

# Buried Onions Study Guide

## Buried Onions by Gary Soto

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# Contents

<a href="#">Buried Onions Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 1.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 2.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 3.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 4.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 5.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 6.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 7.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 8.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 9.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">36</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">37</a>
<a href="#">Themes/Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">42</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">44</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">47</a>
<a href="#">Essay Topics.....</a>	<a href="#">48</a>



[Ideas for Reports and Papers.....49](#)

[Further Study.....50](#)

[Related Titles.....51](#)

[Copyright Information.....52](#)

## Overview

Eddie, a young Mexican American, fights to make something of himself in Fresno, California. Reeling from the death of his father, his best friend, and his cousin, he must wage a constant battle against negative community influences (guns, drugs, lack of opportunity, cultural stereotypes).

Facing his own ennui, he often feels there is no hope. In the beginning chapters, friends and relatives coax him to pick up guns and avenge his cousin's death. Yet, Eddie is determined to survive in this world where all seems against him. Turning against the world of drugs and violence, Eddie vows to take the straight and narrow path, even if it means struggling at temporary manual labor jobs. Having already failed at his community college studies, Eddie's success appears doubtful through much of the book.

When he takes a landscaping job for a white man across town and the man's truck is stolen from the front of Eddie's apartment, Eddie is accused of the theft. To compound his troubles, he is continually harassed by young hoodlums. As he and a friend attempt to recover the missing truck, Eddie's friend is stabbed. Eddie realizes that to survive he must escape the constraints of the barrio. In his desperation, Eddie contemplates joining the military. As the story ends, Eddie knows that his persistence, and his refusal to give in to adversity, mark him as a survivor.

Although *Buried Onions* provides no easy answers for persistent social problems, Eddie finds hope in the fields surrounding Fresno, and a growing awareness that he needs others to survive in the barrio. Few adolescent novels present such an uncompromising look at the difficulties of surviving in a central California Mexican-American community. Although as many of Eddie's dreams end as begin, he continues to look for opportunities. *Buried Onions* is a unique portrait of an older adolescent in a world where the complexities of finding an occupation and making ends meet are never ironed out.

## About the Author

Gary Soto was born April 12, 1952, in Fresno, California, son of Manuel and Angie (Trevino) Soto. Like many Mexican Americans in Fresno, Soto's parents and grandparents had once worked as farmworkers in the surrounding countryside. Although both of his parents were American born, their Mexican heritage remained a vital influence in their home.

When Soto's father was killed in a factory accident when Gary was five, his mother was forced to struggle to provide for the family. For young Gary, survival took precedence over any dreams of writing. Soto tells interviewer, Jean W. Ross, "I don't think I had any literary aspirations when I was a kid. In fact we were pretty much an illiterate family . . . So my wanting to write poetry was a sort of fluke."

When Soto enrolled at Fresno City College in 1970, he began to focus on literature.

His dreams of a literary career began "when I discovered in the library a collection of poems edited by Donald Allen, called *The New American Poetry*... I proceeded to write my own poetry, first alone, with no one's help, and then moving on to take classes . . . and meeting other writers." Influenced first by writers who broke out of established traditions, Soto devoured the poetry of Gregory Corso, Kenneth Koch, and Theodore Roethke. He also was influenced by Latin writers of prose, such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Later, when he entered formal writing programs, he was strongly influenced by Philip Levine with whom Soto studied from 1972 to 1973.

Soto published his first volume of poems, *The Elements of San Joaquin*, in 1977.

Soto notes in a recent on-line essay that this publication meant that "my days in the grape and cotton fields were a thing of the past." Yet, he had no illusions about fame and fortune as a writer: "I was aware that my poetry would likely be read by only a select few outside of Chicano Studies classes." Soto remembers well his early struggles to build upon his initial success: "The agony of writing is a terror in itself, but to build an audience once a book is published?"

For a Chicano writer in the early 1980s, this was not easy.

Soon Soto began to experiment with writing prose as well as poetry. In the Ross interview he describes his initial awkward feelings about prose, and his new ambitions: "I'd never considered myself a prose writer, but I wanted to do something different . . . I didn't tire of poetry, but I wanted to move on into a thicker forest." His first forays into prose were autobiographical recreations of his family's struggles to survive in the barrio. By 1985, Soto had published four volumes of poems and an autobiography.

In subsequent years, Soto continued to write about people and places from his youth. In 1990, the publication of *Baseball in April: And Other Stories* marked Soto's increasing interest in writing fiction for young adults. In each story in *Baseball in April*, Soto focuses



on a young person struggling to find a voice. Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria, in the New York Times Book Review, notes that *Baseball in April* provides a "bittersweet account of reconciliation to the givens of self and life while growing up that will be recognized as authentic by all."

In the novels and collections of short stories that followed *Baseball in April*, Soto explored conflicts universal to adolescents, while also documenting the unique Mexican-American community in Fresno. At a time when almost no Latinos appeared in adolescent fiction, Soto's focus on his Mexican-American heritage was refreshing. Characters, such as Line in *Taking Sides*, became role models for adolescents struggling to find a niche. Francis Bradburn notes in her *Wilson Library Review* that Linc's "growing determination that he will not hide or give up his heritage because it is a vital part of who he is—is important for middle readers to see."

Although the ravages of poverty and violence often overwhelmed characters in his early poems and prose, Soto's later works reflect more hope. Soto explains in the Ross interview how his writing has changed in recent years: "I don't want to take a dreary look at the world and then start writing. I left that somewhere along the line." Soto continues to fight against being easily categorized: "One of the things I would like to do is make that leap from being a Chicano writer to being simply a writer." Soto argues that while his characters and settings may feature Chicano characters, "except for two books, mine are not heavily concerned with Mexican themes."

Writing, for Soto, is a daily activity.

I get up and write from about nine to twelve daily, and I will think about an area that I want to delve into ... I may have a slight suspicion that it's going to be on marriage, or it's going to be a childhood piece, or its going to be on a friend, or place. But I don't know exactly what the ultimate subject will be until I start writing.

Still, themes in his works are tied closely to a past that haunts him. The fear of returning to the poverty of his childhood still remains, and reappears in both his poetry and his novels.

Soto's poetry, short stories, biographies, and novels have sold over a million copies.

He argues that success has come only through sustained cultivation of his audience: "Unlike most other contemporary poets and writers, I've taken the show on the road and built a name among *la gente*, the people." He has visited schools and prisons, made movies, established scholarships, and helped to form Chicano cultural centers. Soto has merged teaching and writing as easily as he mixes poetry and prose. He counsels new teachers in the Ross interview to "take whatever sensitivity you have in writing and carry it over into teaching."

Despite his phenomenal success, Soto continues to crusade to expand the audience for Latino writing. "Because I believe in literature and the depth of living it adds to our years, my task is to start Chicanos reading. If it's my poetry, great. If it's Sandra Cisneros's prose, that's great as well...."



As for me, I start with kindergartners, most of whom are Spanish-speaking and weigh in at forty-five pounds, and move up to college students, not to mention those abuelitas who are curious to see how I turned out after all the stupid antics I portrayed in *Living up the Street*." Although he has had to struggle, Soto tells interviewer Torres that he is happy. Despite his early childhood difficulties, he feels blessed: "There are a lot of people who never know what their talent is... . I am very lucky to have found mine."



# Plot Summary

Eddie is the protagonist of *Buried Onions*, a coming of age story about a young man raised in the barrio culture of Fresno. He lives in a world of gangsters and punks, and he tries desperately to rise above his surroundings. Everywhere he goes there are people trying to prevent him from becoming anything better than the rest of them.

Eddie is 19 years old and he lives alone in a run-down apartment in a part of town that is scary even to him, even though he has lived there his entire life. Although Eddie had been taking classes at City College to learn about air conditioning repair, he has dropped out and does not have a real job. He makes money by painting address numbers on curbs in the wealthy part of town and by doing odd jobs for anyone who will pay him to work.

Eddie's best friend from school, Juan, has recently been killed, and so has Eddie's cousin, Jes's. Jes's' mother wants Eddie to avenge her son's death by finding and killing the murderer. Another friend of Jes's, Angel, wants Eddie to help avenge Jes's' death. Eddie does not know who killed Jes's, and even when he finds out who it might have been, Eddie does not want to kill anyone.

Eddie's mother lives a bus ride away from him and she is basically absent emotionally, mentally and physically. At one time, Eddie hopes she will help him get out of the barrio, but she forgets her promise to help. Instead of sending cash for a bus ticket, she sends him money for coffee.

Eddie performs several days worth of work for a man named Mr. Stiles. Mr. Stiles begins to trust Eddie and even allows him to use his truck one day to run errands. Unfortunately, while Eddie is out running errands, some neighborhood punks steal the truck and Mr. Stiles accuses Eddie of stealing it. In addition to keeping a look out for anyone who might suddenly want to kill him, Eddie is now also on the run from the police who he assumes are trying to find him to arrest him for the stolen vehicle.

Throughout the novel, Eddie faces run-ins with many of the gangster kids in his neighborhood whose lives are overcome by poverty and drugs. There are very few people who seem to rise above this lifestyle and even they are often disappointing once Eddie sees them for who they really are.

In the end, Eddie's desire to leave the barrio leads him to join the military, which will not only provide a way out of the barrio, but also allow him to become part of something with a guided purpose. Eddie believes he will be killed if he stays in Fresno, and he knows there must be something better out there for him. He needs something to believe in and something to be proud of. Joining the military, Eddie believes, will provide exactly what he needs and wants.





# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Eddie is the protagonist of *Buried Onions*, a coming of age story about a young man raised in the barrio culture of Fresno. He lives in a world of gangsters and punks, and he tries desperately to rise above his surroundings. Everywhere he goes there are people trying to prevent him from becoming anything better than the rest of them.

Eddie begins his story by describing the neighborhood where he lives in southeast Fresno. The neighborhood is run-down, and it's the kind of place where the "fences are sagging and the paint blistered on houses... Laundry wept from the lines, the faded flags of poor, ignorant, unemployable people... Some guys, all of them Mexican like [Eddie], worked on their cars" (2). Essentially, it is a poverty-stricken area, where most, if not all, of the residents are Mexican.

Eddie lists the many people in his life who are dead. His father, two uncles, a cousin, and his best friend are all dead. Eddie believes the students at the local college who are learning to be morticians will be the lucky ones. They will get good jobs, because there is never a shortage of death in this area.

A guy named Angel wants Eddie to help find out who killed Jes's, Eddie's cousin and a close friend of Angel. Angel is a local gangster who is about the same age as Eddie, who is 19 years old. Angel wants Eddie to help him so they can kill the guy who killed Jes's and even the score. Jes's' mother, Eddie's Aunt Dolores, also wants Eddie to find the guy to kill him and avenge her son's death. Aunt Dolores brings Eddie tortillas every day as a way of bribing him to see things her way. Eddie has no interest in finding the killer, because he believes the guy will die soon enough without someone specifically seeking him out of revenge.

Each morning, Eddie wakes up and rides his bike to the north part of Fresno where he works doing odd jobs for money. In this part of town, people are wealthy and their lawns are well groomed. Most of the people here are white—very few Mexicans live here. The job that Eddie does most of the time is paint address numbers on curbs, though he will do any odd job someone offers him to make some money. When he returns home at the end of the day, fresh, warm tortillas from his Aunt Dolores are waiting at his front door for him.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

The initial chapter of this *bildungsroman*, or coming of age novel, describes the setting of the novel, provides background information about the protagonist, and begins the conflicts that will be resolved throughout the novel.



The setting is a run-down area of a barrio in Fresno. A barrio is an inner-city neighborhood, an urban area, which is inhabited mainly by Hispanics or Latinos, and more specifically in this case, Mexicans. Death and violence are everywhere, and this has an ever-present affect on Eddie. He cannot get too attached to people, because everyone he cares about dies an untimely death. Because many people are killed each day over ridiculous issues, such as the color of their shoes, Eddie is constantly in fear of his life. When someone calls his name, he is often afraid to turn around to see who it is, afraid he'll be staring down the barrel of a pistol.

Relevant background information that is described in this chapter involves the deaths of Eddie's father, uncles, cousin, and best friend.. Logically, and looking at the patterns, Eddie's time in the barrio is limited. He fears every moment of the day will be his last. It is also important to the plot that Eddie's aunt and friend Angel want Eddie to find the person who killed Jes's, since Eddie will face a conflict within himself about whether to even get involved.



## Chapter 2

### Chapter 2 Summary

In this chapter, Eddie has returned to the north side of Fresno to follow up with a man named Mr. Stiles, who asked Eddie to help dig some holes and do some landscaping. Eddie awakes with excitement, as he looks forward to a day filled with work. He hurries to Mr. Stiles' home early in the day in order to get as much work done as possible.

After a few days of working for Mr. Stiles, Eddie begins to get comfortable and Mr. Stiles begins to trust him. Mr. Stiles needs some things taken to the dump, and he asks Eddie to make the trip for him. Eddie is very excited, because he will actually get to drive. He is ecstatic that Mr. Stiles trusts him enough to allow him to borrow the truck.

As Eddie is dropping off the items at the dump, he sees a small refrigerator that appears to be in excellent shape. He feels lucky to have spotted such a gem and he loads it into the truck before leaving. Before returning to Mr. Stiles' home, Eddie wants to drop off the refrigerator at his apartment. While he is inside his apartment, dropping off the refrigerator and cleaning himself up just a bit, the truck is stolen. Eddie walks outside just in the nick of time to see the truck driving away. He cannot see who the thieves are, but he is saddened that not only has the truck been stolen, but also his dignity.

Aunt Dolores shows up the same day to deliver fresh tortillas to Eddie, but this time, as she unwraps the warm tortillas to which Eddie has been greatly looking forward, there is also a handgun that Auntie offers Eddie. She insists that he take the tortillas and the gun, find the guy who killed her son, and shoot him dead as revenge. Dolores tells Eddie that Angel knows who the culprit is, and he will help Eddie kill the guy. Eddie tells his aunt that Angel is bad news and he refuses the gun and the tortillas. The chapter ends with Eddie saying that the "east was one large bruise that was slowly becoming the night" (34).

### Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter Two begins to develop the rising action for the novel's plot. Aunt Dolores is now pushing more assertively for Eddie to avenge her son's death, and Eddie clearly wants no part of such violence. Also, just as Eddie thinks things are going well for him for a change, the truck that belongs to Mr. Stiles gets stolen, and Eddie is to blame. Eddie believes that no matter how decent and well behaved he tries to be, no matter how "straight" he tries to be, it is really no use. Something always seems to happen to send him spiraling back downward as he ascends his current station in life.

Now the conflict that must be dealt with, at least for Eddie, is what to do about the truck. He could tell Mr. Stiles what happened, but Eddie believes that Mr. Stiles will be convinced that Eddie stole the truck himself. Eddie's decision to just hide from Mr. Stiles proves to be irresponsible, and in turn Eddie watches his back even more carefully

knowing that he will now be sought after by Mr. Stiles and the law. Eddie's symbolic escape mechanism, his bicycle, is still at Mr. Stiles' home. Not only has Eddie lost Mr. Stiles' truck, but he has also lost his only way out of the barrio.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Chapter Three leads Eddie back to Mr. Stiles' house where he leaves a note for Mr. Stiles and the keys to the stolen truck. In the note Eddie explains to Mr. Stiles that someone has stolen the truck, but Eddie does not know who has stolen it. As Eddie is in the north Fresno neighborhood, a kid on the tricycle who had previously accused Eddie of saying bad words spots Eddie. Someone calls the police, and Eddie has to hide and run out of the neighborhood so the police won't catch him. Everyone thinks he stole the truck.

Earlier, Angel had come to visit Eddie, wanting him to help find the guy who killed Jes's so that they can get revenge. Eddie wants nothing to do with the whole situation and tells Angel to leave when Angel shows him a gun that was given to him by Jes's' mother. It is the same gun that she had wrapped in tortillas earlier and offered to Eddie.

When Eddie returns home, his mother and Aunt Gloria arrive for an unexpected visit at Eddie's apartment. Eddie wants to pretend he is not home, so he does not answer the door, but his mother has a key. The two women enter and begin looking for coffee. They look at Eddie's apartment judgmentally, but they would be pleased to find coffee at least. Instead, they see that his place is a wreck and the cupboards are empty. They give him a burrito from a fast food restaurant and he devours it hungrily. While they are there, the ladies try to convince Eddie that he should try to date a girl named Norma, but Eddie is not interested. They tell him that she would be a good catch, because she only has one baby and the child's father is nowhere to be found.

While Eddie's mother and aunt are visiting him, the phone rings. Eddie wants to ignore the call, but his mother answers. It is a girl named Norma, but not the Norma from the previous discussion. Eddie says he knows tons of girls called Norma, and this one is the one who works at the cafeteria at City College who gave him a free sandwich earlier that day when he had gone to the school to sell back his textbooks.

Norma wants Eddie to go swimming at her house and Eddie is glad to leave his mother and aunt, who he calls "crazy ladies," so that he can get away from their judging eyes and strange ways. When Eddie leaves, his mother and Aunt Gloria are still at his apartment and as he leaves the apartment slamming the door he tells them to lock up when they leave.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

This chapter establishes the relationship between Eddie and his mother. She is older than most Mexican mothers he knows, because she is in her fifties. Because of her age one may assume that Eddie feels at least a little bit of respect for her, because she did not have a baby when she was a teenager like so many of the girls he knows. However,



the relationship Eddie has with his mother is very superficial. She shows up with no invitation, unannounced, and lets herself in his apartment. She does bring him food, though, and for this she expects him to enjoy her company. Her intention for coming to see Eddie seems to be that she just wants to convince him to find a girlfriend.

Although Eddie has no interest in dating at this time, mainly because he can barely survive just worrying about himself right now, he is delighted to go visit Norma who telephones at the end of the chapter. Norma seems to be a symbolic name, in that it sounds like the word, "normal." It would be normal for a young guy to have a girlfriend, and there are tons of "Normas" who Eddie knows. They are all the same, really though. They are all "normal." Eddie wants to be anything but normal, ordinary, average by the barrio's standards, and as a result, he will not date any of the girls he knows.

This chapter does very little to develop the plot of the novel. It seems to be an interjection, or a transitional chapter. One awaits the outcome of the situation with Mr. Stiles' truck, as well as the avenging of Jes's' death. Eddie has now been offered a gun twice, and twice he has rejected this symbol of violence.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

As the chapter opens, Eddie is swimming with Norma and kissing her. As they are making out, she mentions to him that Angel is the guy who killed Jes's. Eddie does not believe her at first, but then she tells him a story about how Angel was mad at Jes's for selling a car they stole together without sharing the profits. Eddie thinks about the story for a minute and gets angry, but he does not let his anger show. He tells Norma that he will not tell anyone she told him this information, but he quickly leaves her house. He returns home and wakes early the next day around 7 a.m.

Chapter Four brings Josy Dominguez to visit Eddie. Josy and Eddie had been friends all through school, and now Josy is in the Marines. He is on military leave and came back to Fresno to see Eddie before he leaves to go overseas. Josy takes a look around Eddie's apartment and when he sees that there is no food, he offers to take Eddie out for breakfast.

