team where apparently everyone is accepted. The volunteer coach is named Manuel and he is encouraging, nice, and friendly. The entirely Hispanic team practices for several weeks and begins to demonstrate some basic competencies in baseball. Manuel informs them that they will be named the Hobo Park team, because their practice field is referred to as the Hobo Park. Their first game is against the Red Caps.

The Red Caps are a similar team comprised of Hispanic and black kids with a volunteer coach. Manuel and the Red Caps' coach are apparently friends or at least on very good terms. The field that hosts the game is muddy and deserted. Jesse is impressed that the Red Caps all wear matching red caps and T-shirts, while the Hobo Park team wears whatever they have. The game proceeds and the Red Caps prove victorious. Jesse is not a competent batter. During the game, he takes a wild pitch to the thigh rather than jumping back and thus gets on base. He enjoys being on base even though he does not score. The game is followed by additional practices and then another game against the Red Caps. It gradually becomes apparent that the volunteer league is comprised of only two teams, Hobo Park and Red Caps. They play five games in the season and the Red Caps win every game. Part of the way through the season, Michael loses interest and leaves the team. Jesse strikes up a friendship with another boy named Pete. The teams' ranks are so depleted that several neighborhood girls join to keep the team going. Finally the season ends and Jesse learns this when he shows up for practice but the coach does not. He goes home and worries that at the next practice only one kid will show up and be lonely.

Baseball in April Analysis

The short story titled *Baseball in April* features themes of sportsmanship, ability, and teamwork. Jesse and Michael begin the story as brothers who are isolated. As the story develops, their lack of real sports ability leaves them still isolated, and only their desire to play baseball brings them together with other boys. During the tryout Michael does well but apparently not well enough to get on a team. Later, Michael drops out of



baseball to spend time with a new girlfriend. His lack of commitment to the team may explain his inability to enter Little League even though he possesses natural aptitude. Jesse is just entering the age to play baseball however. He finds the team play, even with the relatively low skill recreational leagues, empowering and compelling. With Michael's departure, Jesse comes into his own, making friends with Pete and other boys. By the end of the season, Jesse has developed some real skill at baseball, playing the key position of catcher. Even though he has not mastered batting, he clearly understands the mechanics of the game and takes a wild pitch on purpose to advance his team's interest and more importantly, to get on base. This demonstrates a serious commitment to the team and the game. It also reveals some ingenuity in working around one's personal shortcomings. Whereas Michael's symbolic 'hit' of not being selected for Little League for three years running, leaves him disinterested in sports, Jesse's literal 'hit' leaves him enthused for the game. Jesse is so devoted that he shows up for practice even after the season has ended and, further, he worries that someone else might show up after he has gone and feel abandoned. Jesse has truly become part of the team. The story's unwritten promise is that Jesse will try out for the Little League next year and with his new skills probably make the cut.



Two Dreamers

Two Dreamers Summary

In *Two Dreamers*, Hector Molina lives with his family in an undisclosed location in California but spends the summers with his grandparents in Fresno. Hector is his grandfather Luis' favorite grandson. Luis is a Mexican immigrant who works as a watchman at night. He has lived a long and successful life in the United States. Nearing retirement age, Luis thinks of making a large amount of money in a short amount of time to secure retirement above mere subsistence. Luis' wife, Hector's grandmother, is a conservative and traditional Hispanic woman who values results above speculation and often mildly chastises Luis for his daydreaming. Luis therefore enlists the young Hector in most of his idle speculations. One of Hector's uncles has recently made a great deal of money in real estate, buying older houses, fixing them up, and reselling them at a large markup. One day, Luis decides that this type of real estate buying and selling may offer the financial solution he is looking for. Unfortunately, Luis knows nothing about real estate, does not like to use the telephone, and feels his English skills are not very good.

Luis and Hector look around their immediate neighborhood and speculate wildly about what various houses and properties might cost. Luis locates a nearby house that is for sale and Hector guesses at its value. Luis then pesters Hector to call the realtor and eventually Hector does, requesting some money from Luis as payment for his effort. The telephone conversation is very brief and amusing, but in essence Hector learns the house is worth far more than he imagined. Luis is devastated to find out that he will not be able to purchase the house. The two inspect the house again and another call results wherein Luis argues with the patient realtor that the house is vastly overpriced. However, the price does not change. Finally, Luis gives up his scheme of making money from real estate transactions. Then Hector reminds Luis of the promised money for assistance. Desiring to avoid a confrontation with his wife, Luis hands the money to Hector and the two go off to dinner.

Two Dreamers Analysis

The story's title "Two Dreamers" refers to Luis and Hector's joint tendency to dream about things instead of concentrating on reality. In the story, Luis dreams about making a lot of money by buying and selling real estate while Hector dreams about getting a few bucks to put in his pocket. Both characters offer a sharp contrast to Hector's grandmother who is realistic and practical. Luis is a Mexican immigrant and shows many typical characteristics of that demographic. He is hard-working, family-oriented, and reticent to utilize his second language of English outside of a small circle of friends and family. He also is reticent to use technology such as the telephone and would prefer to leave English-language communication and telephony to his grandson, the new generation. Their plan is to buy a house, fix it up, and sell it at a large markup. Unfortunately, they have no idea how much a house is worth. When Luis discovers the

house he is interested in is very expensive, he argues with the realtor about the pricing through Hector. In any event, he cannot afford it and their scheme dies. The central tension of the story is the conflict in communication between generations that is typical of many American households as well as the minor conflict between the grandfather and the grandmother.



Barbie

Barbie Summary

In the story called Barbie, Veronica Solis lives with her little sister Yolanda and their parents. Veronica wants a real Barbie doll but has not received one for Christmas for two years. One year ago, her wealthy uncle Rudy gave her a similar doll but it was satisfactory. This year, a few days after Christmas, Rudy and his girlfriend Donna visit Veronica's family once again and to Veronica's great pleasure, give her a real Barbie doll dressed in a striped swimsuit along with a collection of doll clothing. Rudy then announces that he and Donna are going to get married. This news leaves Veronica nonplussed. Veronica retreats to her bedroom to play with her two dolls, Barbie and the ugly fake Barbie. The next day Veronica travels to her friend Martha's house. Martha has two Barbies and a Ken doll. The two friends play all day but when Veronica leaves, Martha tries to surreptitiously switch out Veronica's new Barbie for one of her own older Barbies. A scuffle soon develops and Veronica leaves. She walks home but just before arriving, looks again at Barbie and is horrified to discover her doll's head is missing. Veronica retraces her path searching everywhere but cannot find the doll's head. Veronica returns to Martha's house and enlists Martha in the searching but the head is not found. Finally the girls go home and Veronica gets into bed. She puts her headless Barbie and her fake Barbie side by side. She spends a restless and sad evening fretting.

Barbie Analysis

Veronica is the protagonist of the story "Barbie" and is likely about eight to ten years old. She appears to be a normal Hispanic child living in a nicer neighborhood with her family. Her parents trust her enough to let her walk alone to a nearby friend's house. Like many girls her age, she is obsessed with Barbie dolls. Veronica's friend Martha has three Barbie dolls, suggesting Martha's family is financially better off than Veronica's. The story has several compelling images. The first image involves Veronica comparing Donna to Barbie in a favorable light and softly uttering a "thank you" in a nearly reverent posture. This juxtaposes nicely with Veronica's subsequent comparison of Barbie to fake Barbie, and fake Barbie's vicarious admission that she is ugly and unhappy next to the real Barbie. At this point in the narrative, Veronica's hopes and dreams have come true. Within the larger framework of family, Veronica's hopes are paralleled by Rudy's and Donna's hopes for a bright future of marriage.

