

# **Caramelo, or, Puro Cuento Study Guide**

**Caramelo, or, Puro Cuento by Sandra Cisneros**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Caramelo, or, Puro Cuento Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1-3.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 4-10.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 11-15.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 16.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Chapter's 17-20.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Part II Chapter 21-22.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 23-25.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 26-32.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 33-42.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 43-51.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 52-57.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 58-63.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 64-80.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 81-84.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 85 and 86.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">37</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">41</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">42</a>



## Plot Summary

Caramelo is the story of Celaya's life and family and the different stories that made her life the way it was. A story in her family can be completely false, true, or something in between. The point is that it doesn't matter whether the story is true or not, rather it matters what it adds to the family. If a story adds honor to the family, it is tossed around from person to person, ear to ear, even if it is false. If a true story that would only harm the family's name surfaces, the family does all it can to limit its audience, blaming others that weren't even involved and trying to keep it under wraps. The humor in all of this is that most of the family members know the truth behind every fabricated story, yet they spread the fake one as well solely for the excitement of having a great story to tell. The Mexican culture is all about putting your best foot forward, and this book is about showing not only the foot, but the motivation behind the first step.

Celaya uses different times in her life to show these steps, using her memory and the memories of her grandmother, against whom she has a hearty grudge. Throughout the book, the grudge is analyzed and Celaya finds that her grandmother does not hate her, rather she is jealous of her because her son, Inocencio, now has another female in his life that he loves more than his mother (his wife was never even in the competition). Thus the story unfolds about the struggles between the women in the family and their attempts to baby their men to keep them away from other women. The men do what they can to support their wives and mothers and enjoy the pettiness that unfolds simply to gain their attention.

As the story evolves, relationships become more complex, yet easier to understand because the different links are explained. We understand the love of mother and son, the bond between wife and husband, and even the resentment that exists in that same union. The reader realizes how hard it is for a weak and sentimental person to grow up in such a rough and tumble family and wants Celaya to have her own life, to be free from the madness. In the end, this is a tale of mothers and sons, and mothers and daughters and their interactions with other mothers in the complexity of large Mexican families. Thrown into the mix is the issue of class and race, which adds delightfully and sometimes disgustingly, to the drama. The moral of the story, however, is that despite how crazy family can be, how annoying, loud and intrusive, they will always be there, and it is better to glorify and respect those that truly love us by spreading positive stories and praise, than by demoralizing them and turning our back on them by telling the truth.



# Chapters 1-3

## Chapters 1-3 Summary

The story begins with the narrator staring at a picture above her father's bed. It is a picture of when they were little and in Acapulco. She is absent, and it introduces her feelings of being ignored in the family. The family always made an annual trip to Mexico to the Awful grandmother's house on Destiny street in Mexico City. The narrator remembers a given year when the entire extended family took the trip together at the grandmother's request. She said it was safer this way, because if anything happened to one of the brother's then another brother would see and they could help each other out along the way. It is Uncle Fat Face and his family, Uncle Baby, and his family, and her own Father, whom they all call el Tarzan, and his family. The three brother's all work together at a furniture company in Chicago, and they all quit to go down to Mexico, though they didn't tell their wives they were quitting.

Uncle Fat Face lives in Chicago on Taylor street in a tiny apartment near St. Francis church "of the Mexican's." He lives with his wife, Aunty Licha, and his three kids, Byron, Elvis and Aristotle. Uncle Baby and Aunty Ninfa are the ones that are best off. They have two girls named Amor and Paz. Their apartment is small but they have such huge furniture that is extremely elegant, too elegant for their house. It is so fancy at their house that Celaya doesn't like to visit, because they have to wear their good socks, and clean their feet before putting them on. Everyone explains that they have such nice things because she's Italian.

Celaya's house is small as well, and most of the things in their house are loaned items, meaning they are there until the furniture place her father works at needs them back. Usually they end up with anything that is left over, abandoned, or that is hanging out in the shop until it needs to be reupholstered and resold. She wonders what her father's customers would do or think if they knew they were sitting upon their furniture watching cartoons. Sometimes they get lucky and a customer will forget to pick up a piece and they get to keep it. That is how they got to keep father's favorite orange La-Z-Boy recliner, which is where Celaya sleeps at night.

## Chapters 1-3 Analysis

Celaya feels alone and unimportant and this is the beginning of the feelings she will express throughout the book. The narrator writes that the three brothers agreed to drive down to Mexico together at their mother's request. It obviously turns out to be a bad idea because she states that years later, everyone will forget whose idea it was and will blame everyone else. This is a sign that the trip will be bad, and drama is to come.

When the narrator states that they live near St. Francis church "of the Mexican's," she means that the church exists in an Mexican enclave of the city. Uncle Baby is married to



an Italian-American who is supposed to be very classy. The language that she speaks with makes it obvious that she is not from Italy, which she clears up right away. But to everyone else, she is almost royalty because her ancestors are from Europe. Celaya's house is filled with furniture that does not belong to them, but it makes them feel rich when they have it there. Having expensive furniture is a luxury that they could not afford, and having it temporarily is a pleasure that they enjoy. It puts them up to par with the other families, showing that they are probably monetarily worse off.



# Chapters 4-10

## Chapters 4-10 Summary

Getting into Mexico seems to take forever. Every year they cross the border, Celaya forgets how stark the differences are between the scenery in the U.S. and in Mexico, but her body always remembers. Celaya states that because she and her siblings are kids, they forget things, or people forget to tell them things, which is a way stories get altered. She has never forgotten the time when her hair was chopped off because her grandmother said it would help it grow back faster. Everyone ridiculed her, told her she was a chillona, or a cry-baby, and said she looked like a girl. This was the same time that her brother Rafa was left in Mexico to attend a military school, also at the suggestion of the Awful Grandmother. They finally arrive to the house and see the Awful Grandmother standing outside with her rebozo, a type of shawl, crisscrossed over her chest like a big X that marks the spot of their arrival.