They go to Cuca's restaurant, where, as they are eating, a black man enters the cafe trying to sell onions to anyone who will pay three dollars for a sack. Josy tells the man that he will buy three sacks of onions. As Eddie and Josy leave the restaurant, they stop at the man's car to pick up the onions and see that the man has five children loaded up into the car. Josy buys the onions and gives the kids a pack of gum.

Eddie sees Mr. Stiles' truck across the street and tells Josy what happened. Josy wants to help get the truck back, so he tells Eddie to call Mr. Stiles. When Eddie returns from the payphone, though, Josy is laying on the ground in a pool of blood. He was stabbed in a confrontation with the thieves who ran away immediately.

Josy is taken to the hospital immediately and Eddie goes to visit him the following day. As Eddie is visiting Josy at the hospital, Josy's family blames Eddie for what happened. Eddie also blames himself and feels guilty that his friend has been injured.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Josy enters Eddie's life and brings with him a sense of hope for Eddie. Eddie begins to think that if Josy can make it out of Fresno, then perhaps he can too. Eddie's hope begins to dwindle quickly, though, when Josy is stabbed for trying to get Mr. Stiles' stolen truck back. The truck scene in this chapter is significant because it seems to say that no matter where life takes a person, the barrio will always catch up and ruin the person's life.

Eddie begins to tire easily of his friend's macho combat stories, or so he says. All Eddie really wants is to have some stories of his own. He wants to get out of Fresno and to

have a good life for himself. Josy's return to the barrio symbolizes a way out for Eddie, but his stabbing wounds Eddie's hope, which may be difficult to heal.





# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

As Chapter Five opens, Eddie says, "I wanted to sprint straight into the future, but I kept going in circles. With a dirty face and hands curled into fists, I went back to Holmes playground" (69). Holmes playground is a playground where local gangsters hang out, the younger kids sniff glue from paper bags to get high, and most of the kids are always looking for trouble. Eddie goes here looking for Angel, but instead finds Samuel and a few other younger boys who want to make trouble with Eddie. Eddie also sees Coach, who requests Eddie's assistance with painting the lines on the field for that night's softball game.

While Eddie is doing the lines for Coach, Samuel and some of his friends start kicking the lines and messing them up. Then they flash knives at Eddie as if to threaten him. Eddie leaves the playground without finishing the lines, and, when he realizes that the "little punks" (72) are waiting to fight with him, Eddie begins running through people's backyards towards his godmother's house.

When Eddie gets to his godmother's house, he calls his mother and asks her to send him \$20 for bus fare so he can go see her and get out of this neighborhood. She says she will send the money in a few days, but Eddie is not hopeful. Eddie's godmother is very sad and asks Eddie to go with her to the SPCA to have her dog, Queenie, put to sleep. He agrees to help with the dog and when they arrive at the SPCA, she gives Eddie a twenty-dollar bill to give to the SPCA as a donation. When the time comes to make the donation, however, Eddie keeps \$10 for himself.

Eddie returns to the city with his godmother, who feeds him sandwiches and milk for lunch, and then he goes to see Lupe, Samuel's brother. Lupe is very mad that Samuel pulled a knife on his friend, and he scolds Samuel for doing so. Eddie and Lupe chat for a while, then go to the hospital together to see Josy. When they get to the hospital, Angel is already there. As Eddie is leaving after his visit with his injured friend, he is certain that Angel will follow him to try to shoot him or hurt him. Eddie waits and hides outside the hospital for over an hour, but then he realizes that Angel must have snuck out the back door—the back door where the dead bodies leave from.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Eddie comes face to face with his past in this chapter. In the kids at the playground, Eddie sees his younger self, the kid who used to sit around sniffing glue and other inhalants to get high. He realizes how stupid he must have looked, just as Samuel and his friends now seem so stupid to Eddie.

The last scene of this chapter foreshadows the heightened conflict with Angel to which Eddie is coming nearer. Eddie is convinced that Angel will be trying to kill him, and is



fearful of when or how Angel will try to get him; however, Angel does not even follow Eddie out of the hospital. Angel, most likely, has not even given a second thought to Eddie's presence at the hospital.

The events revolving around Queenie reveal an important aspect of Eddie's characterization. Although Eddie is very poor and practically starving, he does have a conscience. He feels tremendously guilty for having kept \$10 from the money that was supposed to be donated to the SPCA. Although he has not been given explicit instructions to donate the entire twenty dollars, Eddie knows this was the intention of the cash in his hands. Had Eddie any income, a job, or some other source of cash, he never would have kept the money. Eddie is a sympathetic character, though, and it is difficult to brand him a thief based on this occurrence at the SPCA.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

As Chapter Six opens, Eddie is visiting Coach, because he needs someone to talk to. He feels hopeless and needs guidance. Eddie says that some people in this situation would have "gone to a priest, some priest with pleats of wisdom on his brow" (87). Eddie gives Coach his entire life story and tells Coach about the incident with Mr. Stiles' truck. Coach makes a phone call to Mr. Stiles, who, after speaking with Coach decides to re-hire Eddie. While Coach is on the phone with Mr. Stiles, Samuel and the other punks try to start a fight with Eddie. Coach chases them off and then talks to Eddie about joining the military.

After Eddie leaves from his visit with Coach, he goes home to put on clean clothes and then goes to see the Navy recruiter in Fresno. Eddie is unimpressed by the recruiter and finds it hilarious when the recruiter tells him that a person does not need to know how to swim in order to be in the Navy. While Eddie is in the recruitment office, a guy he knew in high school also enters the office. His name is Larry, and Eddie only remembers that he was "a real stoner, a heavy-metal freak" (98). Eddie is "depressed at the thought [of being] in the same place in life" (98) as Larry.

The next day, Eddie goes to Mr. Stiles' house to work for him. While Eddie is working on Mr. Stiles' landscaping, police officers jump out of the garage and arrest Eddie. Although Mr. Stiles somewhat believes that Eddie did not steal the truck, he needs to be certain. Also, the truck was used in a robbery, during which an old man was brutally beaten.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter is important to the plot, because for the very first time, Eddie gets a glimpse of a way out of the barrio. He will be satisfied to return to work for Mr. Stiles, but he also goes to meet the Navy recruiter. Although the trip to the recruitment office and the return to Mr. Stiles both seem to fall through for Eddie, at least both events provide some glimmer or hope. At least he has some chance of getting out of his dire situation.

Essentially, in this chapter, Eddie comes face-to-face with his two options. He can either go back to painting addresses and doing odd jobs in north Fresno, or he can join the military. He starts to see these as his only two real choices. When he gets arrested at Mr. Stiles' house, though, Eddie is now left with only one viable alternative if he wants to get out of the barrio for good.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

When Eddie returns home from his ordeal with the police, he sees his bicycle and a note from Mr. Stiles. Mr. Stiles apologizes for the arrest and leaves \$10 for Eddie as a sort of consolation prize. Eddie uses the money to buy things like soda and ice cream, then spends two days in his apartment alone, feeling sorry for himself, eating ice cream, watching television and listening to the radio.

Eddie decides to get rid of all the cockroaches in the apartment, so he stomps on them until he is sure that no more cockroaches are alive in his apartment. He goes outside for about an hour and returns to find that the cockroaches have all returned, bent antennae included.

Soon thereafter, Josy and Coach show up at Eddie's apartment. They want him to accompany them on a fishing trip. Coach knows of a secret place where they will go fishing. Eddie is curious, though doubtful, about the secret place. Since he has nothing better to do, he agrees to go on the trip.

The three men enjoy their car ride out to the country, and Eddie is glad to get away from the barrio. However, when they arrive at their destination, Eddie is disappointed to see that this is the same place that Eddie and other high school kids had used as their make-out spot. This so-called secret place is no secret at all. As the chapter closes, they are at the end of their trip, driving back into the city.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

With the other escape options seeming to fall apart, Eddie is now faced with the possibility that he will be able to remain in the barrio while enjoying a location outside the barrio that can serve as a temporary escape. He is greatly disappointed to see that the secret place, which symbolizes freedom and tranquility for Coach, is nothing more than the local make-out spot. It's a dirty place, and somewhere that Eddie needs to stretch his imagination in order to enjoy. With this now third possible escape from the barrio proving to be another dead-end, one can predict that Eddie will turn to his only other somewhat viable option, the military.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

By the time Chapter Eight begins, Eddie has grown tired of living in fear of Angel. He decides to find Angel to "mess him up before he got [Eddie], a sort of Golden Rule for homies" (126). The chapter begins with Eddie imagining that someone is calling his name, but every time Eddie looks, no one is there. Even the creaking of the floorboards seems to make him nervous these days.

Eddie goes to Angel's house, but rather than approaching the front door, Eddie sneaks in through the back yard and attempts to ambush Angel. It just so happens that Samuel is at Angel's house at the same time, something Eddie had not counted on. Eddie gets a few good hits on Angel, accusing him of killing Jes's, which Angel vehemently denies. Samuel tries to help Angel, at the same time settling his own score with Eddie, by whacking Eddie from behind. Eddie puts Samuel into a chokehold and rams Samuel's head into a wall in the backyard. Samuel drops to the ground and does not get up. As Angel retreats into the house Eddie runs away as fast as he can, assuming Angel has gone to get a gun.

Eddie ends up at Josy's house and Josy's mother is upset that Eddie is there. Josy helps Eddie tend to his wounds and then the two of them go to the hospital together to get Josy's stitches removed. At the hospital, Eddie pretends to be a translator for Josy, telling people he doesn't speak English. This way Eddie does not have to leave his side.