Just as Veronica proves careless with her fake Barbie, so she proves careless with her real Barbie. The fake Barbie has a chipped forehead and peeling eyelashes because of abuse and the real Barbie's head gets lost somewhere in the scuffle with Martha or on the subsequent trip home. The head is never found and this is symbolic of lost childhood dreams. Although Veronica's plight is certainly poignant and quite meaningful to her, her family would hardly be aware of the problem as they are now involved in planning an upcoming wedding. The closing image of Veronica going to bed with a

chipped fake Barbie and a headless real Barbie is somewhat melodramatic. It is also highly reminiscent of the perils of childhood.



The No-Guitar Blues

The No-Guitar Blues Summary

In *The No-Guitar Blues*, Fausto, a young Hispanic boy, watches television and sees Los Lobos playing rock and roll on a program. At that moment, he is inspired to become a guitar player in a rock and roll band. His parents are fairly well off but do not have surplus funds for things like guitars so Fausto decides to do odd jobs to earn money so he can buy his own guitar. After a few hours however, Fausto has earned only a quarter. Then he finds a dog named Roger who appears to be lost. Fausto checks the dog's tags and returns him to his owners who live in a rich part of town. Fausto slightly embellishes the story of finding the dog, stating he recovered the dog near a dangerous roadway in the hope that the owners will offer a large reward. The owners invite Fausto in, give him some treats, and then reward him with a twenty-dollar bill. Fausto knows he can buy a used guitar with the money but starts to feel guilty for making so much money from such a commonplace thing as returning a lost dog. The next day he attends church feeling guilty and makes a snap decision. He donates the twenty dollars to the collection plate. On the plate's next trip through the congregation, Fausto also donates his sole remaining quarter. The next few hours Fausto wonders whether he has done the right thing. However, he puts the donated money out of his mind and forgets about playing guitar. The next day however, Fausto's mother remembers that there is an old bass guitarrón in the garage. Fausto retrieves the coveted instrument from the garage and his grandfather begins teaching how to play it.

The No-Guitar Blues Analysis

The story examines the notions of guilt and reward. Fausto decides he wants a guitar and sets about to earn one. The object being a guitar is secondary to the story where Fausto could just as easily want a bike or anything else. Since it is winter there is no yard work to do, Fausto has very little luck finding odd jobs, earning only a quarter after a few hours of looking. He then stumbles upon a dog that is perhaps lost. Fausto decides to return the dog in hopes of a reward. To bolster his chances, he escalates the story, claiming the dog was found near a dangerous road. The story works and Fausto receives a twenty-dollar reward. During the exchange, he is given a turnover to eat. His misunderstanding of the English language is ironic, where he refers to the pastry as an empanada. Fausto then feels as if he has somehow stolen the money because the work he performed does not justify such payment. After consideration, Fausto makes recompense by giving the money to the church. He even donates the quarter he received earlier. Fausto thus assuages his guilt. He then receives a 'just reward' for his donation. His mother remembers that the family owns a bass guitarrón, a large-bodied type of guitar of distinctive Mexican design. The ending scene, a first guitar lesson between Fausto and his grandfather, "smelling of tobacco and aftershave," is memorable. The title of the short story is a play on words.



Seventh Grade

Seventh Grade Summary

In the story *Seventh Grade*, Victor goes to school for the first day in seventh grade. He has spent the summer vacation picking grapes and doing other jobs to earn money to purchase his school clothes. He is familiar with the school and its processes and has elected to take French as his sole elective. Victor has chosen French primarily because he already speaks Spanish well and because the girl on whom he has an unspoken crush, Teresa, is taking French as her elective. Victor is fairly certain they will be in the same French class. Victor and Teresa also share a homeroom class to begin the day. Victor's attraction to Teresa is fairly common knowledge at the school and even Teresa knows about it. She talks to Victor after homeroom but he is shy and flustered. Instead of replying, he says something stupid. Victor's course schedule has seven classes that include homeroom, English, math, social studies, lunch, French, metal shop, and biology. During lunch, Victor meets his good friend Michael Torres. Michael has been wondering how to impress girls and has decided that he must scowl like the male models in a fashion magazine. Victor thinks Michael looks like an idiot as he walks around fiercely scowling, but girls do seem to notice Michael or at least some of them give a double take. Victor tries scowling a little but loses interest. Victor spends the second part of lunch prowling around trying to find Teresa, without appearing to be looking for anyone. He finally spots her and then takes her into French class where they sit near the front, a few desks apart. In French class, Victor claims to already know French and tries to show off by speaking his version of French, "La me vava me con le grandma" and "Frenchie oh weve gee in September." While Victor's French fails to impress the teacher, it does attract the willing Teresa who approaches Victor after class and asks for help in studying the new language. Victor quite happily agrees.

Seventh Grade Analysis

The obsolescent paper-based method of school enrollment on the first day of class suggests the publication date of "*Seventh Grade*." The school maintains a single-day schedule of seven class periods and a lunch break. The homeroom period starts the day. Victor's nonchalance about the registration process strongly suggests that he has attended the same school at least one year prior to the opening of the story. Victor appears to be a typically Hispanic youth and lives in an apparently typical suburban area of Fresno. His family is not exceptionally well-off because Victor has spent the summer picking grapes in order to purchase his own school clothes. Victor, like Michael and most other seventh-grade boys, wants to gain the attention of girls but is unsure about how to do it. Victor resorts to acting like a clown to gain the attention of Teresa. He makes faces or as his friend Michael calls it scowling and speaks his made-up version of French. Victor's crush on Teresa is common school knowledge, which is indicated by the classroom chatter during Victor's English class. Fortunately for Victor, Teresa is eager to be impressed and having discovered that Victor is too shy to directly



approach her, she approaches him twice. The first time they interact however in homeroom, ends poorly as Teresa gives Victor a rather open-ended conversation and he is very awkward. Teresa's second attempt is more forceful and easier for Victor as she proposes a definite course of action. He simply agrees. nyone who has survived the seventh grade can surely sympathize with Victor's plight.



Mother and Daughter

Mother and Daughter Summary

Yollie Moreno, about fourteen years old, lives with her single mother in the story Mother and Daughter. Yollie is thin, beautiful, and in eighth grade. She is widely regarded as one of the smartest students at her school. Yollie is captain of the crossing guard, an altar girl at church, and especially talented at spelling. She likes a boy named Ernie Castillo and she has a best friend named Janice. Mrs. Moreno is very fat and quite eccentric. She has a strange sense of humor that often embarrasses Yollie, but the mother and daughter have an especially strong relationship and spend many evenings watching scary movies on television and eating popcorn. The entire neighborhood likes Mrs. Moreno and everyone thinks she is funny, especially Yollie's Uncle Raul. Mrs. Moreno works hard and saves as much as she is able but the family has to struggle to make ends meet. Mrs. Moreno has managed to save about one hundred dollars which she intends for Yollie's college education and she hopes her daughter will become a doctor.

A school dance is coming up and Yollie is anxious to impress Ernie. All of the girls, including Janice, buy new dresses and shoes but Mrs. Moreno cannot afford a new dress for Yollie. Instead, she buys new shoes and a pack of black dye. She dyes Yollie's white dress black and carefully irons it so that it looks brand new. Yollie is thrilled and goes to the dance to show off her clothing. The dance is held at the school and is held outside until it begins to rain. While the dance is going on Yollie dances with Ernie and has a good time. Then the rain comes and the dance moves inside. Yollie and several other girls get wet in the rain and retire to the restroom to fix up their hair. While in the restroom, Yollie discovers to her horror that the black dye is running from her dress and is dripping grayish water onto the floor. Horrified and afraid that the other girls will make fun of her, Yollie runs away from the dance and goes home and screams at her mother. The next day the argument continues until Yollie calms down and Mrs. Moreno patches up their relationship. Later at school, Ernie wonders why Yollie left the dance and it turns out that nobody except Yollie noticed her dress's condition. Then Ernie calls Yollie and asks her to go to a movie with him. She accepts and Mrs. Moreno takes one hundred dollars from Yollie's college fund to purchase a complete set of new clothes from a nice store. Yollie is thrilled.