There are seven children in Celaya's family and she is the only girl. With all of her siblings, plus her other cousins in the house, the Awful Grandmother usually just calls them al "Tu," or you, because that always gets somebody's attention. At first, the kids are shy and speak to one another in English, which is very rude. They always manage to upset their cousin Antonieta Araceli, and are reprimanded by their Aunt Light-Skin, who works as a high-class secretary. The kids get in trouble because they don't know how to respond to people. Instead of being very cordial, as is the Mexican way, they say "what" and are scolded by their grandmother. They make fun of Antonieta Araceli for her name, and she tells them she is named after a famous Cuban dancer who is beautiful because she is very blond and white.

There was a servant named Candelaria that worked with her mother in the house. They were both very dark and had very harsh Indian features. Celaya was very interested in the color of Candelaria's skin. She looked like burnt milk candy, and she had never seen that color before. Not even Candelaria's mother, Amparo the washerwoman, was the color of caramel like Candelaria. Celaya used to think that being white like Aunt Light-Skin was beautiful, but she thinks differently once she sees Candelaria. Celaya spends the day playing with Candelaria and is confronted by her cousin Antonieta Araceli later that day for playing with the Indian girl. She calls her dirty and says she doesn't wear any underwear. The kids have to investigate, and when they find out that she only wears a cloth wrapped around her beneath her skirt, they run away from her making fun of the oblivious girl. Her mother tells her can no longer play with Candelaria, nor is she allowed to hug her, take her gum, or even talk to her.

## Chapters 4-10 Analysis

Celaya states that she never knows where the truth ends and a story begins, meaning that the family is accustomed to telling stories that they try to pass off for the truth. This



statement foreshadows how the rest of the book will be, full of wonderful stories which nobody can ever tell what is true. The truth gets altered so many times that even though someone is just retelling the story the way they heard it, it could still be a simple story and not the real truth.

The kids feel weird talking in Spanish in Mexico, especially because their Spanish is not perfect. They get into trouble fairly quickly and upset their cousin and Aunt Light Skin, whose occupation is depicted very much like a high class hooker, though she is called a secretary. Her daughter is also very light and is named after a blonde Cuban dancer. Being blonde and light skinned in Mexico is a very big deal and is a symbol of class and better breeding. On the flip side, the servants are all Indian because they are cursed with their features. The servants are very dark and are not allowed to interact with the rest of the family. Celaya falls in love with the color of the washerwoman's daughter, Candelaria, but is later forbidden to talk to her because of the difference in class.



# Chapters 11-15

## Chapters 11-15 Summary

Celaya's father tells the Awful Grandmother that he wants to buy a silk rebozo for Celaya, and she tells him he is crazy for wanting to buy such a prized possession for a small girl. It is absurd because the rebozo is no longer used by the younger generations, especially if they are living in the U.S. where their culture is stripped. She then says that even if he is lucky enough to find one, he should just give it to Awful Grandmother because she knows the worth of a silk rebozo, and the little girl does not.

The Grandmother arranges for Inocencio's friends to come by the house to celebrate his birthday with him and to enjoy her mole, a complex spice and pork dish. Everyone was abnormally loud to Celaya, and they all joke at her expense, something not uncommon for any elder to do to a minor. When Celaya didn't want to eat her mole, the Grandmother started complaining about her, ridiculing her and making her feel worthless. The Grandfather catches wind of this maltreatment and extends his kindness, shooing the Grandmother away. He then gives the mole to the dog and later tells the Grandmother that Celaya ate all her food. When Celaya asks the Grandfather why he did this, he says that all he did was make the situation better with a little white lie. The two bond a bit and Celaya complains to her Grandfather that nobody likes her and nobody will trust her because she cannot keep a secret. The Grandfather tells her a few stories, then one about how he lost three ribs in a terrible battle. He exaggerates the terribleness of the battle, and later on we will see the true story behind his three missing ribs.

The following day, Celaya and her mother leave the house to walk around because Celaya's mother is sick of being around the Grandmother and Aunt Licha. She says they are always talking about her behind her back, and she cannot take it anymore. The two walk around, enjoy the diverse Mexico City smells and walk to the basilica. They then go to eat at a restaurant. Celaya stares at her mother and analyzes her throughout the day, though she doesn't know she is doing this. She watches how her mother stares off into nothing, not saying a word. She breaks little toothpicks into even smaller pieces until they cannot break anymore. Celaya stares at her mother and admires how beautiful she is in her sunglasses. She asks Celaya if she wants anything else and calls her Cinderella. This means her mother is in a good mood, so she orders another soda. Celaya is ecstatic that her mother is paying so much attention to her, talking to her, and taking her out for the morning. When they get back to the house, the first thing Celaya says to everyone is what a great time her and her mother had at a restaurant. Suddenly, everyone is quiet, then her mother is screaming. Celaya is alarmed at why everyone is so upset that she and her mother had such a great time. Then her mother threatens to leave, Father is trying to calm her down, and she throws a shoe at him. Celaya remembers it being dark, and the shoe being glass, even though she knows this is not the way it happened, but that is the way she has always told it.





## Chapters 11-15 Analysis

The Grandmother takes special time out to insult Celaya at every opportunity. This is not customary, rather because she is jealous of her. She says that Celaya would never be capable of enjoying or appreciating a silk rebozo, not because she is young, but because she grew up in the States and is an uncultured Mexican-American girl. Later she further embarrasses her by getting her to sing in front of everyone, then quickly getting her to stop after it took her so long to muster the nerve to do as the Grandmother wished.

Little white lies are the bread and butter of this book. When the grandfather covers for Celaya by throwing away her food to the dog, he is setting a foundation for the rest of the family to do the same. They simply throw away the bits of truth that do not appeal to them and pretend the reaction to something came from a totally different action. The goal of this is really just to make a situation better, but it can and will get out of hand.

This section is the beginning of the conflict between Celaya's mother, Zoila, and the Grandmother. When Celaya goes out with her mother, it is one of the best times she's ever had with her. This is because she never goes anywhere with her mother alone. She has always had to share her with her brothers and other family members, and being the youngest she has never had quality time with her mom. Suddenly her best moment is ruined by the grandmother who is offended by Zoila going to eat in a restaurant. It is an offense to her cooking and everyone is upset with Zoila, especially for "making" Celaya go with her. She has single handedly shamed several people in the family solely for wanting to take a break from them. Celaya is in trouble because she is the one that exposed the secret she didn't even know she was supposed to keep, which she wouldn't have been able to keep anyway.



# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

This chapter begins with the Grandmother on a rant of complaints that she does daily with her family. She swears she would rather have family here and have the trouble of cleaning and cooking and watching children etc. Yet she is tired, she is only made of flesh and bones and cannot handle it all on her own. She ends by telling Inocencio that family always comes first and that he is never to forget that. She complains even more once her two younger sons leave and her helper, Oralia threatens to quit. The Grandmother swears that she will find help for Oralia, but in the end she cannot trust anyone and tells Amparo, the washerwoman, to just have her daughter, Candelaria help. The Grandmother tells Candelaria that it is only temporary and to not get too used to living the higher life. She tells her she has to bathe everyday and keep her hair neat, since they do not live in a ranch.

Zoila complains to Inocencio that she wants to go somewhere and get out of living rooms. Every time they go anywhere all they do is go from one living room to the next and never go anywhere worth while. Inocencio agrees to take the entire family to Acapulco, and at the very last second, the grandmother invites herself, and brings along Candelaria, who inevitably gets left behind and is seen on television back home after their trip. When her mother goes to get Candelaria, she tells the Grandmother that she will remove her from the house, especially since she is already of age and it is not wise to have her away from her house.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

The Grandmother is very pushy and intrudes on the trip that Mother and Father were supposed to take alone. In the end it is the entire family, plus Grandmother and Candelaria since Candelaria can help with the children. It was never intended that Candelaria go to have fun, rather she is simply a servant. They leave her behind in the ocean town and when she is brought back, her mother removes her from the house because she does not want Candelaria to be sexually molested or abused, because she is of age for those things to happen. This means she is already menstruating and is developing from a girl to a woman. This assumes that sexual abuse is fairly common and rampant in the community and that she will be safer in her house where she has close family members to watch her. It also very subtly insinuates what will happen in the future of the story.



# Chapter's 17-20

## Chapter's 17-20 Summary

Father is recalling a story that the kids want to hear. He struggles to remember, with the kids begging to know more. When they get to Acapulco, they arrive at a boat-shaped house, which is owned by a woman named Catita. They get to the beach, and all wear big hats to protect their skin, except for Candelaria, who the Grandmother says is already too dark and burnt to merit protection from the sun. A wandering photographer takes a picture of the family, and the Grandmother insists that Father not pay the man in advance. Celaya is scared of the water, but Candelaria continues to beg her to get in.

When they find Candelaria she is sent home on a bus and not with the family. The family takes a small boat ride. A flower that Candelaria had made for Celaya falls into the water. Her father promises to get her a new one; her mother tells her to go away. The ride is over and the family leaves the deck all at once, except for Grandmother and Mother. The Grandmother mouths off, and Mother remains completely still. When the family gets back into the car, Celaya mentions her flower and asks her father to stop the car so they can all go look for it the way he promised. Mother laughs hysterically, then starts screaming at father. She gets out of the car, causing a scene. She runs as fast as she can away from the car, dodging street vendors and whistling men. Father goes after her pleading for her to relax and get back into the car. She tells him that she is not going back into the car and that they are through. Father is confused and embarrassed; all the brothers are nervous and the crowd around them observes as if it were a live soap opera. The Grandmother goes to them and tells her son to leave her behind, that she is unappreciative and spoiled. Mother calls her pushy, nosy, and a real intrusion in their lives. She calls her a bad name in Spanish that makes everyone gasp. The Grandmother finally tells her son that he must choose between his mother or his wife.

## Chapter's 17-20 Analysis

When Candelaria is playing in the water, Celaya notices something very familiar about her that will not be revealed until later in the story. It is a truth to a story she has yet to hear, and this moment is the defining moment, which will make her believe the story she hears in the future.

The Grandmother is obviously very prejudiced of the townspeople because of the color of their skin. She gawks at them, spits at them, and finds every opportunity to talk about the horrid Indians that surround them. She is even cruel to Candelaria, even though she knows her.

On the ship, Grandmother tells Mother something that upsets Mother. Though the information is not revealed until later in the story, it is something truly disturbing that can potentially break up Mother and Father's marriage. The Grandmother is so cruel and

jealous that she is willing to hurt everyone in the family just to have her some attention. The reader will not find out who he chooses until later in the story, but it is something that he has never done, and it is assumed that he has chosen someone else over his mother for the first time in his life.



## Part II Chapter 21-22

### Part II Chapter 21-22 Summary

The narrator shifts to talk about a time before she was born—a time when she was dirt and her Awful Grandmother and Little Grandfather were no more than Soledad and Narciso. Before the Awful Grandmother became awful, she was a little girl who lost her mother at an early age. She was born Soledad Reyes. Her parents were reboceros, or people who make Mexican shawls. Women across the republic paid good money to get their hands on one of the rebozos that Soledad's family made. Soledad's mother liked to experiment with the fringes of the rebozos and created one that nobody was able to replicate. One day she died without ever having finished it, and everyone agreed to leave it unfinished and not sell it. It was unfinished, just like her life. After Soledad's mother died, her father, Ambrosio remarried quickly and sent his daughter away to live with her aunt. Her aunt had too many kids to count that ran around literally like wild animals. They were naked, dirty, abusive, and when they got old enough were downright criminal in their actions. All Soledad had in the world was her mother's unfinished black rebozo, two dresses, and a pair of badly made shoes. Her mother was dead, and her father might as well have been because he forgot all about her.

Soledad's Aunt Fina is not a cruel person. On the contrary she is very sweet and has a big heart. Her children are allowed to do what they please because she remembers how hard and structured her own life had been, and she wants them to be able to enjoy life. She had such a big heart she accepted Soledad right away and only asked that she help her with the children's care. Soledad did not like her cousins; there were so many she thought there might be twelve, but Aunt Fina couldn't even keep count. They all had the same fat ass and little eyes so it was hard to tell them apart. Aunt Fina thought maybe she had between sixteen and eighteen, though she said that only God knows for certain how many there are. She explains that some of her children were stillborn,; some died before they were a few months old, and some of them just disappeared. Once she even got a postcard from a son of hers who was in Havana, so after all the years that have gone by, she has lost count.