Just as Eddie and Josy are leaving the hospital, Eddie sees Angel at the bottom of a stairwell. Angel has fresh stitches in a cut above his eye and Eddie is sure that Angel will shoot him on the spot unless he can somehow stop him. With full speed and full force, Eddie jumps Angel and the two of them tumble down the staircase beating each other with every ounce of passion left in them.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

In terms of the plot of the novel, Chapter Eight is clearly the climax. Not only does Eddie confront Angel at his house, but the two also meet in a second brawl outside the hospital. It is significant that the two fights occur in separate locations, because the first fight holds the odds against Eddie. Angel is the leader of a gang, and would most assuredly kill Eddie if he were to complete the battle. However, in a non-partisan location, such as the hospital, Eddie and Angel stand an equal chance of death or survival. At least in the hospital, there are people around who can break up the fight or take care of their injuries once the fight is over.

However, things just cannot possibly get any worse for Eddie. His dynamic character has undergone a major transition by this point. At the start of the novel, he would do anything at all to avoid being associated with the gangbanger lifestyle that Angel leads,

but he now embraces it to the point of seeking danger and looking for trouble. The only question left revolves around Eddie's escape. He must get away from the barrio if he is to survive, but it still is unclear how this conflict will be resolved.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

As Chapter Nine opens, Eddie is fleeing the brawl at the hospital trying to get home. Josy pulls up in his mother's car and offers Eddie a ride but he refuses. Eddie finally arrives home, where he keeps to himself and lets his wounds heal for two days. During this time, Lupe comes to Eddie's apartment with the intention of settling the score, angry that Eddie injured Samuel during the fight. Lupe makes all kinds of noise, even shattering one of Eddie's windows with his bear hands, but Eddie does not let Lupe in. Eddie's neighbor, Mrs. Rios, eventually chases Lupe away.

Eddie spends time allowing himself to heal and then seeks refuge at his godmother's house. He spends two weeks with her then leaves Fresno to join the Navy. Eddie gets a ride to the naval base in an old beat up van with other new recruits, but the vehicle breaks down in the middle of nowhere. While they wait for someone to come pick them up to take them the rest of the way, Eddie goes for a walk. He treks across an open field, where he happens upon the black man who sold onions at Cuca's restaurant. As the chapter closes, Eddie has an epiphany and realizes that he is no longer a child and that he will make it just fine as an adult.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

In this final chapter of the novel, the major conflict, that of Eddie's attempt to escape from the barrio, resolves itself. Eddie finds his escape by way of the military, as he joins the Navy. The final journey for Eddie is the road trip from Fresno to the naval base—it's a symbolic road. There is road kill, symbolic of the many friends and relatives who Eddie has lost during the journey to this point in his life. The van breaks down and overheats, which is symbolic of Eddie's anger erupting when he ambushed Angel. Finally, the last scene of the novel occurs in an onion field, a place that feels symbolic even to Eddie, who has always thought there were onions, bulbs of sadness, growing beneath the city. At this point, all the sadness has surfaced and Eddie can appropriately allow the sun to set on the sadness of his youth.



# Characters

## Eddie

Eddie is the protagonist of the novel. He is 19 years old and has lived his entire life in the barrio of Fresno. He is a person of good morals, claiming that he does not even curse because he believes it is wrong. There was a time in his life when he was younger when he "huffed," or sniffed things like glue and paint fumes to get high. He is not that kind of person anymore, though, and desires to rise above the slums he inherited.

Eddie lives in an apartment where his only roommates are cockroaches, and from time to time his mother or aunt visit him. He does not have a real job and he dropped out of City College where he had been attending classes to learn about air conditioning repair. In order to earn money, Eddie performs odd jobs on the wealthy north end of Fresno where people will pay for guys like Eddie to do dirty work and petty jobs.

## Coach

Coach works at Holmes Playground organizing softball games and maintaining the fields and basketball courts. He has known Eddie since Eddie was just a kid, and has seen him grow into a young man whom he is proud of. Coach represents the only male role model Eddie has had throughout his entire life, but even he does not give Eddie much hope for what life as a man in the barrio can become.

At one point in the novel, Coach tries to convince Eddie to join the Navy so he can get out of Fresno, but the plan backfires when Eddie is turned off by the recruiter who he meets at the recruitment office. After that, Coach takes Eddie and Josy to a secret creek out in the country to try to show them that there is more to living than what they can see in the barrio.

Coach also serves as a character witness as he tries to convince Mr. Stiles that Eddie did not and never would steal the truck. Coach spends a long time on the phone talking to Mr. Stiles, telling him what a great kid Eddie is, until Mr. Stiles finally agrees to hire Eddie to do more work for him.

## Mr. Stiles

Mr. Stiles lives in a wealthy neighborhood on the north side of Fresno where Eddie rides his bike to find odd jobs to earn money. Mr. Stiles hires Eddie to dig holes and plant trees and shrubs for him. He initially treats Eddie with respect, even calling him by name when he speaks to him. One day he allows Eddie to take his truck to make a run to the city dump, but on the way home from the dump Eddie stops at his own apartment to clean up and the truck is stolen while he is inside. Eddie does not return to work for Mr.





Stiles, but later Mr. Stiles leaves a note at Eddie's apartment saying all he wants is his truck back. Mr. Stiles believes that Eddie stole the truck. When Mr. Stiles tells Coach that he wants Eddie to come back to work more for him, it turns out to be a set-up and Mr. Stiles has Eddie arrested. Eddie is set free, but he realizes that Mr. Stiles never actually trusted him to begin with.

## **The Kid on the Tricycle**

While Eddie is planting a birch tree in Mr. Stiles' front yard, a young boy on a tricycle rides up to ask Eddie what he is doing. When Eddie tells the boy that he is planting a birch, the kid misunderstands and runs home to tell his mother that Eddie just said a dirty word to him. Following this incident the child's mother watches Eddie through the window of her house across the street to be sure that he is not doing anything illegal. Eddie thinks the kid will grow up to be a cop who will be judgmental and profile all of the Hispanic kids in Fresno as punks and gangsters, even if they turn out to be innocent.

## **The Man Selling Onions**

While Eddie and Josy are dining at Cuca's Restaurant, a black man enters the cafe selling onions for three dollars per sack. Josy buys three sacks of onions from the man, and when the man goes to get the onions from his car, Eddie sees that the man has five young children with him in a beat-up old car.

## **Norma**

While Norma seems to be a common name for girls Eddie's age in his neighborhood, there are three Normas who are mentioned. One is a cashier in the cafeteria at City College who is very nice to Eddie. Another is a girl at a cafe where Eddie stops to rest and hide from some punks. The third is a girl who Eddie's mother wants him to date and possibly to marry.

## **Eddie's Mother**

Eddie's mother lives a bus ride away and she does not provide for her son in any way whatsoever. Occasionally, she drops in to check up on him, but she seems oblivious to the rotten lifestyle that her son has chosen simply to get away from her. She gets upset when he has no coffee to offer her when she comes to visit, and she does not seem interested in having any real conversations with him.

## **Eddie's Aunt Dolores**

Dolores is Eddie's Aunt, his mother's sister, and the mother of Jes's, who was killed by a stranger for making a comment about the guy's shoes. Dolores wants Eddie to find the



man who killed her son, so she tries to bribe him by sending him homemade tortillas on a regular basis, until one day she actually gives Eddie a gun to do the job. Eddie refuses to accept the gun, and Dolores stops sending tortillas. Instead she starts sending tortillas to Angel, who takes the gun with the promise of avenging the death.

## **Josy**

Josy is a guy who Eddie has known since they were kids. The two of them used to play and sniff glue together at Holmes Playground. After high school, Josy joined the Marines, and returns to the barrio to say goodbye to Eddie, because Josy is being shipped overseas. While he is with Eddie, they see the man who stole Mr. Stiles' truck and Josy tells Eddie to go call Mr. Stiles. While Eddie is on the phone, Josy confronts the thief, who stabs him, leaving him severely wounded, hospitalized, and unable to leave right away for his overseas mission.

## **Angel**

Angel is a gangster kid from the barrio who often tries to recruit Eddie to help with crimes, such as theft, drug use or avenging the deaths of Juan and Jes's. At one point, Eddie is convinced that Angel killed one of his friends himself, and Eddie confronts him and fights him.

## **Samuel**

Samuel is another gangster kid, but he is younger than Eddie. He is the leader of a younger group of punks who try to make trouble with Eddie.

## **Lupe**

Lupe is Samuel's older brother, and is closer to Eddie's age. When Samuel starts giving Eddie a hard time, Eddie turns to Lupe to try to set Samuel straight.

## **Juan**

Juan is Eddie's best friend from high school. At the start of the novel, Juan is already dead, so he never actually appears in the text.

## **Belinda**

Belinda is Juan's sister who lives in the barrio and is close to Eddie's age. She is pregnant with her second baby, and her husband, Junior, is in prison. She has a tattoo of a teardrop on her face.



# Objects/Places

## Fresno

Fresno is the city where the novel takes place. The majority of the action occurs in the barrio where Eddie lives, which is the poverty-stricken, drug-infested part of town where he grew up. There is a part of Fresno, the north side, where residents are wealthy and Eddie rides his bike to each day looking for work.

## City College

This is the local technical college where Eddie enrolled in classes to learn air conditioning repair, but dropped out. Eddie thinks the mortuary students will be the most successful, because so many people die every day in Fresno due to the crime and drug problems.

## The Cafeteria

This is a place where Eddie can sometimes get free food because the cashier thinks he is cute and sneaks food to him.