Mother and Daughter Analysis

In Mother and Daughter, the relationship between Yollie and her mother is strong and positive. Even though Yollie thinks her mother is weird, she respects her. Mrs. Moreno is a dedicated mother, a hard worker, and quite resourceful. The central tension of the story revolves around Yollie's desires for immediate acceptance by her peers and Mrs. Moreno's desire for a successful future for her daughter. These two desires compete for a scant supply of money Mrs. Moreno has saved. While the money is only enough to



buy a nice outfit, Mrs. Moreno has struggled for some time to amass the savings and has hoped it would be the beginning of Yollie's college education. Instead, she spends it on Yollie's clothing so that she can feel confident on her first date. Like nearly all of the other characters in the collection, Yollie is Hispanic, young, and a member of a family with close and functioning relationships but limited financial means. Like most of the other stories in the collection, the story is set in the environs of Fresno and features typically Hispanic neighborhoods, schools, and communities.

During the story's crisis, Yollie's dyed dress begins to run after it gets wet. Yollie is convinced that the dress has faded from black to dirty gray and is horrified by her appearance. She is so troubled that she flees from the school dance. In fact, Yollie is the only person to have noticed the dress's condition. Even her friends and Ernie have not noticed. This reaction by Yollie is typical of many adolescent reactions to minor events that seem immensely important at the moment. The characterization of Mrs. Moreno is quite enjoyable.



The Karate Kid

The Karate Kid Summary

In the short story *The Karate Kid*, Gilbert Sanchez is an eleven-year-old Hispanic boy living in a typical urban neighborhood with his middle-class family. He is in fifth grade and attends elementary school. One day Gilbert's older cousin, Raymundo, stops by with the movie *The Karate Kid* and the two cousins watch the movie. Gilbert is fascinated and decides that the movie parallels his own life to an amazing degree. Gilbert and Raymundo then practice karate moves and discuss karate fighting. Gilbert becomes convinced that he knows how to fight in the karate style. The next day in school a ten-year old student, Pete, cuts in the lunch line in front of Gilbert. Pete, widely known as Pete the Heat or simply Heat, is a notorious bully and although he is younger than Gilbert, is much larger. Nevertheless, emboldened by the movie, Gilbert refuses to accommodate Pete. Pete challenges Gilbert to an after-school playground fight and then cuts in line further ahead.

After school Gilbert meets Pete. Gilbert stands like a stork on one leg and flaps his arms like wings, just like the character in the movie. Raymundo and Patricia, a girl Gilbert likes, stand with dozens of other students who watch Gilbert's antics before Pete flattens him with several violent punches. Gilbert collapses and remains motionless with his eyes closed until everyone leaves the playground. Gilbert cannot understand why he lost the fight and eventually concludes that, unlike the character in the movie, he does not have a kindly karate instructor. The next day Gilbert wheedles his mother about karate classes until she relents and gives him the money to attend the karate studio down the street. Gilbert attends the class, buys a uniform, and starts taking lessons. At first he is excited and impressed but after several weeks he grows tired of doing calisthenics and routine exercises. Gilbert grows bored and wants to quit lessons but his mother has paid for several months. After a few months, Pete again cuts in line in front of Gilbert and Gilbert again refuses to let him in. Another playground fight is arranged for after school. This time a confident Gilbert drops into a karate stance, many students watch, and Pete again flattens him with several violent punches. Gilbert collapses and remains motionless with his eyes closed until everyone leaves the playground.

The karate lessons continue as Gilbert becomes increasingly bored and frustrated. He begins to fantasize about having an accident that will force him to quit karate. He begins to think of ways to get out of the boring lessons. Meanwhile he stops being so assertive at school. To his great joy, Mr. Lopez the karate instructor, announces that enrollment is too low to continue keeping the karate school open. The school will close and the students will have to go somewhere else to continue their lessons. When Gilbert's mother talks about a studio a little further from home, Gilbert declines, ecstatic to be free after six months of lessons. When *The Karate Kid Part Two* comes to town the next summer, Gilbert does not want to see it and Raymundo goes by himself.



The Karate Kid Analysis

The story *The Karate Kid* is the longest story in the collection. Gilbert is a typical Hispanic boy in most respects and lives in an urban neighborhood. His family is middle-class with a fair amount of disposable income, which is atypical for the collection as a whole. At least some of Gilbert's extended family lives close by as Raymundo his cousin, attends the same elementary school. Gilbert does not have any real problems in his life but he is fascinated by the idea of the solitary hero who individually can take care of any personal problem. To this end, he believes he can prevail over a school bully through sheer force of will. The bully, Pete the Heat, demonstrates Gilbert's inability to do. Gilbert then resorts to a prolonged karate training regimen that spans six full months. The training is performed by a disinterested and lackluster instructor who fails to capture the students' imagination and in the end, fails to train them in karate. For example, Gilbert barely makes a single rank advancement in six months and never during his time at the studio is he allowed to spar even once. None of the students is particularly devoted to the class and after only a month or so, Gilbert finds the course boring and exceptionally uninteresting. And in the final analysis, the training is of no value because in a second confrontation with Pete, Gilbert is again wholly ineffective. He instead serves as a punching bag for Pete the Heat, who is a year younger but much more aggressive than Gilbert. By most standards, the failure of karate training can be attributed to poor instruction from the instructor since Gilbert began his classes as an avid and devoted student. While the lesson regimen of calisthenics and repetitive practice rings familiar to any who have studied martial arts, the disinterested and uncaring instructor is clearly atypical of successful training studios. The various styles of martial arts Gilbert encounters in the telephone book and the various moves Gilbert learns and watches, are all interesting and add texture to the story. Gilbert is a memorable and credible character.



La Bamba

La Bamba Summary

In *La Bamba*, Manuel is the fourth of seven children in his family and is Hispanic in origin. He attends elementary school with at least one of his younger siblings, Mario. Manuel lives with his mother and father, who is a pharmacist. When the elementary asks for volunteers for the after-school talent show, Manuel raises his hand. He plans to lip-sync to Ritchie Valens's *La Bamba* for his performance. After volunteering, Manuel has second thoughts. He wants to impress a particular girl and his friends but he also becomes very nervous about being on stage in front of the whole student body and their families. There is no easy way to back out however so Manuel attends the practice with his 45 RPM record in hand. During the practice Manuel is startled by a trumpet player and drops the record which rolls across the floor before Manuel retrieves it. Over the next few days Manuel practices pantomiming the song and adds in some wild dance steps at the suggestion of one of his friends. On the night of the performance Manuel is scared. He watches as the other talent pieces go on stage one after the other. They are all performed well and receive applause. Finally, it is Manuel's turn and he goes on stage as the music begins to play. Manuel begins to lip-sync and gyrate around the stage, garnering applause and laughter. During the performance, the record begins to skip over and over and Manuel responds by continuing his act over and over until the stage manager takes the record off. Manuel looks around and walks off stage, amidst howls of laughter and applause. He is pleased to discover he is popular. His act is interpreted as deliberately comical and is received quite well. Manuel begins to wonder what talent he can perform at the next years' talent show.