The city of Mexico, which is also known as the City of the Palaces or the Paris of the New World is a wonderful city. It is the time just before the revolution and though there is political tension, things are calm. For Soledad, however, she was very busy helping Aunt Fina with the laundry, since she was a laundress, and helping with the kids. What with chores, the children, and hiding from her Uncle Pio's "funny ways" she had little time to pity her situation. One day she said a little prayer "San Martin de Caballero, trae al hombre que yo quiero" which means San Martin de Caballero, bring me the man that I love. And Soledad vowed that the next man she saw would be her husband. To her surprise up came a man from the street in a military cadet uniform. It was her cousin Narciso Reyes and she knew he would be it.



## Part II Chapter 21-22 Analysis

Senora Regina is a very loving mother, but she is cautious of her only son. Bringing Soledad into the house will be a challenge that the family will have to face because Narciso and Soledad will develop a romance later in the story. Senora Regina was kind to Soledad in materialistic terms, but she emotionally brought her down whenever she could by reminding her of how low class she was. It is ironic because Senora Regina is from the same class level of Soledad, but because she married Eleuterio Reyes, a full Spaniard, she had purified her family and thus became Spanish herself in a way. When Narciso takes Soledad to marry her, he does not offer to give her a proper wedding, rather he "steals" her. This insinuates that there is another reason he marries her, rather than simply being in love with her.



# Chapter 23-25

## Chapter 23-25 Summary

A man should be "feo, fuerte, y formal" or ugly, strong, and proper. Narciso Reyes was all of these things, except he was not ugly. Soledad knew that it was her destiny to fall in love with him, and she knew before he even knew. His eyes were the most striking of all, and she loves all of the little moles and freckles all over his face. When she met him, she accidentally calls him papa, then switches the accent to the first syllable which changes the word from father to potato. She was absolutely embarrassed. She thought about her name and his and knew that they were related, but they were cousins of cousins, or related the way a llama and a camel are related. Reyes is a common name and not even Narciso thought he could be related to Aunt Fina and her progeny of wild children, so Soledad felt she was in the clear. Soledad began to eat the fringe of her rebozo.

Narciso thought she was a funny girl, and had a vain charm. He found her crying outside before he left; she was still embarrassed for calling him a potato, and he asks her what was wrong. Then he kisses her and they are both aware of their destiny to be together. Soledad tells Narciso her life story, and he feels obligated to take care of her. After all, he was a gentleman. After Narciso sets everything up with his mother, she is allowed to move into the Reyes del Castillo household with Narciso as a servant.

The Reyes del Castillo household was very close to the Zocalo, the main plaza. All the houses on the block were old mansions built for the conquistadors when Spain still ruled Mexico. However, years of neglect aged the buildings and their former brilliance could only be seen in a story. Narciso's mother, Senora Regina, felt obliged to take in Soledad because her son had made a promise to her. Senora Regina asks Soledad what she is good at and she tells her all of her many trades, including watching children, doing laundry, counting, and picking head lice. She knows just enough of everything, but Senora Regina interprets this as not knowing enough of anything. Senora Regina did not like Soledad only because she reminds her too much of her own humble, Indian roots. They are both Reyes, but not the regal Reyes that her husband is. Her husband is full Spanish, and she married him only because he got her pregnant.

Senora Regina makes up a cot for Soledad in the pantry off of the kitchen. It was a slap in the face because the house had many rooms that were all made up as if they were for royalty. Senora Regina had many rooms, but only one child. She kept up so many rooms because she was very fond of the appearance of being "gente adinerada" or people with money. Senora Regina was very kind yet outwardly rude to Soledad. She would give her many gifts but then remind Soledad of her humble roots. For instance Senora Regina would give Soledad a new pair of shoes then tell her that there was no need to thank her, that it was not her fault that Soledad grew up "wiping her ass with corn husks."



Class was a very important thing to Senora Regina. She learns how to behave in the upper middle class that she is in through years of watching and learning. Soledad knew that Narciso was very classy because of the way he ate, which is the determining factor in figuring out a person's class. Eating and the shoes a person wears showed class. Despite Soledad's lower class, Narciso saw something in her worth marrying and he "stole her" to be married.

## Chapter 23-25 Analysis

The narrator is using all of the stories she has heard throughout her lifetime to compile this part of the book. This part of the book is meant to explain why everyone's personality is the way it is. Already we see that the Awful Grandmother has reason to be so mean and cruel because she had such a cruel life, growing up without a mother or father and always having to watch herself to make sure she was not molested by the older men in the house.





# Chapters 26-32

## Chapters 26-32 Summary

This time period in Mexico was very impressive. The president was spending a fortune trying to make Mexico seem as if it was more civilized, or European, than it really was. The people remember all the golden statues and thousands of lights that were going up. There were fireworks every evening in 1910. This new Mexico was strong, proud and believed in patriotism, progress, industry and science. However, it was only the civilized people who knew any of these words that were written all over the city, because the majority of the citizens still could not read. By 1911, the revolution began and for the next ten years the city and republic was overwhelmed with violence. Nobody knew what was really going on, who was in charge, and soldiers went from serving the government to being rebels from one day to the next.

There is a time known as the Ten Tragic Days when the Reyes family was locked in their house. They were trapped like rats amid bombs going off in the distance and nearby, Eleuterio could not do anything to defend his family because he was merely a an artist, a piano player. Regina only knew about money and how to get it. This is all that mattered to her. Narciso was a boy cadet during this time. On his way home one day he was very nervous and all he could utter to make himself feel better was "Mama." There is something about a Mexican man's mother that gave pure comfort and joy. They are very devoted sons and their mothers are very devoted moms when it comes to their boys. Narciso saw a dying peasant on the street and thought he heard him utter Mama also. He continued on; then from out of nowhere a voice asks Narciso who he is and who he is with. Two soldiers come out of hiding and put Narciso up against a wall. They were about to kill him when the Captain came out and recognized Narciso as his friend's son. The soldiers let him go. Narciso runs home without anything that his mother had asked him to bring from in town. She snarls at him telling him he was worthless. However, he had run so fast and was so exhausted from the run and sheer fright of almost dying a few minutes prior that he could not catch his breath. He finally collapses onto the red tiles of the house.