## Cuca's Restaurant

Eddie dines here with Josy while Josy is visiting on military leave. They buy onions from a man while they are here, and afterward, Josy is stabbed when he confronts the truck thieves across the street from the restaurant.

## Mr. Stiles' Truck

Mr. Stiles allows Eddie to use his truck to run some things to the dump. While at the dump, Eddie finds a small refrigerator that he takes to his apartment. As Eddie goes into his apartment to drop off the refrigerator, some gangsters steal the truck. Later, Eddie and Josy confront the thieves and they stab Josy. The truck is returned to Mr. Stiles, but Mr. Stiles has Eddie arrested as part of an investigation for some crimes that the thieves used the truck to commit.

## North Side of Fresno

The north side of Fresno is the part of town where wealthy people live. It is safe and well kept-up. Eddie goes here to find odd jobs to make money. This is also where Mr. Stiles lives.



## The Hospital

Josy spends some time at the hospital after being stabbed. When he returns to the hospital to have his stitches removed Eddie goes with him, pretending to be Josy's translator so that Eddie can stay with him.

## Paint Cans

Eddie uses spray paint to paint numbers on curbs, but when Angel sees Eddie with the paint cans, he thinks that Eddie is using the paint for huffing.

## Eddie's Bike

Eddie rides his bike to the north side of Fresno, but he leaves it at Mr Stiles' house when Mr. Stiles' truck is stolen and Eddie decides not to go back. After the truth comes out that Eddie didn't steal the truck Mr. Stiles returns the bike alongwith some money and an apology note.

## Holmes Playground

This is the playground in the barrio where kids play, and where gangsters recruit new members. The kids play innocently until the punks won't leave them alone. Coach works here, and Samuel threatens Eddie here as well.

## Onions

Onions are a recurring motif throughout the book, and Eddie imagines that the air in Fresno smells like buried onions, symbols of the negative aspects of life that everyone has ever experienced and just pretended went away.

## Coach's Secret Creek

Coach takes Eddie and Josy to what he refers to as a secret creek to go fishing. Eddie is disappointed to learn that the secret creek is no secret at all, but rather the place where high school kids go to hang out, get drunk and make out.

## Queenie

Queenie is the dog of Eddie's godmother. The dog is old and in poor shape, so Eddie takes it to the SPCA to be euthanized. Eddie is supposed to make a donation of twenty dollars to the SPCA, but he keeps ten dollars for himself and buys groceries.



## Top Ramen

Top Ramen is the food that Eddie buys more than anything else. It is very cheap, likely one of the cheapest foods available in any market.

## Cockroaches

At the beginning of the novel, Eddie tries earnestly to get rid of the cockroaches in his apartment, but they keep coming back. Later, Eddie thinks of the cockroaches as his roommates. These insects are symbolic of the gangsters in the barrio. When Eddie tries to maintain that he is better than his surroundings, he tries to get rid of the bugs. At one point, though, Eddie succumbs to the barrio life and seeks trouble. At this point, the cockroaches are thought of as Eddie's only real friends.

# Setting

The setting is the Mexican-American community in Fresno, California. Surrounding the city are the great farms that feed much of the United States. In these dusty fields lies Eddie's heritage, for nearly everyone in the Mexican-American community Eddie has grown up in has ties to the fields. For those who have worked the fields, simply surviving is a struggle. This sun-drenched world of poverty and broken dreams provides few options. Although those in Eddie's community have escaped the fields, they find themselves limited by lack of opportunity in town. Nineteen-year-old Eddie, like his neighbors, knows of little outside the schools, playgrounds, and streets of his neighborhood. Eddie feels the confinement of his community all too well: "This was my barrio, the landscape I had known all my life. I had gotten in fights on this street and cut the lawn for a vieja who had long been gone. I even knew who laid down the CON SAFOS on the wall of the radiator shop."

Eddie's uncertainty reflects the lives he sees around him. Wherever he looks he sees chaos and pain. Eddie knows how closely lives are intertwined in the barrio: "We know each other, marry each other, and hurt each over small matters." Houses, streets, even dogs mirror the difficulties his neighbors face. Eddie's apartment is "in a part of Fresno where fences sagged and the paint blistered on houses.... Laundry wept from the lines, the faded flags of poor, ignorant, unemployable people.... Still the babies cried, and their crying stirred up our frustration because we were like those strollers going back and forth, back and forth, going nowhere."

As Eddie sees the poverty and violence haunting his neighborhood, he searches for role models. His is not a lonely existence.

He is surrounded by people "popping up out of nowhere, friends and enemies, aunts and grandparents, and little kids . . . taking in the messed-up world from their backyard fences." Yet, his relatives, friends, and neighbors provide more problems than answers. Eddie must ignore those, like his aunt, who coax him to use weapons to avenge his cousin's death.

Eddie's loud and dangerous world contrasts with the Anglo world across town that he visits to find work. There the people keep to themselves in insulated neighborhoods and take pride in possessing cars and homes and futures. Although Eddie would like for these Anglos to possess answers for living that he does not see in his own community, his visits across town reveal a world with no center of gravity, and little beauty.

"It's strip malls, the flash of car dealers with drooping flags, refrigerators lined up behind windows like robots, and off the main strip homes that are nicer, though their owners are plagued by the universal human worry: how to get money."

It is fitting that when Eddie finally escapes the limitations of his Fresno community by joining the Navy, his first stop is the open farmland outside of town where his parents and grandparents once worked.



There Eddie has an epiphany—a sudden, profound insight—while observing a migrant worker struggling to feed his family by collecting leftover onions culled from the fields. Eddie sees this worker's determination to survive and take care of his family. Overlooking the man's rumpled clothes and lack of possessions, Eddie sees the man as a brother who will do what he must to overcome awesome limitations.



# Social Sensitivity

Adolescents born into poverty must learn to deal with adversity from an early age.

Avoiding trouble is not just a matter of choices. For minority adolescents who live in low-income ghettos, difficulties often seem inevitable. Eddie and other adolescents must face the fact that the American Dream may be elusive. Following the rules, as Eddie learns, may not be enough. "I felt like a deflated inner tube hanging in a garage, black from depression, because I had done what people and the Bible told me to do: work. But that advice had failed me... . The working life was a scam. I could stencil every curb in Fresno from pagan Monday to holy Sunday.... But no matter how hard I tried to live a straight life, I could still mess up."

The difficulties of living with poverty affect everyone in the barrio. Because the street is the communal meeting ground, it is impossible to lead an isolated life. Adolescents who live in the barrio know the difficulties of others and learn early that failure and tragedy are part of everyday life. Eddie knows why his peers act as they do. When he is harassed by young hoodlums acting tough, he understands how they think. In his intimate neighborhood, he has watched his environment bend and shape children into sometimes frightening adults. He has seen childish innocence mutate into self-destructive behavior: "Angel wasn't stupid, just scary. He was good with figures and he'd been pretty smart until he got to fifth grade and started sniffing glue and spray paint."

With few opportunities available, adolescents living in poverty often face deadend futures. Eddie sees more failures than successes. To isolate himself from those who have failed, Eddie notes with disdain the job an acquaintance from his air-conditioning class at the community college has obtained: "Dumb as a dog, he had gotten a good job pasting tuna and plunking down a coin-shaped pickle slice and a bloodless tomato on three kinds of bread." Eddie knows at the present, his options are not much better.

Adolescents see that hatred and misunderstanding of others commonly appear in American culture. Where frustration exists, hatred and misunderstanding often go hand-in-hand with acts of violence. Eddie has grown up observing the gangsters who patrol the barrio looking for those who do not fit. With no jobs, and few options, gangsters band together to take out their frustration on others. Lashing out against others is a trap that even Eddie falls into. Reacting to his pain after his cousin is killed, Eddie beats a fellow student for little reason. Anger at the environment that produces death and chaos brings out the worst in Eddie: "I ground my shoes on top of his, and if he had struggled, I would have broken his neck right there."

When childish ideals and the wisdom of teachers and preachers are tested by newfound experience, the adolescent often feels that no positive truths can withstand the harshness of adult realities. In Eddie's Mexican-American community, the Catholic Christian doctrine serves as a fragile thread holding the social fabric together. For those, like Eddie, who are struggling, it is difficult to reconcile the hopeful message of Scripture





with the grim reality he faces. Eddie notes the crucifixes worn by gangsters, and the pervasive religious messages. Ironically, cousin Jesus has not been saved by the church. Eddie reacts bitterly: "[Our] poor Savior with his head down and feeling not too good. They had lowered the boom on him centuries ago, and now everyone wanted a piece of the holy action." For Eddie and many other adolescents, patriotic and religious ideals contrast harshly with the values they see in play daily.

Knowing that hopes can be easily dashed, adolescents in difficult environments learn that painful scars accompany everyday experience. Observing how quickly their harsh environment ages the adults they live with, these adolescents come to associate the world of marriage with a treadmill of pain.

For adolescents like Eddie, marriage and the world of work too often start a cycle of children, poverty, and struggle. Eddie knows that even survivors, like his mother, pay the price: "My mom was in her fifties, an old mom considering that she was Mexican and most Mexican mothers I knew had their first kids when they were sixteen.

After my father died, she went from a young woman to a middle-aged woman to an old woman in a matter of months, it seemed."

In the barrio, there is no room for John Wayne-like machismo, or for the blustery swagger of action-adventure heroes. Adolescents like Eddie see the danger that accompanies young adults growing too quickly into gangster roles. The sheer volume of death belies the myth of immortality that accompanies cinema superheroes. Eddie sees how quickly machismo can degenerate into senseless violence when his friend, Jose, is knifed as they try to rescue Mr. Stiles's truck. Despite his broad frame, and his military training, Jose is brought to his knees by young ruffians with a knife. Jose, who was a model of success outside his community, is nearly killed by his environment. "The blood seeped from his shoulder and near his waist. His eyes had collected tears and they were ready to race down his face. I don't know if they were tears of pain or tears of embarrassment from getting knifed by thirteen-year-old changos."