La Bamba Analysis

The tension in the story *La Bamba*, derives from Manuel's performance in the school talent show. Manuel is not particularly talented but hopes to be popular. His act involves pantomiming a popular song's performance, which is hardly imaginative or difficult. Manuel's performance involves some bizarre dance moves and then an accidental scratch in the record causes the music to skip over and over. Manuel's act is received by the audience as a comical act however, and the skipping record is assumed to be deliberate. Thus, Manuel does become a star, a comic star, and achieves his goal rather accidentally. Manuel compares an earlier science fair failure to his talent show debacle and assumes at first the audience is laughing at his ineptitude. Only later is he relieved to discover the audience is laughing at his comic performance. Manuel assumes that his record is scratched during the earlier rehearsal when he drops it onto the floor. Manuel's father, a pharmacist, supports a large family and appears well off. Manuel has lots of free time and is supported by his family. The school performance rings true and seems quite familiar to any reader who has attended such a show. Most of the acts are interesting only to close relatives of those performing.



The Marble Champ

The Marble Champ Summary

In *The Marble Champ*, Lupe Medrano is an eleven-year-old Hispanic girl living in suburban Fresno with her family, consisting of her parents and an older brother. Lupe wins the school's spelling bee and the reading contest at the public library. She also receives a blue ribbon at the science fair. Lupe is the best student at her piano recital and is widely known as a chess champion. A straight-A student, Lupe excels at everything academic and she is pretty also. She cannot play sports however and she wants to distinguish herself at sports. She recalls a long string of sports ineptitude, including accidentally once scoring a soccer goal for the other team. Lupe decides that shooting marbles is a sport and sets about to win the neighborhood marble-shooting competition held in a few weeks. She finds her brother's marble collection and practices in her room, quickly mastering the rudiments of shooting. Her brother gives her some pointers and she practices constantly. Lupe also begins a daily regimen of arms, hand, and thumb strengthening exercises. As the days go by, Lupe's thumb gets strong and big. Her mom notices her thumb muscles while they are washing dishes together. Lupe continues to master the game and within a week has beaten her brother. A few days later she beats Alfonso, a neighbor boy that is considered quite good at shooting marbles. Lupe's parents encourage her new interest and her brother continues to help her with advice. The day of a huge neighborhood marble championship arrives and Lupe goes to the championship tournament with her family. She plays her first game and after a shaky start, wins. She continues to win game after game until she finds herself in the girls' championship game. She invites every girl she beats to accompany her to the next game and in so doing creates her own little network of new friends. They all have a fun time. Lupe beats the final girl and becomes the girls' champion. She then has a final game against the boys' champion, and beats him too. Lupe becomes the town champion marble shooter. Ecstatic with her sports achievement, Lupe goes home.

The Marble Champ Analysis

At seven pages, the story *The Marble Champ* is the shortest work in the collection. The story is a straightforward tale of a girl making a goal, planning how to achieve the goal, executing the plan with dedication, and achieving the goal. Lupe begins the story as an academic person, excelling at brainy pursuits such as chess and spelling, but utterly lacking in any physical capability. She decides to change that and makes a goal to become a marbles champion. Lupe's family supports her ambition and especially her brother offers assistance. She quickly masters the rudiments of the game and then continues to develop her skill and strength. In just a few short weeks, Lupe goes from a marble newbie to a marble champion. The brief tale is a type of moral story where one sets out to achieve can be achieved with dedication and hard work. At the competition, the girls play against other girls and the boys play against other boys, until the final

game. Lupe's triumphant restaurant dinner, with both trophies sitting on the restaurant table, is the concluding image in this satisfying and enjoyable story.



Growing Up

Growing Up Summary

In *Growing Up*, Maria, a Hispanic girl, is in tenth grade and lives in Fresno with her family. Her family consists of her mom, dad Rafael, sister Irma, and brothers Rudy and John. Maria is the oldest child. She remembers a vacation one year ago to visit an uncle in West Covina. The trip is boring except for a one-day excursion to Disneyland. At the park, she feels that she is dressed poorly. Self-conscious, she feels poverty-stricken. Although she rides many rides and has some fun, her memory of the trip, even the part at Disneyland, makes her feel ambivalent about another family vacation. Thus, when Maria's parents announce a vacation to Great America, she tells her father that she does not plan on going on the day before the planned vacation. Maria's father, a foreman at a paper mill, emigrated from Chihuahua, Mexico, as a child and grew up in abject poverty. Maria's father gets angry with her and thinks she is being very ungrateful. Maria's mother intervenes and the decision is made to allow Maria to stay home alone and spend most of the time with her godmother.

After the family leaves, Maria has fun for a few hours, then gets worried and feels alone. Finally, she relaxes. She occasionally feels guilty about making her father angry and worries that he might drive crazy because of her. Maria then calls her friend Becky Ledesma and the two girls go to the mall to look at boys. Maria returns home and is surprised by how quiet the empty house is. After doing some chores, she goes over to her godmother's house for the rest of the evening. For the next four days, Maria agonizes in guilt and anxiety, sure that something horrible will happen to her family. Nothing happens however and they return home safely. When Maria realizes they are safe and had fun without her, she becomes angry and resentful. Then she feels guilty and strange. She finally concludes that she is simply growing up. Later that night the family goes out for dinner and Maria feels like she indeed is growing up.

Growing Up Analysis

In the story *Growing Up*, Maria, who is in tenth grade, is the oldest protagonist in the book and also faces the subtlest conflict in the book. She has reached the point in life where spending lots of time with her family is not particularly enjoyable. This is epitomized in her retrospection about last year's family vacation to West Covina. She concludes that the entire vacation is boring, except for maybe one day at Disneyland. Even that day however is marked by her feelings of insufficiency and poverty. She thus decides to skip the family vacation to Great America. Maria has no especial difficulty during the four days while her family is absent. In fact, she has a lot of fun hanging out with her friend and being independent. However, she begins to have complex feelings of guilt, where she focuses on the belief that her actions have angered her father, and he tends to drive crazily when he is angry. She fears he will cause an accident and her family will be harmed or worse. These anxious feelings intensify whenever Maria hears



about motor accidents on the radio. When Maria's family returns home perfectly okay, her anxiety changes into irritation, almost as if she wanted some mishap to occur. In fact, she is jealous of the good times that she has missed. Maria's complex emotions are subtle and the narrative portrayal of her emotional state is exceptionally well-written. Maria is smart enough to analyze her emotions and concludes that she is simply growing up, which is a difficult process under the best circumstances.



Characters

Alfonso appears in Broken Chain

Alfonso is the protagonist of Broken Chain. He is described as a typical Hispanic boy of about thirteen years of age. He lives with his parents and older brother in a house in an urban area. Alfonso does daily sit-ups to develop his abdominal muscles and cuts his hair in a style adopted from a popular magazine. He wishes his teeth were straight, all so he can hopefully attract the attention of a girl. Since his mother tells him braces are too expensive, Alfonso spends about an hour each night using his thumbs to put pressure on his teeth in an unsuccessful attempt to straighten them out a little bit. Alfonso's father is apparently much dedicated to a local baseball team and his mood rises and falls with the fortunes of the team. His mother appears typical in most respects, where she is supportive and realistic. Alfonso's older brother Ernie is looking for a girlfriend and has been disappointed recently. Alfonso spends his days wondering how to get the attention of a girl and then meets Sandra and helps her little brother. Alfonso and Sandra quickly learn they are in the same grade and school. They decide to go on a bike ride together. Alfonso attempts to prepare for the bike ride but accidentally breaks his bike's chain. He cannot convince a jealous Ernie to loan out his bike. Uncharacteristically mature, Alfonso faces the situation with honesty. He plans to tell Sandra the horrible truth that they cannot go bike-riding because he does not have a functional bike. Fortunately, Ernie comes through in the nick of time and Alfonso uses Ernie's bike to woo Sandra.