The doctor tells Narciso that he has a collapsed lung and needs immediate surgery. When the operation is over, the doctors had removed three ribs and sent him home with a tiny hole in his chest that had to be cleaned and dressed daily. He could no longer bathe in warm water or go swimming. Senora Regina said that the real reason Narciso got sick was because of the fear that he endured from expecting a bullet to his chest.

Later on in Narciso's life, he brags about having lost three ribs in the battle at Celaya, even though it was a lie. The truth was he wasn't even in Mexico during that battle because he fled the nation to go to the United States. He went to Chicago and had forgotten all about the patriotic notions he was so passionate about, which were dying wrapped in a Mexican flag. He realized it was all pointless and he did not want any part



of it, especially since all his work as a cadet consisted of burning bodies that would never be wrapped in a flag.

He grew to hate the U.S. and his relatives there because of how vulgar and classless they were. He often wrote his mother telling her that it was a way of American life to forget about the civilized Mexican traits he had grown accustomed to. In the midst of his hate for the country, Narciso meets a black singer with whom he immediately falls in love. He writes a letter home to his father and tells him that the woman is half Cherokee and half black and that she is a real American wonder. As soon as his father read that she was part black he has a fit and says he would never allow such a marriage, forgetting that if his family in Spain saw how dark Regina was they would have never allowed her in the family either. The news kills Eleuterio, or so everyone thinks, and Narciso rushes home. His girlfriend ends up running away from him, joining a dance troupe in Paris instead.

Eleuterio suffered a "rage" when he heard the news that his son was dating a black woman. It caused him to have a cerebral embolism and declared dead. He was displayed in the living room for a few days, then as everyone was praying the rosary, someone notices that his eyelids were twitching. Everyone announces that he is alive and a doctor rushes over immediately. The doctor gets a stiff brush and rubbing alcohol and scrubs Eleuterio back to life, or so the story goes. His body regains its color and when he is pronounced alive again, everyone celebrates by passing around rompopo, an eggnog drink. However, he is only half alive, and only half of his body is really alive. It is hard for him to speak, and in the end it is only Soledad who can understand him.

When Narciso arrives back at his house, his mother takes one look at him and knows that she will have to replace the hole in his heart that his ex-girlfriend left behind. With a mother's love she can fix anything, she thinks. Soledad was now assigned to keeping Narciso clean, since he had forgotten how to be clean while living in Chicago. She acted as his nurse and even bathed him in a washbasin. Soledad brought up strange feelings in him, and he thinks about the first day he met her and when he kissed her. She had filled out a lot since they had met and then he kissed her the way a man kisses the woman he knows will mother his kids.

## Chapters 26-32 Analysis

When Narciso is walking home during the Ten Days of Tragedy, we learn more about his connection to his mother. A Mexican mother is very comforting to her son and is very devoted to him. However, by the way the author writes this, the reader sees that a mother is only really devoted to her sons and not her daughters. There is a special connection that does not go away, perhaps because a daughter can be competition to a mother because eventually she will be a mother, too, and if she is a better mother, the older mother may feel threatened. There is no competition between a mother and son; therefore, it is a more endearing relationship.



Narciso suffers a collapsed lung which his mother describes is simply fear from expecting a bullet to the chest. This is an example of the way Mexicans think. For every rational explanation, there is a surreal explanation that follows. Each surreal explanation has a wonderful story that makes it more believable, making reason fly out the window. Nobody really knew if Narciso really had a hole in his chest or not; medically speaking, it does not sound possible without some type of apparatus to keep the hole from closing. However, it helps the surreal story either way, because it is so far fetched, it makes the story that much better.



# Chapter 33-42

## Chapter 33-42 Summary

Soledad remembers people having told her to take care of herself now that she was turning into a young lady. She never knew what they meant until later in her life. She figured out that it meant to take care of herself down there and to keep her virginity. Everyone always had the same advice for her, yet nobody ever told her how to take care of herself down there. She thinks of this when she is allowing Narciso to take her. She cannot stop the flood of emotions she is feeling and cannot even dream of stopping the wonder that is happening between them. It was an overwhelming joy for her and she felt truly blessed.

The sexual education that women received back in those times was minimal. Society felt it necessary to explain very little, and the less said the better. Soledad loved Narciso, but he was really only using her for sex. Regina pretended not to see her son going in and out of Soledad's room, but his father puts his foot down the best he could and mumbled words of wisdom to his son. He told him that his behavior was worse than a dog's and not proper for a Reyes man. He then tells him that he had impregnated his mother, and his father sent him back to Mexico from Spain the second he knew that Regina was expecting Narciso.. He tells his son that he should make an honest woman out of Soledad and marry her, and he should never forget the conversation they just had. Narciso promises.

Soledad's belly begins to swell in the months that follow. Regina ignores her state, and this is when Eleuterio bursts out in his mumbled speech that they are not dogs and must stop treating Soledad so cruelly. She is pregnant by his son Narciso and she should not be serving a dinner. They marry soon after the fight. Once Soledad and Narciso are married, Narciso starts traveling a lot for his work. He meets a woman with whom he rapidly falls in love. She is a performer and not the proper woman that any mother or father would approve of, much like his love in the U.S. He has an affair with her while Soledad is pregnant with their baby boy. When Soledad finds out about the affair, she has no idea what to do. She does not know how to get him to love her, she is completely naïve, and now that she is so pregnant, she can't even use her awkward body to lure him.

She wanted her baby to be a boy and vowed that she would love the baby the way the Virgin Mary loved her little Jesus. When her baby was born, Narciso was not with her. Yet it does not matter

## Chapter 33-42 Analysis

All of this takes place before Narciso's embolism. The story switches back and forth to add depth to the characters and to show the parallel of what each has been taught and



what they have done with the advice and teachings of their elders. Narciso had been sleeping with Soledad before he left for the U.S., then again when he came home. When he impregnates her, he pretends not to notice, as does his mother. Finally, Eleuterio speaks out on behalf of Soledad. He had done the same thing to Regina. He had impregnated her and left but was forced by his father to do the right thing. Now he was asking the same thing of his own son. He had to step up and take care of the mess he had made. This is how he ends up marrying his own cousin, Soledad, and following in the footsteps of his father.