Adolescents living in the prisonlike grip of poverty often look to the world outside their neighborhoods for help. Unfortunately, too often, the representatives they meet most often from the outside world are policemen and other authority figures. In Eddie's world, these visitors bring racism and stereotypical attitudes with them: "A cop's cruiser stopped at the end of the alley, stopped and eyed us, its windows glinting with leftover evening light.... Behind those sunglasses I knew he was staring at our brown asses. He hated us because we were messing up the world." Eddie and his peers know all too well how they are perceived by their more affluent neighbors: "A car drove by, filled with people on their way to church. They glared at me, all of them probably thinking: That homeboy is going to break into our house!"

The lack of communication between Anglo and Mexican-American neighborhoods makes Eddie aware of the challenges he faces. Living in the barrio, he knows the persistent challenges posed by poverty. Yet, Eddie would not trade places with the more wealthy Anglos across town, and forsake his Mexican-American heritage. In the barrio,



which Eddie knows well, the human frailties which outsiders see as flaws are merely how residents cope with adversity. As survivors, barrio residents learn early to nurture their fragile strengths: "Bad as things are, could be, we never commit suicide like the gavachos who can't take it. We live to the end, even if the end is when you are nineteen and crumbling on a dirty floor."

In order to survive in the barrio, adolescents must deal with complex truths that transcend simple judgements of good/bad, right/wrong. Eddie's struggles to understand Mr. Stiles reveal his coming to grips with complex adult truths. Throughout the story, Eddie admires the sense of order which Mr. Stiles works hard to cultivate. To Eddie, Mr. Stiles's manicured lawn represents security and calm that can combat the chaos he sees daily in the barrio. Yet, while working on the lawn, he experiences racism and class bigotry. After he has rescued Mr. Stiles's truck from thieves, he discovers the blindness of class loyalty racism when he returns to Mr. Stiles's home. Ignoring Eddie's work habits, Mr. Stiles turns Eddie into the police, eagerly believing Eddie is capable of brutally "beating . . . an old man in a Laundromat." Despite this lack of trust, in the days following his arrest, Eddie is understanding of the frailties of adult decisions. "In those two days I wavered between hate for Mr. Stiles to something like love for him because he was the kind of guy who was putting together a life for his family."

Ultimately Eddie discovers that the "easy" alliances of childhood often dissolve with age. As a child, being on a baseball team, or in the same class in school, or attending the same church, seemed a bond that would last forever. But nearing adulthood, Eddie found himself forming new allegiances that pushed beyond family or neighborhood connections. New ties to "brotherhood" are discovered when he leaves the viselike grip of the barrio. Passively, almost in defeat, he hops on the Navy van to go off to basic training. When the van stops in the middle of open farmland outside of town Eddie observes his fellow enlistees: "Two of the dudes took off their shirts and tossed them on their heads. Larry the stoner did the same. I was surprised that he had a couple of wounds, knife scars, on a pale body." In the open air, far from the ominous barrio environment, Eddie looks beyond race and class distinctions, and finds kinship with all those young men who have been scarred by experience: "All of us could have taken off our shirts and shown our wounds, each pink and velvety to the touch."

Eddie also realizes his closeness to those who struggle on, never admitting defeat.

As Eddie walks further in the fields, he sees someone he has known from the streets of Fresno. Once before Eddie has noted the pathetic man struggling to feed his family by selling culled onions from the fields.

Earlier, with Jose, Eddie had noted the misery in the man's life: "He headed toward a car holding five children, two in the front and three in the back. The car, a huge Buick Electra, was a standard RV of poverty....

The upholstery was throwing up its guts."

Now, away from the city, Eddie sees a man who has struggled, and has used the resources available to survive and keep going. This man, like Eddie, will get sustenance when and where he can, fighting to take care of those he loves. Poised to enter new worlds away from the barrio he has known since childhood, Eddie knows he too must look forward, and keep working, and survive.



## Literary Qualities

Soto writes straightforward, action-filled novels with adolescent protagonists who are streetwise. In *Buried Onions*, Soto's spare prose is full of place names, and adolescent slang dialogue. Although much happens to these characters, the heart of the novel is Eddie's thoughtful reflections on his experiences. Eddie's interior monologues reveal his emotions, his choices. *Buried Onions* depicts an adolescent carefully observing his world forced to act before he knows where he is going.

Soto, as a poet, is adept at using concrete language to show his characters and their world. Soto tells interviewer Hector Avalos Torres, "I would rather show and not tell about certain levels of poverty, of childhood: I made a conscious effort to not tell anything, but just present the stories and let the reader come up with assumptions."

Soto's characters exist in a crowd. They bang up against each other, fight, and love.

Eddie remains unsentimental in his observations. As an adolescent he must go on, gathering his scars. Soto lets his characters' actions carry his messages. Eddie makes mistakes, and gives in to the lure of violence. Yet, as an adolescent, his future lies before him. Soto does not hide from the sordidness of the barrio, but he does not allow the problems to defeat his protagonist.



# Themes

## Barrio Culture

A barrio is an inner-city area with a mostly Latino or Hispanic population. The setting for this novel is the barrio in Fresno, a place where crime and drug use and abuse are rampant. Children are fatherless, and mothers are incompetent. Gangs form easily and shoot at will. Young men rarely make it out of the barrio uninjured. People get shot at or stabbed constantly, and there is no safe place to hide. Simply walking down the street can be a matter of taking one's life into one's hands.

Eddie grew up in this culture and he hates it. He believes there is something better for him somewhere else, though he does not know when or how he will ever get there. In this barrio, everyone knows everyone else's name, and that's not exactly a good thing. Every time Eddie hears someone call his name, he is afraid to look over his shoulder to see who it is, fearing that whoever it is might try to kill him.

Obviously, this is not a safe place to live, and the fear that Eddie feels each moment of his life is prevalent throughout the novel. Ironically, though, the same culture that has stifled Eddie's ambitions is the same culture that motivates him to escape. In the end, the only people who survive the barrio culture are those who leave it behind.

## Escapism

A theme that reveals itself throughout the novel is that of escapism. Because the barrio in Fresno is such an awful place to live, the residents of the area are constantly looking for ways to get out. Young men escape through drug abuse, and young women escape through sex. The young men end up dead or in prison, while the young women end up as young mothers on welfare with no help to raise their children. Thus continues the horrid cycle.

The one character of Eddie's generation who had almost escaped from the barrio returned to show his friend that there is a way out. However, even his brief return to Fresno proves dangerous, as he is stabbed and hospitalized while visiting.

Eddie makes a symbolic escape from the barrio each day that he travels to the north side of Fresno to work. He knows there is a better life that exists, but he also sees that once he enters that better lifestyle, people are very different from him. They do not look like him, act like him or trust him. They look at him as if he is a criminal, and they associate Eddie with the guilty culture that is the barrio.

In the end of the novel, Eddie finally escapes in a very real sense. He joins the military, and once he is out of Fresno he never looks back. He has already learned that the mere thought of saying goodbye to the barrio can prove to be deadly, and that's a chance he is just not willing to take.



## Role Models

There are very few positive role models in the barrio where Eddie lives. He has no father, and his mother is absent and barely in touch with reality. The few people to whom Eddie has looked up have been killed, so he has no one left whom he can respect. Left in a position of loneliness, Eddie begins searching for role models.

Eddie turns to Coach, who he has known for a very long time, but with whom he has not maintained close contact. In Coach, Eddie sees a man who could have made it out of the barrio. In fact, Coach served in the military and traveled the world. Eddie never understands exactly what makes Coach stay in this horrible place. Eddie never sees that he is part of Coach's motivation for staying. Coach believes that he is a role model for the young guys of the barrio, and he lives each day in hopes of making a difference to someone. Indeed, it is as a result of Coach's influence that Eddie finally finds the courage and strength to get out for good.

The other person who serves as a positive role model for Eddie is his friend, Josy, who joined the Marines. He comes back to visit Eddie and to brag about all the great things he gets to do as a Marine. He wears his uniform and hat with great pride and stands tall and proud knowing that he matters to something greater than himself. At first, Eddie is irritated by Josy's braggadocio. However, as the two spend more time together, and when Eddie sees Josy put himself in harm's way in order to get the stolen truck back to its rightful owner, Eddie realizes that Josy is a much better person than is typical in the barrio. In the end, Eddie follows in Josy's footsteps and leaves the barrio for good.



## Themes/Characters

In the barrio, the odds are stacked against adolescents. Even those, like Eddie, who fight against negative environmental influences, must face the reality that death comes easily for the young. Eddie sees clearly the consequences of his harsh environment at the beginning of *Buried Onions*.

I knew the mortuary students would get good jobs because my cousin had died recently and my father and two uncles were dead, all of them now with arms like the arms of praying mantises, crooked and thin as whispers. My best friend from high school was also dead, his head having been caught like bulk laundry in the giant rollers of a steel foundry.

The difficulties Eddie faces are not his alone. The heritage of struggle (first in the fields, and later in the city) feeds the curse he and his neighbors face. The central metaphor of *Buried Onions* is of a giant, buried onion which is the source of pain in the community. To Eddie, the onion infects both the present and the future: Soon the black asphalt would shimmer with vapors, which were not released by the sun's heat but by a huge onion buried under the city. This onion made us cry. ...