Jesse and Michael appears in Baseball in April

Jesse and Michael are brothers, nine and eleven years old, respectively, who live in a typical Hispanic family in an urban area. They are quite excited about the upcoming baseball season and practice their skills with each other. Older Michael teaches Jesse the basics of throwing, catching, and batting. When the day arrives, they go to Little League tryouts and perform for the assembled coaches. In his his first time at tryouts, Jesse is nervous and performs poorly. Michael seems to perform well at catching and batting. They return home and wait for the telephone to ring but it does not. Instead, they end up joining an informal neighborhood recreational league that is comprised of only two teams. Their team Hobo Park plays the Red Caps five times and loses all five games. About half-way through the season, Michael loses interest and spends his time going crazy over a girl that likes him. Jesse stays on the team however and makes friends with another boy. Jesse plays catcher but is not good at batting. During the first game, he lets a wild pitch strike him so that, hit by pitch, he can advance and get on base. This is his only time on base during the game. He does not score but is exhilarated at the chance to base run. When the season ends Jesse worries that someone on the team might mistakenly show up for practice and find themselves all alone.



Luis appears in Two Dreamers

Luis is born in Jalapa, Mexico and emigrates to the United States in his late twenties, presumably circa 1958. He appears to be about sixty-years-old during the story. He works as a night watchman for a food manufacturing facility in Fresno. He lives on a quiet and shady street. Luis is married, has five adult children, and at least twenty-one grandchildren. Luis' favorite grandson is Hector. Hector lives with his parents during the school year but spends his summer months living with his grandfather Luis. Luis has a son-in-law who has made substantial money in dealing real estate, probably as an amateur investor. Luis is also worried about his impending retirement and wants to bolster his retirement nest egg as possible. During the narrative, Luis decides to see if he can take up real estate as an avenue to making money. However, Luis' schemes apparently rarely move beyond the theoretical stage. Luis' wife is realistic and practical and the two often bicker. Luis is presented as hard-working and family-oriented. He is bilingual but reticent to use English with strangers. Luis is also hesitant to use newfangled technology such as the telephone. Luis and Hector are the two dreamers mentioned in the story's title.

Veronica Solis appears in Barbie

Veronica Solis lives with her little sister Yolanda and their parents in a typical Hispanic family within a traditional neighborhood. The area receives little detail but appears to be suburban in character. Veronica has several uncles. Her uncle Rudy is wealthy and gives her gifts. During the story, Rudy announces his engagement to Donna, causing Veronica's mother to become a little flustered, suggesting that Rudy is a maternal uncle. Like many young girls, Veronica is probably eight to ten years of age, Veronica is captivated by Barbie dolls and wishes to have one of her own. One Christmas, Rudy gives her a doll that is like a Barbie, but Veronica finds the doll ugly and unappealing. When they come to visit, Donna and Rudy give Veronica a real Barbie doll with several changes of clothing. Veronica's dreams of having a genuine Barbie appear to have come true. Veronica then goes to her friend Martha's house to play with Barbie dolls. On the way home, she accidentally loses her new Barbie's head. Although she searches for hours, Veronica never locates the missing head.

Fausto appears in The No-Guitar Blues

Fausto lives with his family in a typical Hispanic neighborhood. His grandfather may also live with his family although this is not definitively established in the narrative. Fausto is energetic, industrious, and conscientious. He attends church with his mother sporadically. After seeing Los Lobos perform on television, Fausto decides that he wants to be a guitar player in a rock and roll band. Although he has seen other bands on television, he has never seen a Hispanic rock and roll band before. Seeing the Hispanic members of Los Lobos ignites a fire within Fausto. He spends several hours trying to earn money to purchase a guitar, knowing that his parents do not have the money for one. Fausto eventually finds a lost dog and returns it to the owner, embellishing the



story of finding the dog in the hopes of gaining a big reward. Fausto does receive a twenty-dollar reward for returning the dog. The reward makes Fausto feel guilty however so he donates all of his money to the church in an act of repentance. Later, Fausto's mother remembers there is an old bass guitar in the garage and Fausto does receive his instrument after all.

Victor appears in Seventh Grade

Victor is the protagonist in Seventh Grade. Victor has spent his summer picking grapes to earn money to buy his school clothes. He appears to be a typical Hispanic student and attends school in Fresno, returning for his first day of the seventh grade. Victor's course schedule has seven classes and eight periods in the day. His classes include homeroom, English, math, social studies, lunch, French, metal shop, and biology. Victor speaks English fluently and has mastered the basics of Spanish. He takes French because the girl he likes, Teresa, is also taking French. Teresa is also in his homeroom class. Victor has a close friend, Michael Torres, who he meets for lunch. Victor likes Teresa but is too shy to directly approach her. Most of the students at the school realize that Victor likes Teresa and she clearly knows of his infatuation for her. During a school day, Victor spends time looking for Teresa, wondering how to impress her, and doing some dumb things to try and get her attention. Victor's antics succeed and after French class, Teresa approaches Victor for assistance in doing French homework. Victor is sure that seventh grade is going to be a lot of fun.

Yollie Moreno appears in Mother and Daughter

Yollie is probably fourteen years old and is a Hispanic girl whose mother emigrated from Mexico prior to Yollie's birth. Yollie's father is not discussed in the story but it is clear he no longer lives with the family. Yollie and her mother share a particularly close relationship and they enjoy spending evenings together eating popcorn and watching scary movies on television. Yollie is a dedicated student and is widely regarded as one of the smartest students at her school. She is particularly gifted in spelling. Yollie is functionally bilingual but prefers English. She is described as slender and quite beautiful, while her mother is regarded as approachable and quite fat. Aside from excelling in school, Yollie's preoccupation is with her friends and Ernie Castillo, a boy with whom she is infatuated. During one school dance, Yollie wears a dress that her mother has dyed black. At the dance Yollie is caught in the rain and the dress's dye runs. Yollie is convinced that everyone will laugh at her dirty grey dress and she runs home. Nobody however notices the dress. Later, Ernie telephones and asks Yollie to go to the movies with him. Yollie convinces her mother to spend some of her future college savings fund on new clothes so she can be confident on her date with Ernie.



Gilbert Sanchez appears in The Karate Kid

Gilbert Sanchez is an eleven-year-old Hispanic boy living in a typical urban neighborhood with his middle-class family. He is in fifth grade and attends elementary school. Gilbert's older cousin, Raymundo, lives in the neighborhood and attends the same elementary school. After watching the movie *The Karate Kid*, Gilbert and Raymundo convince themselves that they are karate fighters. At school Gilbert takes his new-found confidence to heart and refuses to let an intimidating bully cut in line in front of him. The standoff results in an after-school fight which Gilbert loses badly. After much introspection, Gilbert decides that his failure stems from not having an instructor. He convinces his mother to enroll him in karate lessons and spends six months training at a lackluster studio with a disinterested instructor. After only a few weeks, Gilbert finds the karate training tedious and boring. After a few months, he wants to quit and starts thinking about ways he can get out of future classes. Gilbert is not alone in his opinion. All of the students dislike the class, which suggests a huge failing on the part of the instructor. In any event, the training is ineffective because a few months later, Gilbert once again faces off with the same school bully and badly loses the fight. After six months and only a single rank advancement, Gilbert is ready to injure himself to get out of classes. To his great joy, the instructor announces that the school is closing due to lack of students. Freed from the tyranny of boring karate training, Gilbert accepts his role as a non-fighting student and stays out of trouble at school.