Soledad has the baby on her own with the midwife and no husband. This would be a terrible thing to do alone, especially in modern times, but Soledad does not care. The joy of holding her perfect baby boy makes the pain of a cheating husband disappear. He is not worthy of being there anyway. She looks at her son and that is the moment when she knows there is so much misery, yet so much humanity to balance it all out. This is the point in her life where she will take charge of things and be in control. Nobody will ever come between her and her son, at least this is what she thinks when he is born.



# Chapter 43-51

## Chapter 43-51 Summary

Inocencio was a very sad child. The truth is that he was not happy unless he was sad. He was always in deep thought, thinking and daydreaming constantly. He was happiest when he could devote his time to daydreaming and love, much like his grandfather.

Narciso was rarely involved in Inocencio and his other kids' lives. He traveled more than ever for work. When Uncle Fat-Face, Inocencio's younger brother fled for the U.S. border, Inocencio admired this audacity so much that he followed him. The two end up in Chicago. Inocencio and Uncle Fat-Face find their Uncle Snake in Chicago. He gives Inocencio a job as an upholsterer but tells him that he must be very devoted to the craft or he won't keep his job. Inocencio thus begins his royal profession of master upholsterer, and he never takes anything more seriously than his job for the rest of his life. Unfortunately, Inocencio gets sent to prison and in order to escape, he agrees to enlist in the army.

When Inocencio gets married to Zoila, they have seven children. His favorite is his little daughter whom he names Celaya after the battle. He did not love her name at first, until his mother said it was fit for a soap opera star. Then when he first took his new little daughter to Mexico, Soledad saw how her son Inocencio looked at his little daughter and she knew she was no longer his queen.

## Chapter 43-51 Analysis

This part of the book unveils the reason why the Grandmother, Soledad, is so awful to Celaya. She is jealous because Celaya is actually capable of taking her place in Inocencio's heart. It is something that Soledad never expected, especially after seeing how her own husband didn't even care about his own children that much. Her experience with men was that they only loved their mothers, and women were dispensable. However, her son was different, perhaps because of the way she raised him or his own nature. Everything she knew about relationships was coming to a halt. A son could love someone more than his mother; a daughter could love and depend on her father forever, and another female could take a mother's place. This is the basis of Soledad's hatred of her very own granddaughter. Soledad knew how much she loved her very own son, and now she knew that he loved his daughter the very same way.



# Chapter 52-57

## Chapter 52-57 Summary

Inocencio chooses his wife over his mother and leaves Soledad in Acapulco to find her own way home. His mother is still upset over it. Mother is still upset at him, and when Inocencio ignores her, she throws a rock at him cursing his family. The little Grandfather has died by now, and the awful Grandmother agrees to go to the states with her son and his family. The Grandmother spends the entire time talking about Celaya's looks, telling her she needs injections because she looks like a boy, and to cut her bangs to clear her complexion. On the drive back to the states, Celaya sits quietly. Her father asks if she is depressed and she wants to tell him yes but doesn't have the heart to. The family tells stories they've all heard before and make up a few new ones on the way. Father is the best story teller; mother's stories are the worst and the meanest. The Grandmother's stories are all aimed at making everyone feel guilty about her life. Celaya asks her father to tell her more stories about his life, and he explains that they are not stories, but rather histories. She asks what the difference is, and he tells her that a history is simply a different kind of lie.

The little Grandfather died on a Tuesday. He was hit by a truck. The Grandmother wanted to sell the house right away to everyone's surprise. She sits in her room and starts braiding and unbraiding the strands of her cherished rebozo. It is the only thing that can calm her nerves. Soledad's daughter, Fina, wants nothing to do with the move. She hates her mother and says she deserves to be sad and left alone. Fina hates her mother because she was not supportive of her marriage. Fina was "Stolen" away by marriage just as Soledad was, but all for different reasons.

## Chapter 52-57 Analysis

Now the grandmother is being replaced by another woman—the wife. When the grandfather dies, Soledad wants to get rid of everything; after all, she has never had a real marriage in that house and the only person she ever truly loves, Inocencio, was now at the mercy of his wife and daughter. She basically has no good memories at all in that house. When Inocencio calls his sister to help with the move, she refuses because of how harsh her mother always was with her. She says that Soledad does not deserve her help. It is interesting to see the mother daughter battle here because one would think she would have a great relationship with her daughter, since her own mother left her so early. It seems she would want her daughter to have a good role model, to be cherished and taught how to live and survive. Perhaps because Soledad was never properly taught anything by a woman, she was in not able to teach her own daughter and ended up giving her the same harsh love that she received from everyone else. Also, because Fina was also stolen and not married properly, maybe Soledad felt guilty for never having taught her daughter how to be. It is a cycle that keeps repeating itself

and maybe it is because nobody ever teaches a woman anything. The less they know, the better is the power of the culture of them.





## Chapter 58-63

### Chapter 58-63 Summary

The Grandmother was even meaner in Chicago. She misses her house, her routine, and her life. She stays with her son Baby because his apartment had more room than the other sons. Baby's kids turned their noses up at the old woman, complaining daily about her being in their house. The Grandmother has enough money to buy a house, but the neighborhoods she could afford are filled with low-class Mexicans with whom she did not want to associate, and the neighborhoods she couldn't afford would never want a Mexican like her to be associated with the neighborhood.

One of Inocencio's friends convinces the Grandmother and Inocencio that San Antonio is the place to be. Inocencio can have a good strong business, and both he and his mother can have their own big houses. On a trip down to Texas, Inocencio buys a house without even consulting his wife. However, Zoila is so excited that they will be moving out of their dark, cold, rat-infested apartment that she immediately starts packing and makes the children do the same. When Inocencio calls back, he tells Zoila that his mother gave them the money to buy the house. A pure sincere gift with no strings attached, except that the Grandmother will live with them, until his business picks up and they can buy her a house.