Perhaps as practice for the coming years. I thought about the giant onion, that remarkable bulb of sadness.

The problems Eddie deals with as he struggles to find work are embedded in the fabric of despair that permeates Fresno.

Caught in an empty materialistic community with few economic opportunities, Eddie sees no way out of his frustration. If the difficulties merely existed in the barrio, he could find his salvation across town in the Anglo suburbs. But Eddie discovers that even in the more prosperous neighborhoods, the cycle of despair is being renewed daily.

Despite Anglos' ability to cultivate security and material possessions, to Eddie the future they are busy creating remains warped and limiting: "They were going to plant shrubs and trees and, in mi loco imagination, they were going to bury their onion.

This way, they could cry out their sadness right on the front lawn. This way, they could say, 'I got my onion now, go get yours.'"

To fight his sense of stagnation, Eddie looks for role models on which to base his hopes for a healthy future. But Eddie finds few role models in the neighbors, family, and friends he has known since childhood.

His peers are too busy surviving to look beyond the demands of the present. Eddie views his generation in the barrio as "Dinosaurs. . . . That's who we are. Too old to run with gangs and too messed up to get good jobs." Everywhere he looks, he sees peers trying to bluff their way through a deadend world. When he is at his lowest point and



goes to enlist in the Navy, Eddie sees Larry, a stoner and heavy-metal freak he knew from high school: "I felt depressed at the thought he and I were in the same place in life—desperate to get out the easy way, the service."

For many in the barrio, even the traditional support of family fails to send positive messages. Like all adolescents, Eddie hears the messages of adults clamoring their expectations. But Eddie learns that in the barrio, even adult expectations can foster violence and more death: "The telephone was ringing. It was my aunt and she wanted revenge, too, wanted me to put someone away for good in a grave. It wasn't bad enough that we had to live through the vapors of buried onions and poor jobs. We needed dying."

Without a father, and without a network of supportive teachers, Eddie gets his help where he can. His childhood playground coach serves as advisor, father and older brother, caring for Eddie and his neighborhood cronies even while knowing their checkered history. "He'd known all of us glue sniffers—Angel, Lupe, dead Jesus, and me—since we were on bikes with training wheels. He'd known that most of us would mess up, some more than others. Still, it pained him." Eddie responds eagerly to Coach's positive expectations: "I did as I was told, wanting to live up to Coach's description of me as a dude who followed orders."

Eddie soon discovers that most people outside his immediate community seem to believe he will mess up in the future. Those he should trust, who are employed to help and protect him, teachers and policemen, treat Eddie and his peers as potential criminals who cannot be trusted. The prejudices Eddie discovers in the Anglo community are deep seated and intimately linked to class loyalties. Eddie discovers racism and class prejudice the hard way. Even after Coach assures Mr. Stiles that Eddie was innocent of stealing his truck, Mr. Stiles calls the police when Eddie appears at his house. Despite Mr. Stiles' positive experiences with Eddie, he assumes that Eddie may be guilty of brutally beating an old man.

Despite being arrested, and harassed by the police, Eddie fights on, both against these racist attitudes and the negative influences of his environment. He has learned that in a world with no support, those in the barrio must persevere despite adversity.

Somewhere, Eddie knows, is a world where kids are not allowed to fail. But in his world no one can rely upon a network of support, and even the best are damaged.

Any community, he recognizes, has an energy, a set of rules, which may over time help perpetuate the already existing chaos.

Eddie soon finds himself blindly reacting to his difficulties in the familiar ways he sees daily in his community. Although he resists his aunt's attempts to draw him into violence, Eddie finds himself fighting his old friend, Angel, whom he suspects of being involved in his cousin's death. Even in the midst of battle, Eddie suspects that no one really knows who caused the killing. Yet, in an environment filled with middle-school kids sniffing glue, gangs, and drive-by shootings, Eddie discovers that frustration and violence go





hand-in-hand with the lack of opportunity: "As I lay on the floor, I thought about my cousin Jesus's stabbing. Maybe Angel hadn't killed him after all. Maybe it was chisme, just something for Norma to say. . . . In Fresno, with nothing to do, people spread rumors like everything, and before you knew it, you were the topic."

Faced with little information about how to act, and few options, adolescents often simply try to run away from problems.

Running is the only option, going with the only opportunities that exist. Eddie is no stranger to running from adversity. "I had run from the police a couple of times and from all sorts of cholitos in junior high. I had run from teachers, angry neighbors, and even my mom when her temper flared." If he stays he will face more feuds, more dead ends. After the police release him from custody, he finds himself running from Angel. He is beginning to realize he may have to run completely out of his community to escape his problems. If he stays, he will face more feuds, more suspicion and violence.

He is tired. "I was a regular Speedy Gonzalez.... I wanted to sit still, to keep from always running."

But Eddie, like most adolescents must make choices about where he lives. Although he would prefer to stay in this community that he knows so well, he knows that if he stays he will be scarred by his dangerous world. His community, which threatens to consume him with its violence, has become a prison. Like all adolescents, Eddie must be pragmatic and take the choices that are available. "I figured that Angel would be healing at the same time and would soon be after me. He had my aunt's gun and the next time he would use it. I had to leave." Eddie reluctantly faces his only remaining opportunity, the military, which is seen more as an option for the future than an ambition.

Even as he is caught up in the world of machismo, Eddie knows it only promises death and pain. "All my life everyone was pulling away from me—Father, my mom, Jesus, school friends, and homies who disappear in three lines of the obituary column. I could have cried under the heat of Fresno, but it wouldn't have mattered. My tears would have evaporated before anyone saw my sadness."

Only as he leaves the world he knows does he recognize how closely he is tied to the land, the heritage. When the Navy van breaks down outside of Fresno, Eddie walks to a nearby field and sees a black onion worker. He has trudged over acres of buried onions. Eddie feels a buried history in those who work the fields. They have struggled and endured. These workers were "his brothers." "I hunched down, my hands to my face to hide the shame that had brought me to this field. I saw Jesus on the ground, then Angel over him. I saw my palms bloodred from all the city wars—those in the past, those now, and those to come when every homie would raise a fist to his brother.... [My] eyes filled and then closed on the last of childhood tears."



# Style

## Point of View

*Buried Onions* is told from the point of view of a nineteen-year-old Hispanic boy who has lived in a barrio in Fresno his entire life. He has a depressing view of the world, because everywhere he goes he sees sadness and despair. He watches as friends he has known forever turn to drugs and getting stoned everyday. He sees his friends and family members killed shamelessly by perfect strangers for unexplainable reasons. Eddie tells the story of his escape from the barrio in the present tense, using a limited first person point of view. Many things that happen around him confuse him, and he says as much. When Eddie hears rumors, he does not know the truth nor is he ever able to find out the truth.

Just as Eddie is unsure whether he will ever make it out of the barrio, so too is the reader left wondering if he will ever escape. Because the book is told from the first person point of view, right up until the end of the book, the very last page of the very last chapter, the mystery is not solved. Indeed, Eddie does find a way out of the living hell of his childhood, and the reader is able to breathe a sigh of relief with Eddie.

## Setting

The setting for the novel is the barrio in Fresno where Eddie lives. A barrio is essentially a ghetto, in that it is a place where residents live in poverty, drug abuse is rampant and gunshots are heard often. The streets of the barrio are so unsafe that each time Eddie hears someone call his name, he is terrified to look over his shoulder to see who is calling him. It could be a friend, a cop, or just some punk waiting to shoot him as soon as he turns his head.

In contrast to the barrio is the north side of Fresno, where Eddie rides his bike each day in search of work. The north side is a place where, although he feels safe, Eddie feels inferior to everyone in the neighborhood. Here, Eddie knows that he is being judged and that residents peer out their windows to keep an eye on him. The north side of Fresno represents a better way of life to Eddie. He knows that a better life exists for some people somewhere, and he sees proof of it everyday. Unfortunately, Eddie has no idea how to get the better life he dreams of.

## Language and Meaning

The novel is told in a language that is easily relatable to adolescents and adults alike. Interspersed in the novel is occasional profanity and frequent use of Spanish words. The profanity makes the story realistic, because there is no doubt that anyone living in the conditions described in this barrio would frequently use curse words. Eddie says he



does not curse, though, and makes an effort to point this out as proof that he is better than his surroundings.

The Spanish language throughout reinforces the Hispanic culture from which the Fresno residents are derived. The novel includes a glossary in the back so the reader can understand the Spanish words. This language represents the history, heritage and ancestry of the people of Fresno. Their language is the only tie they have to their ancestry, as everything else about their present situation is purely American.

## Structure

The novel has a chronological and narrative structure. The reader follows Eddie through the events as they occur in his life. Although there are no significant instances of flashbacks or foreshadowing, there are numerous places where Eddie relates events that he recalls. The memories, however, are narrated as part of the present action.

This type of structure allows the reader to experience the action alongside Eddie. The frustration, despair and longing for a better life become more real as a result of the narrative structure. Had the author, Gary Soto, chosen some other style, for example, the text could have easily become detached from the characters and the reader. Instead, the structure accomplishes the feat of telling a coming of age story of a character while allowing the reader to "come of age" simultaneously.