Manuel appears in La Bamba

Manuel is a young Hispanic boy attending John Burroughs Elementary School, presumably in the higher grades of the school. He is the fourth of seven children in his family and lives with his parents. His father is a pharmacist. The family appears well off and education is obviously valued by Manuel's parents. Manuel has several friends at school and also has a crush on a particular girl whom he believes is the 'second-best' good-looking girl at the school. Manuel believes that the best-looking girl is his friend's love interest. Manuel volunteers to perform in an after-school talent show and plans to lip-sync a pantomime of Ritchie Valens's "La Bamba," in the hopes it will impress his friends and some girls. After volunteering, Manuel begins to rethink his decision. He becomes increasingly nervous and spends a lot of time practicing his bizarre dance moves, stage antics, and lip-syncing. During practice, Manuel drops his 45 RPM record and it rolls across the floor. At the performance, Manuel begins his posturing and then the record, scratched from its roll across the floor, begins to skip repetitively on a given lyric. Manuel does not know how to respond so he sings the line over and over and dances around and around. The audience interprets the entire performance as intentionally comical. Fortunately for Manuel, everybody loves his comic antics and he becomes quite popular at school.



Lupe Medrano appears in The Marble Champ

Lupe Medrano is an eleven-year-old Hispanic girl living in suburban Fresno with her family. Lupe's family consists of her parents and an older brother. Lupe wins the school's spelling bee and the reading contest at the public library. She receives a blue ribbon at the science fair, is the best student at her piano recital, and is widely known as a chess champion. A straight-A student, Lupe excels at everything academic. However, she cannot play any sports and she wants to distinguish herself at sports. Lupe decides that shooting marbles is a sport and sets about to win the neighborhood marble-shooting competition held in a few weeks. Lupe borrows her brothers' marbles, and spends many hours practicing shooting marbles. She spends many hours doing arm, hand, and particularly thumb exercises. Within a few days, she is shooting straight. Within a few weeks, she is shooting hard. She first beats her big brother and then she beats Alfonso, a neighbor who is regarded as good at marbles. Lupe continues to practice and exercise right up until the competition. Her mother and father, excited at the prospects of their daughter excelling at something physical, fully support her goal. At the competition, Lupe has a shaky first game but wins, moving up through the brackets. Each girl she defeats is invited to join her group and she soon has a group of cheerleaders. Lupe makes the final completion and defeats another girl to take home the championship. As the girls' champion, she then plays against the boys' champion and beats him too. Lupe is the hero of the hour, the darling of her family. She also demonstrates that a pretty and smart girl also can excel in physical pursuits.

Maria appears in Growing up

Maria, a Hispanic girl, is in tenth grade and lives in Fresno with her family. Her family consists of her mom, dad Rafael, sister Irma, and brothers Rudy and John. Maria is the oldest child. Maria's father, a foreman at a paper mill, emigrated from Chihuahua, Mexico, and grew up in abject poverty. Maria has an uncle Shorty, who was in a bad automobile accident and is a paraplegic with scars from burns. Maria's grandmother is named Lupe. Maria remembers taking a family vacation that involves one day at Disneyland. The whole vacation is boring and although Maria had fun on the rides at Disneyland, she feels poorly dressed and, next to the other girls there, exceptionally poor. Thus when Maria's father announces another family vacation, Maria declines to go. Instead, she stays home alone for four days, spending the evenings and nights at her godmother's house. During her family's absence, Maria grows increasingly anxious and becomes convinced that her absence has angered her father so much that he will drive recklessly. She fears that he will crash the car, resulting in serious harm to the family. In fact, no crash occurs and the family returns home safely, having enjoyed a splendid time on vacation. Maria then becomes morose and frustrated, feeling like she has missed out on a great family adventure. She is introspective and insightful enough however, to realize that her experience is simply a sign of growing up and gaining maturity. When the family goes out to dinner and Maria reads her fortune cookie, she finds she agrees that she is "mature and sensible."



Objects/Places

Alfonso's Broken Chain appears in Broken Chain

In Broken Chain, Alfonso cleans his bike in preparation for a trip with Sandra, the young girl that he has a crush on. While cleaning, Alfonso takes off the bike chain. He plans to degrease it, lubricate it, and put it back on. Unfortunately, he breaks the chain. Angry, he throws the broken chain down and it not only breaks again but also bounces up and cuts his hand. The chain is symbolic of Alfonso's relationship with his brother Ernie and the strains placed on that relationship by Ernie's not having a girlfriend while Alfonso has prospects.

Hobo Park appears in Baseball in April

Hobo Park is the neighborhood name for the field where Jesse and Michael's informal baseball team practices and sometimes plays games. Their team takes its name from the park. Their chief rivals, the Red Caps, are named after their matching red baseball caps. Hobo Park proves a fun exercise although they lose all five games to the Red Caps and their league is comprised of only the two teams.

The Pink House appears in Two Dreamers

In Two Dreamers, Luis locates a pink house for sale about two blocks from where he lives. He mistakenly assumes the house must cost about thirty thousand dollars. In fact, it is listed at forty-three thousand. The realtor notes that the sellers might accept a lowered price of forty-one thousand and five hundred dollars. Luis, via Hector, argues the house is not worth much more than thirty thousand dollars because the pink stucco is cracked. Needless to say, he does not make much headway with the realtor while pursuing this line of reasoning.

Barbie Doll appears in Barbie

In Barbie, the protagonist Veronica Solis yearns to own her own Barbie doll and finally receives one as a Christmas gift from her future aunt Donna. Veronica carefully compares the Barbie to another fake Barbie doll and finds the real Barbie doll to be more beautiful. She is happier. The next day however, Veronica loses Barbie's head while walking home from a friend's house. The head is never found.



Fausto's Twenty Dollars appears in The No-Guitar Blues

In No Guitar Blues, Fausto receives a twenty-dollar bill as a reward for returning a lost dog. Fausto embellishes the story of finding and rescuing the dog. He quickly comes to feel guilty for having received so much money for what was after all simply a common courtesy. Although the money could buy Fausto his longed-for guitar or even a new pair of jeans, he donates the money to the local church.

Michael Torres' Scowl appears in Seventh Grade

In Seventh Grade, Victor's friend Michael Torres always scowls. Michael looks at the models in GQ Magazine and concludes that attractive men must always scowl. Michael scowls all the time and thinks it makes him appear attractive to girls. After a while, Victor tries to scowl too, believing that scowling will make him attractive to girls.

Yollie's Black Dress appears in Mother and Daughter

In Mother and Daughter, Yollie Moreno wears a black dress to a school dance. The dress has been dyed black by Yollie's mother because the family cannot afford to purchase a new dress. When Yollie is caught in the rain, the black dye runs and so too does Yollie, away from the dance. She rushes home in tears. For Yollie, the black dress represents a compromise of what she desires and what she can get. Later, Yollie receives new clothing and new confidence.

Mr. Lopez's Karate Studio appears in The Karate Kid

Mr. Lopez is a lackluster and disinterested karate instructor who runs a crummy karate studio near the home of Gilbert Sanchez, a student. The studio had wooden floors that release splinters and scanty equipment. Mr. Lopez is obviously disinterested in making the studio succeed or training the students well. After attending the school for six months, Gilbert still is unable to defend himself. The school eventually closes because of an insufficient number of enrolled students. The studio and the instructor represent the worst type of martial arts training available.

John Burroughs Elementary School Talent Show appears in La Bamba

In La Bamba, the protagonist Manuel performs a skit in the talent show for his elementary school. The show is organized by Mr. Roybal who is a teacher at the school. It contains six acts. The show is received well by the assembled student body and their parents. Manuel's comic rendition of Ritchie Valens's "La Bamba" makes him a celebrity.