The family drives down to San Antonio with their lives in their van. The drive is slow and arduous. When they finally get to the house, Celaya is floored by what she sees—the ugliest house in the world.

### Chapter 58-63 Analysis

Buying the house in San Antonio is the perfect way for the Grandmother to edge her way back into her son's heart. She gives him the down payment for a house and claims there are no strings attached. However, it is clear that her strategy is to do something nice for the entire family, rather than just for him. This convinces Inocencio that the Grandmother has changed and is more generous now. While Zoila probably knows what is going on, she has no choice but to comply with the new arrangement, especially since it is too hard for her to suggest an ulterior motive for the Grandmother being so nice.



# Chapters 64-80

## Chapters 64-80 Summary

Celaya starts private school soon after arriving. She is a freshman and learns that she has no idea what she thinks about sex and her virginity. Some girls know where they stand and vow abstinence until marriage; others have left their virginity long ago and aren't looking back. This is where Celaya realizes she knows nothing about being a female. Celaya makes a friend in an older girl called Viva. Celaya likes Viva because she is edgy and takes her under her wing.

The Grandmother gets sick and suffers a stroke. Zoila is the one that has to take care of her. One day she even considers killing her by accidentally dropping her down the stairs, but she sees a tear in Soledad's eye and cannot bring herself to do it. The day the Grandmother dies, Zoila makes all the kids open every window in the house because she swears the Grandmother left behind a rotten meat smell. The only person that is depressed is Inocencio. He grieves the loss of his beloved mother.

Celaya starts having trouble in school when she mistakenly mentions that she is part Spanish. The other girls ridicule her and threaten to beat her up everyday. This is when she tells her father that she wants to leave and be alone. She wants to leave the family before she is married and find herself. Her father tells her that this would be shaming the family and that a good Mexican girl does not leave before she is married. It is worse than being a prostitute, a whore, a bitch, or a lost soul.

Celaya tries telling her mom that she is depressed, and when she utters the words, her mother yells at her. She tells her she has nothing about which to be depressed. That if anyone should be depressed, its her.

## Chapters 64-80 Analysis

Viva is the girl Celaya goes to for everything. She introduces her to sex and its power. Viva knows right off that Celaya is younger than she is because she is so naïve about sex. Viva also introduces Celaya to the idea of moving to San Francisco and living on their own. Celaya had never thought about leaving the family. This idea excited her. She never wanted anything more than to have her own room, her own space to be able to think without having people running past her door, shouting at her through the walls, or shouting at each other. She just wanted quiet, and that was too much to ask in her family.

After the Grandmother suffers her stroke, she is in a very vulnerable position. The daughter-in-law she has been so terrible to is now the one that has to take care of her. Zoila thinks about killing her, but feels sorry for the Grandmother when she sees her cry. She decides to take the high road and not kill her, yet she does not feel compassion for her. She is keeping her alive only because it is the moral thing to do.



The Grandmother dies in the house, and Celaya tries to be sad, but she feels nothing. Her mind races and she tries to control her thoughts on her Grandmother. However, one thought leads to another and in seconds she is so off from anything relating to her Grandmother that she has to refocus again. This is a result of her Grandmother's treatment of her. She left behind no good memories with the favorite daughter of her favorite son, and she will not be part of Celaya's future stories that will bring honor to the family.

When Celaya tells her father about wanting to leave the house to be alone, he tells her that this will never be possible until she is married. He cannot have her leaving the house because that would be worse than being a whore. This is information that she never knew before, again showing how little a Mexican woman knows about her own fate.

Zoila is a woman who knew more about her fate than most women, and understood that she could create her own fate. However, after getting married and having children, she lost sight of that and later turns to liberal propaganda and conspiracy theories about government. This is not enough to keep her son from going into the military, and she never shares any of her liberal ideals with her daughter. Instead, she neglects Celaya and possibly resents her for getting more attention from Inocencio than she ever got.



# Chapter 81-84

## Chapter 81-84 Summary

When Celaya meets a boy named Ernie, she decides that he will be her ticket out of the house. He is polite, funny, and kind. The two run away to Mexico where they agree to get married, until he goes to talk to a priest who convinces Ernie that he should not marry Celaya. She is not a pure girl, one he can take home to his mother.

After Celaya's trip, Inocencio decides that it is better he move the family back to Chicago. He is depressed when he gets there because nobody cares about quality anymore. His brothers have turned the business into a plastic chair place, and fine items are no longer in high demand. He is so depressed that one day he suffers a heart attack. Outside of his hospital room, Zoila tells Celaya the truth about the fiasco in Acapulco. Soledad told Zoila that Inocencio had a daughter with another woman. Candelaria was his daughter, and suddenly the pieces all fit together.

Celaya goes into the room to see her father. There she sees the ghost of the Grandmother who wants so desperately to take him with her. She asks her why she told her mother about Candelaria. Soledad's ghosts says that she did it for love, in attempts to keep her son. She tells Celaya that she will not take Inocencio now, that she will let him stay if Celaya will tell her story.

## Chapter 81-84 Analysis

Once Celaya starts to think about men and marriage, she gets an immediate dose of the power that a mother has over her sons. Ernie decides to leave Celaya in Mexico City without marrying her because the priest tells him his mother will never approve of a girl like Celaya. What he means is that she is no longer pure and has lost her virginity. This in itself is bad enough, but she comes from a good Catholic family and this trip has disgraced them as well. In thinking about his mother, Ernie leaves and doesn't look back. Celaya calls her father who is in tears from worrying. He sends his friends to get her. She expects them to ask questions about her trip, but they do worse, they say nothing. They treat her like a poor fragile flower which has been manipulated by the devil himself. She doesn't let on that the entire plan was her idea, nor does she ever tell anyone else. In the end, Ernie ends up impregnating a devout Catholic girl and is forced to marry her, as is the custom whenever a Mexican man impregnates a woman.