## Quotes

"I knew mortuary students would get good jobs because my cousin had died recently and my father and two uncles were dead, all of them now with arms of praying mantises, crooked and thin as whispers. My best friend from high school was also dead, his head having caught like bulk laundry in the giant rollers of the steel foundry. It was his first good job, and his last." Chapter 1, page 1

"The sun was climbing over the trees of City College and soon the black asphalt would shimmer with vapors. I had a theory about those vapors, which were not released by the sun's heat but by a huge onion buried under the city. This onion made us cry. Tears leapt from our eyelashes and stained our faces. Babies in strollers pinched up their faces and wailed for no reason. Perhaps as practice for the coming years. I thought about the giant onion, that remarkable bulb of sadness." Chapter 1, page 2

"I bought spray cans of black and white paint and stencils, and usually worked the north part of Fresno, where there seemed to be more money. The lawns were deep and very green, and the flower beds saluted with all kinds of fistlike flowers. Most of the people were white, not Mexican. Most people there keep to themselves, not like here, in my area of southeast Fresno. We sit on porches, our gaze following anyone who comes into our neighborhood. We know each other, marry each other, and hurt each other over small matters. Bas as things are, could be, we never commit suicide like the *gavachos* who can't take it. We live to the end, even if the end is when you are nineteen and crumbling on a dirty floor." Chapter 1, page 4

"I couldn't imagine a place where the sun didn't gnaw at my eyes, gnaw with its bright hunger so that every other minute my pupils had to adjust themselves. I closed my eyes for a brief second and wondered what this tree was doing in Fresno." Chapter 2, page 20

"I had messed up a lot in high school, messed up on beer and sometimes glue. But now I wanted God to come down and straighten me out with his golden pliers. I wanted a job like other people had, wanted to shake off homies like Angel and Lupe and the gangsters at Holmes Playground." Chapter 2, page 25

"The good life is one where you go to work, do an eight-hour shift, and return home to your family, where your kids are wild for you. After all, you're the daddy. Mountains rise from your shoulders, coins jingle in your pocket, and the food on the table is your doing. A good life is a long, busy evening of watching TV, where every third or fourth joke is actually funny. Maybe you throw down a beer, play checkers with your oldest kid, or kick back on the lawn when it's hot and all the dogs on the block have something to say to the moon. You don't care if the mosquitoes on your neck set their needle-thin heads into a vein. You want to share your blood, share because you're a young father and you got lots more where that came from." Chapter 3, page 35



"What did I know? The working life was a scam. I could stencil every curb in Fresno from pagan Monday to holy Sunday, tattoo them with numbers so that no one, drunk or sober, could ever get lost. But no matter how hard I tried to live a straight life, I could still mess up." Chapter 3, page 35

"The tyke on the trike was coming up the sidewalk, his pinkish knees churning. He was a regular cop. If he'd had a handgun at his waist, he would have clipped me right there." Chapter 3, page 47

"My apartment was quiet as a shoe and just as smelly." Chapter 4, page 56

"Josy was stabbed. He was down on one knee, blood in the shape of the United States on the sidewalk. The winos and their dogs came over to see if they could help." Chapter 4, page 66

"I wanted to sprint straight into the future, but I kept going in circles." Chapter 5, page 69

"Angel would follow me... He was going to try to kill me, and it wouldn't be with a knife but with my auntie's gun. I hid near some parked cars, waiting for Angel to trip out. After nearly an hour, I realized that Angel, the devil of all *cholos*, had sneaked out the back, through the same door where the dead bodies passed on their way to the mortuary." Chapter 5, page 86

"The cop said I was wanted for the brutal beating of an old man in a Laundromat." Chapter 6, page 104

"The cruiser pulled away and when I peered out the window, I saw the kid on the trike racing along, trying to keep up." Chapter 6, page 104

"About an hour later when I entered my apartment, I was surprised to see that the cockroaches had returned. Their antennae were all bent, and some of their legs were crippled, but they were eager as ever. They were the same ones. At that point, I let the homies settle in." Chapter 7, page 110

"Coach had known most of us when we were knee-high gangsters with candy cigarettes hanging from our mouths. We whipped ourselves with Red Whips and sucker punched each other for gum and grimy quarters. We were playground kids. He knew our problems, which were his not long ago. He knew that we needed fresh air and distance from the little shop of horrors we created for ourselves." Chapter 7, page 111

"Junior was locked down in Vacaville, but if he found out that I was with his wife, even just talking to her while she rocked the stroller back and forth, quieting the little gangster swaddled in a blue blanket, he would arrange for his *carnales* to beat me good." Chapter 8, page 123

"In Fresno, people were always popping up out of nowhere, friends and enemies, aunts and grandparents, and little kids like this eating fruit and taking in the messed-up world from their backyard fences. The kid blinked his long eyelashes at me. He sized me up,



and almost correctly, too, because he asked if I was homeless like the people on television." Chapter 8, page 125

"That night, with no help from the mortuary students, I soaked myself in the bathtub and washed my body with a tenderness that amazed me." Chapter 9, page 141

"I saw my palms bloodied from all the city wars—those in the past, those now, and those to come when every homie would raise a fist to his brother. Without saying a word, the man raised me up and handed me onions, one for each hand. And whether it was from the sun or the whipping wind, my eyes filled and then closed on the last of childhood tears." Chapter 9, page 146



## Topics for Discussion

1. Is there hope for Eddie at the end? Where might he end up?
2. Discuss the portrayal of different classes and races in the novel.
3. What is the relationship between the buried onion Eddie imagines beneath the pavement and the heritage of farmworkers in communities like Fresno?
4. What can we infer about the prospects of the next generation by looking at the younger adolescents Eddie encounters?
5. Mr. Stiles hires Eddie, and then reluctantly turns him in to the police. How does Eddie view him? How do you interpret his actions?
6. Are Eddie's misfortunes merely bad luck?
7. Although Eddie is pursued by several young women, he largely disdains their advances. Why? How are women characters represented in the novel?
8. Is Eddie's decision to join the Navy a positive choice? How should we interpret his departure from Fresno?
9. What does Eddie realize when he meets the onion seller in the fields at the end of the book? How could this be seen as a sign of hope?



## Essay Topics

Explain the motif of buried onions that runs throughout the novel.

Discuss the multiple methods of escaping harsh realities that are used by various characters throughout the novel.

What does the incident with Queenie reveal about Eddie's true nature?

What does the military represent for the young men in the novel?

What does Belinda's baby symbolize to Belinda?

Discuss the importance of the stolen truck and what the incident reveals about Eddie's true nature.

Offer an explanation as to why Eddie refuses to become romantically involved with the girls he knows in Fresno.



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Describe the range of role models you see in your family and community.

Write about the hopes and dreams they foster.

2. Compare attitudes toward authority figures in your community to their prescribed mission. Describe incidents and experiences that either support or contradict this mission.

3. Write an oral history of an older member of your family. Ask this family member about work history, about adversities they faced. Try to discover how they survived these difficulties.

4. List several occupations and industries that are predominant in your community. By talking to family members, and conducting research, explore ways these occupations have influenced the community.

5. Write a screenplay for filming one or more scenes from *Buried Onions*. Discuss characters and actions you would emphasize or eliminate.

6. Taking a recent incident of youth violence as a starting place, analyze both the causes and effects of this violence on the community.

7. Within the last sixty years, the United States has shifted from a largely rural to a largely urban culture. Research the agricultural background of your community.

8. Trace the varieties of ethnic groups in your community. First, with peers, note the ethnic backgrounds of parents and grandparents. Then construct a time line of group immigration to this community (or country).

9. Write in depth about a Hispanic author, musician, artist, or a representative of popular culture that you admire.



## Further Study

Carton, Debbie. Review of *Buried Onions*.

Booklist 94 (November 15, 1997): 554. Argues that the unvarnished depiction of barrio life is valuable for adolescent readers.

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Hopf, Mary. Review of *Buried Onions*. *School Library Journal* 44 (January 1998): 114.

Focuses on Soto's poetic prose and powerful images.

Ross, Jean W. "Interview with Gary Soto."

*Contemporary Authors*. Volume 124. Edited by Hal May and Susan Trosky. Detroit: Gale, 1988, pp. 424-27. A revealing interview exploring Soto's development into a poet and novelist.

Soto, Gary. "The Effects of Knut Hamsun on a Fresno Boy." [http://www\\_docs/news/releases/info/07](http://www_docs/news/releases/info/07) (July 5, 1999). An excellent and entertaining essay depicting Soto's early development as a writer.

Soto, Gary. "Who Are Your Readers?" <http://garysoto.com/whatsup.html> (May 8, 1999). (To be published in *American Literary Heritage*.) A frank and lively essay exploring Soto's literary career.

Sutton, Roger. Review of *Buried Onions*.

*Horn Book* 74 (January/February 1998): 81. Emphasizes the need for more boys' books like *Buried Onions*.

Torres, Hector Avalos. "Gary Soto." In *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Volume 82: *Chicano Writers*. Edited by Francesco Lomeli and Carl Shirley. Detroit: Gale, 1989, pp. 246-52. An in-depth essay on Soto, including a lively interview.

## Related Titles

Soto has written about the MexicanAmerican experience in poetry, short stories, autobiographical stories, and novels.

His early autobiographical works detail his experiences living in poverty in the Fresno barrio. From *Baseball in April* to *Petty Crimes*, his short stories have given voices to a wide array of characters from the Mexican-American community. Young Adult novels like *Jessie* and *Buried Onions* connect a heritage of struggling as migrant workers to the hopes of present-day adolescents.

Throughout his poetry, short stories, and novels, Soto refuses to relinquish ties to those in the barrio. Although he is now successful, his writing and his volunteer efforts reveal his dedication to improve the lives of those who face poverty and despair.

Refusing to relinquish his ties to the barrio, Soto, through his writing, shows his eagerness to reach out to struggling children and adolescents. In *Buried Onions* and other novels, Soto illustrates the disintegration of a community in a world where violence and death haunt even the young. Taken as a whole, Soto's poetry, short stories, autobiographies, and novels reveal the unmistakable detailing of experience.



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