Lupe's Thumb appears in The Marble Champ

In The Marble Champ, Lupe decides that she wants to be recognized for sports. She is determined to win at the neighborhood marble competition. While she trains, she spends a lot of time doing arm, hand, and especially thumb exercises. A naturally skinny girl, her thumb rapidly develops into a powerful appendage ideal for shooting marbles. After a few weeks, Lupe's mom notices her bulging thumb muscles while they are washing dishes. Lupe's thumb is a symbol of her determination to succeed.



Themes

Growing Up

All of the stories in the book feature a strong theme about growing up and becoming more mature. Almost all of the protagonists in the book are in the last few years of elementary school or the first few years of junior high school. In *Growing Up*, Maria is in the tenth grade. She is the oldest protagonist in the book. All of the stories place the protagonist in a situation that causes him or her to evaluate and extend his or her abilities through focused effort. The protagonists set a goal and then work toward the goal to achieve it. Many of the situations demand an adult interpretation of life. For example, Lupe in *The Marble Champ* story wants to excel at marbles. She takes the time to practice, exercise, and develop skill with a specific goal in mind. Yollie, in *Mother and Daughter*, faces a lack of family money with determination to make the best of a bad situation. Even Veronica, in *Barbie*, settles on a grown-up reaction of disappointed acceptance at the loss of her new Barbie's head. Through trial and conflict, the protagonists all resolve narrative crises in ways that demonstrate increasing maturity. They all 'grow up' through the course of the narrative and in retrospect, conclude they are better for undergoing their difficult experiences.

Mind versus Body

Many of the protagonists in the book face physical challenges or tasks, which form the central tension of the narrative. Jesse, in *Baseball in April*, must learn to play baseball; Hector, in *Two Dreamers*, must make a telephone call; Fausto, in *The No-Guitar Blues*, must earn money; Gilbert, in *The Karate Kid*, gets involved in two schoolyard fights; Manuel, in *La Bamba*, must perform at the school talent show; and Lupe, in *The Marble Champ*, must learn to shoot marbles. All of these stories pit a physical act or performance against the protagonist's natural inclination to avoid the performance. Learning baseball, karate, or marbles takes time, dedication, and patience. Earning money takes hard work, which is boring to perform. Performing in a talent show involves nervous hours of preparation. Lupe is the preeminent example of the book's mind-body dichotomy. Widely recognized as one of the smartest kids in school, excelling in academia and all mental activities, Lupe is physically incompetent. She desires to perform well at sports and decides that marbles is a sport. She practices marble shooting with devotion, exercises her arms, hands, and especially her shooting thumb. Gradually, Lupe comes to dominate her neighborhood's marble shooting competition. Whether a character is mentally competent yet physically weak, or physically strong but lacking mental agility, most of the stories in the book are about characters moving from an area of strength toward an area of perceived weakness, only to achieve success through dedication.

Financial Limitations

None of the protagonists in any of the stories in the book are financially rich. Several protagonists such as Manuel in *La Bamba*, come from solid middle-class families, while others such as Hector in *Two Dreamers*, border on poverty. Some characters, such as Gilbert in *The Karate Kid*, live in families with some disposable income, while most characters such as Fausto in *No-Guitar Blues*, live in families that barely scrape by. The two extremes of financial wealth probably lie between Yollie, in *Mother and Daughter*, who must sacrifice her college savings for clothes and Manuel, in *La Bamba*, whose father is a pharmacist. Yet the theme of financial limitations runs throughout nearly all of the stories in the collection. For many characters, dreams do not become realities because there is not enough money to travel, buy luxuries, or often even to buy necessities. Fausto, for example, must work in the summer months doing seasonal agricultural work in order to have money to purchase school clothing. Even though many characters are impoverished or have meager incomes, their financial limitations do not cause undue sadness for the most part. A few stories involve working around financial situations while other stories are about accepting financial limitations.

Style

Point of View

All of the stories are related from the third-person and omniscient point of view. The internal thoughts of characters are rarely divulged by the unnamed and effaced yet reliable narrator. The narrator's point-of-view is closely aligned with that of the protagonist in every story. This conveys the protagonists' dreams and needs in a highly sympathetic way. All of the primary characters in the book are quite likable people. None of them pursue questionable activities and their motivations are all plausible and easily understood. The straightforward narrative construction allows the book to be easily accessed and understood. There is no confusion because of the clear structure of each story. The author is obviously more interested in telling a story than creating meta-fictional gimmicks. The point of view selected is consistently appropriate for the stories included in the book and aids materially to an understanding of the material.

Setting

Most of the stories are explicitly set in Fresno, California. The ones that are not definitively located there can easily be located there. The author Gary Soto is born and raised in Fresno. The city is depicted as a typical American suburban settlement with an urban downtown core surrounded by rings of suburban zones. The area is focused on the agricultural industry and there are many references to seasonal agricultural work including work for younger children. For example, Fausto in *No-Guitar Blues*, has spent his summer picking grapes. Most of the stories are set in distinctly Hispanic neighborhoods and those not so explicitly set could easily transpire in such a neighborhood. Nearly all the characters presented are hard-working and family-oriented. They are all honest and value education. Almost all of the characters except Luis Molina in *Two Dreamers* are fluent in English and nearly all have some degree of fluency in Spanish. Several characters are first-generation emigrants, while most characters are second or third-generation Americans. Within the context of each story, every protagonist enjoys strong family support and live in a stable home situation. Each character however has only a few close friends. All the protagonists are well-adjusted individuals who are growing up. They all face transient but nevertheless real situations that demand their attention. They frequently face family financial limitations if not hardship. They also frequently struggle to balance sports pursuits against school courses.

Language and Meaning

The stories are presented predominantly in English. Occasional words or phrases in Spanish are used and from time to time, some characters speak in Spanish. The book's end-matter section "Spanish Words, Phrases, and Expressions Used in This Book"



offers a Spanish-to-English translation of nearly every Spanish word or phrase used. The Spanish phrases used add texture to the narratives and settings. They do not create any special barrier to understanding. The stories are presented in a straightforward narration and do not use complicated structure. Chronologies are usually straightforward and often span a very brief period of time, sometimes as little as a single day. Characters often remember previous events or think about the future, but such chronological excursions are clearly identified and pose no special barrier to comprehension. Meaning within the stories is straightforward and most of the stories feature a strong moral tone. For example, in *The Marble Champ*, Lupe sets her mind to winning a marble championship and does so after many long days of preparation. Several of the stories feature fairly complex symbols, which add a rich texture and several stories use metaphors. Within the book, meaning is usually easily identified and quite accessible.

Structure

The 113-page collection of short stories contains eleven short stories, ranging in length from seven to twelve pages apiece. It ends with a four-page section entitled *Spanish Words, Phrases, and Expressions Used in This Book*, which acts as a sort of Spanish-to-English dictionary. The book's stories are written predominantly in English but occasional words and phrases of dialogue are written in Spanish. Older characters tend to speak more in Spanish while younger characters tend to speak entirely in English. The book by no means requires fluency in Spanish for full comprehension. Each of the stories follows a traditional narrative development where the protagonist is presented and characterized, the central tension is developed, the story's climax quickly follows, and a brief dénouement is offered. Of necessity, these phases are very brief. Characterization is usually limited to a very brief physical description, which usually consists of a single sentence. The typical character is a Hispanic boy or girl in the last grades of elementary school or the early grades of junior high school. The only notable exception is Maria in *Growing Up*, who is in the tenth grade. The characters all value education, demonstrate a respectable work ethic, and usually come from a lower middle class background. They usually live in a traditional family with other siblings with one or a few close friends and a wider circle of acquaintances. Most of them are of the age when girls and boys first notice each other, but none of them are yet wholly obsessed with the other gender. Typically family finances do not allow for extensive purchases and often money becomes a factor in the central crisis of the narrative. The stories have 'happy endings' as the characters get what they are looking for and are welcomed back into their supportive families.



Quotes

"Alfonso sat on the porch trying to push his crooked teeth to where he thought they belonged. He hated the way he looked. Last week he did fifty sit-ups a day, thinking that he would burn those already apparent ripples on his stomach to even deeper ripples, dark ones, so when he went swimming at the canal next summer, girls in cut-offs would notice. And the guys would think he was tough, someone who could take a punch and give it back" (Broken Chain, Pg. 1.)

"In two weeks Jesse had gotten better. But Michael quit the team because he found a girlfriend, a slow walker who hugged her books against her chest while gazing dreamily into Michael's equally dazed face. What fools, Jesse thought as he rode off to practice" (Baseball in April, p. 19.)

"'Wait a minute,' he said to the woman. Hector looked up to his grandfather. 'She says forty-three thousand.'
His grandfather groaned and his dream went out like a light bulb. He put his comb in his back pocket.
'You said thirty thousand, Son.'
'I didn't know—I was just guessing.'
'But it's so much. Es demasiado.'
'Well, I didn't know.'
'But you go to school and know about things.'
Hector looked at the telephone in his hand. Why did he have to listen to his grandfather and call a person he didn't even know?" (Two Dreamers, pg. 28.)

"Veronica stared at the woman, then at the doll. The woman's eyes were almost as blue, and her hair almost as blond as Barbie's. Veronica slowly took the Barbie from the woman and very softly said, "Thank you." She gave her uncle a big hug, taking care not to smash Barbie against his chest. Veronica smiled at the woman, then at her mother, who returned from the kitchen with a pot of coffee and a plate of powdery-white donuts" (Barbie, pg. 36.)

"He had watched "American Bandstand" for years and had heard Ray Camacho and the Teardrops at Romain Playground, but it had never occurred to him that he too might become a musician. That afternoon Fausto knew his mission in life: to play guitar in his own band; to sweat out his songs and prance around the stage; to make money and dress weird" (No-Guitar Blues, pg. 43.)

"Mr. Bueller asked if anyone knew French. Victor raised his hand, wanting to impress Teresa. The teacher beamed and said, 'Très bien. Parlez-vous Français?'
Victor didn't know what to say. The teacher wet his lips and asked something else in French. The room grew silent. Victor felt all eyes staring at him. He tried to bluff his way out by making noises that sounded French. 'La me vava me con le grandma,' he said uncertainly" (Seventh Grade, pg. 5.)



"'I've been saving a little every month,' said Mrs. Moreno. 'For you, m'ija.' Her mother held up five twenties, a blossom of green that smelled sweeter than flowers on that Saturday. They drove to Macy's and bought a blouse, shoes, and a skirt that would not bleed in rain or any other kind of weather" (Mother and Daughter, pg. 68.)

"Gilbert stayed home the next day, feigning sickness, and looked through the Yellow Pages for a karate school. It was very confusing. There were so many styles: Shotokan, Taekwon-Do, Kajukenbo, Bok-Fu, Jujitsu, Kung Fu. That one sounded familiar, but it was in north Fresno, far from his home. It would take him forever to bicycle up there" (The Karate Kid, pg. 72-73.)

"Manual was the fourth of seven children and looked like a lot of kids in his neighborhood: black hair, brown face, and skinny legs scuffed from summer play. But summer was giving way to fall: the trees were turning red, the lawns brown, and the pomegranate trees were heavy with fruit. Manuel walked to school in the frost morning, kicking leaves and thinking of tomorrow's talent show. He was still amazed that he had volunteered. He was going to pretend to sing Ritchie Valens's "La Bamba" before the entire school" (La Bamba, pg. 81.)

"The weeks passed quickly. Lupe worked so hard that one day, while she was drying dishes, her mother asked why her thumb was swollen.

'It's muscle,' Lupe explained. 'I've been practicing for the marbles championship.'

'You, honey?' Her mother knew Lupe was no good at sports.

'Yeah. I beat Alfonso, and he's pretty good.'

That night, over dinner, Mrs. Medrano said, 'Honey, you should see Lupe's thumb' (The Marble Champ, pg. 93.)

"That night the family went out for Chinese food. Although her brothers fooled around, cracked jokes, and spilled a soda, she was happy. She ate a lot, and when her fortune cookie said, 'You are mature and sensible,' she had to agree. And her father and mother did too. The family drove home singing the words to "La Bamba" along with the car radio" (Growing Up, pg. 107.)



Topics for Discussion

In *Broken Chain*, Alfonso asks to borrow his brother Ernie's bike, but Ernie says no. Ernie explains he needs the bike to go with some friends. Do you think Ernie has an unspoken motive for not lending his bike to Alfonso? Discuss.

In *Baseball in April*, Jesse and Michael audition for the Little League. Michael seems to perform well, making several difficult catches, throwing well, and hitting all ten balls at bat. Jesse watches some prospective coaches mark Michael's name. However Michael is not selected for any team. Do you think that Jesse's perception of Michael's skill is biased? What else could account for Michael not being selected?

Imagine that in *Two Dreamers* the pink stucco house really did cost only thirty thousand dollars. If that is the case, do you think that Luis would have purchased the house? Do you think he would then have been able to sell the house and make a handsome profit? Why or why not?

In *Barbie*, Veronica and Martha briefly struggle over Veronica's new Barbie. Minutes later, the doll's head falls off and is lost. Do you think the doll's head is symbolic of Veronica's and Martha's relationship? What other aspects of the narrative could be symbolized by the beautiful-but-incomplete Barbie?

In *No Guitar Blues*, Fausto returns a dog and receives a reward. He quickly feels the reward was inappropriate and begins to feel guilty for receiving so much money. Why does Fausto feel guilty about receiving the large reward? How does he ease his conscience later on?

In *Seventh Grade*, Victor tries several tactics to attract girls, including scowling at random times and claiming to know French when he does not. Why does Victor believe these things will attract girls?

In *Mother and Daughter*, Yollie Moreno wears a dress that has been dyed black. She gets caught in the rain which causes the dye to run. As the rain bleeds the dye making it run, Yollie cries tears and runs home in shame. The dress thus becomes a metaphor for Yollie and a symbol of her inability to obtain clothing that marks a certain social status. What other symbols appearing in the book are metaphorically linked with a specific character?

In *The Karate Kid*, Gilbert Sanchez attends a bad karate studio and receives poor instruction from a disinterested instructor. After six months of karate training, Gilbert still badly loses fights at school. Imagine that Gilbert had attended a first-rate karate studio with an interested and involved karate instructor. Do you think the outcome might have been different? Why or why not? Discuss the role of teachers in physical training and education. How can a good instructor make students desire to succeed? How can a bad instructor ruin even an exciting course of study?



In *La Bamba*, the protagonist Manuel pantomimes a performance of Ritchie Valens's "La Bamba" in a school talent show. The story makes it quite clear that Manuel is Hispanic in looks, outlook, and culture. How does Manuel's racial identity shape the narrative? Would the story be essentially the same story if Manuel was a Japanese kid?

In *The Marble Champ*, Lupe wins the school's spelling bee and the reading contest at the public library. She also receives a blue ribbon at the science fair. Lupe is the best student at her piano recital and is widely known as a chess champion. A straight-A student, Lupe excels at everything academic. However, she cannot play sports well. Lupe wants to distinguish herself at sports. Why do you think so many people are not satisfied doing what they are good at and want to learn new things? What things are you not very good at, but would like to learn to be better at doing? How can you go about achieving distinction in something you are not very good at?

In *Growing Up*, Maria spends four days worrying that her family is going to be harmed in a traffic accident. Yet when they arrive home safely, she becomes irritated and morose. Why does Maria react like this? Do you think it is indeed a sign of her become more mature and growing up? Why or why not?