Inocencio was the only man that didn't marry the woman that he impregnated out of wedlock. He had a daughter with Amparo the washerwoman, who is the girl Candelaria. Celaya remembers the day at the beach when she saw Candelaria squint and recognized herself and her father in her. Zoila had been mad all these years because everyone knew about it except for her and the kids. Nobody ever had the guts to tell her, or everyone really just wanted to ridicule her behind her back. It makes her sick to think



about Inocencio doing something so terrible as leaving behind a poor pregnant woman, damaged goods. This was the lesson that Eleuterio taught Narciso. Eleuterio made Narciso marry Soledad, and they were miserable for years. When Inocencio did the same thing in such a mirrorlike way, Narciso did not step in. Instead of condemning his son to a lifetime of unhappiness, he let him hold onto his dreams. He let him move away and not look back. He let him act like a dog rather than risk being unhappy for the rest of his life.

This shows the type of person that Inocencio is. He is not a dog, but he is a guilty person. Perhaps this is why his little girl Celaya is his favorite. Because he remembers that he left a little girl behind, and that that little girl was washing the clothes of his family every year they went to Mexico.

When Celaya speaks to the ghost of her Grandmother, Soledad tells her that she wants Celaya to write her story. Celaya promises to do so in order to keep her father alive a little longer. Thus we see that the back and forth nature of this story is due to Celaya writing a story that is being narrated to her by the ghost of her Grandmother. They never spoke when Soledad was alive, but they formed a relationship once she was dead. In the chapters where Celaya is talking to her Grandmother, it is all after Soledad has died.



# Chapter 85 and 86

## Chapter 85 and 86 Summary

Inocencio gets well right away and he decides that he wants to throw the biggest thirtieth anniversary party for him and Zoila. He invites everyone he knows. The guests talk about all of the same stories that have been told throughout the book. They tell their versions of the truth in the ensuing chapters.

Then during the party, Inocencio goes to his daughter and tells her that she must take care of herself. They are Reyes, not dogs. Celaya does not tell her father she knows the truth. She simply follows the tradition of leaving a conversation with so much left unsaid.

## Chapter 85 and 86 Analysis

Though Celaya is never taught about what it means to be a woman, she knows a lot about what it means to be a Mexican and a Reyes. She has learned not to ask questions about a story, especially about a sentimental story. She knows not to call her father a hypocrite for leaving behind a pregnant woman and not following the respectable tradition of marrying. Perhaps she knows that Narciso wanted better for his son, or maybe it is that Narciso did not care enough about his son to teach him the right thing to do. Either way, Celaya knows that her father wants nothing but the best for her, and sometimes people deserve better than the truth. This is why stories are created. They are intended to get a point across in a positive way, without scarring the meaning of a lesson with an embarrassing and shameful moment in time. Stories are meant to make people happy and learn about themselves, and Celaya has learned all she needs to know from her father. She learns that family is everything, even her family who annoys and ridicules her. She would be nothing without them, and they nothing without her.



# Characters

## Celaya

Known best for her inability to keep a secret, Celaya is the only daughter in her family and is the youngest. She is constantly picked on for being the baby and for being her father's favorite. As a young girl she is very brave and curious, though once she grows into her teenage years, she grows into an awkward girl with her father's big nose and her mother's square body. She is also taller than everyone in her class, and life becomes unbearable the way only a teenage girl would find it. She is very aware of her surroundings, always noticing what is going on and who is saying what. When she starts developing she notices how everyone reacts to her being a young lady, and it scares her. Her grandmother has never been fond of her because Celaya took her grandmother's place in her father's heart. When she was born, she became his new queen, and shoved his mother aside. Even though this was never voiced, the grandmother knew it the second she saw her son with his new baby girl. Most of Celaya's childhood battles are with her grandmother and their inability to get along. Nothing she ever does is right, and the grandmother often tells her that she is overreacting, is spoiled, and is a worthless Mexican-American.

What Celaya never knew growing up is that she fell into a role that would make her hated by all the important women in her family. Her mother and grandmother were always very bitter towards her because Inocencio loved Celaya unconditionally. The other women were jealous of her and made it known by being so mean to her. This takes a toll on Celaya after a while, and she learns to distrust and hate her family.

## Inocencio - Father

Inocencio is Celaya's father and Soledad's first and most beloved son. He was raised in Mexico City with his brothers and sister. Inocencio is a daydreamer and loves thinking about love and misery. His parents joke that he is miserable if he is not thinking about something sad. He devotes his life to his family and is always torn between the three women in his life. His mother is his heart and soul, and he knows that she will always do anything for him. They have a special bond that nobody can break, though his wife has tried and almost succeeded. His wife Zoila married him because of his charm. They met after he enlisted in the army. After getting married and having seven children, Inocencio's attention went to working and making enough money to properly care for his family. He was always as active as he could be with his sons and only daughter. Celaya was his favorite out of all his children. He also has an illegitimate daughter with Amparo, a servant in his mother's house. Inocencio was the only one in his family who was not made to marry the woman that he impregnated. His father married Soledad and his grandfather married Regina, all because the men got the women pregnant before marriage. They were also lower class women, and these men were considered upper



class. Narciso did not pass on the moral wisdom that his father and grandfather had taught him, and Inocencio perhaps was a happier person because of this.

Inocencio does, however, begin to neglect his wife emotionally, and this causes a lot of problems between them. Zoila feels lonely, but there is nothing Inocencio can do because he has to work to send his kids to school. At the same time, he gives emotional support to his mother and Celaya, which infuriates his wife. He believes Zoila should be stronger than she really is and is giving his attention to those who really need it. When he shames his mother by choosing his wife over her, he has the rest of his mother's life to make it up to her. He accepts any form of gratitude he can from her, even if it's a stab at his wife, and he does everything he can to make her life better.

## **Zoila - Mother**

Celaya's mother is a Mexican-American woman from Chicago. She grew up embracing American pop culture. She is a darker skinned Mexican, and her Spanish is not as good as her English. These traits make her mother-in-law despise her, in addition to stealing away some of Inocencio's attention from his mother. As Zoila grows older she turns her back on the church and sees the disparities between man and woman. She becomes upset with her domestic lifestyle and starts listening to women's rights activists and people who think outside the box. Her ideas become increasingly more liberal with every day that passes, yet she still cannot give up her past.

## **Soledad - evil Grandmother**

At the beginning she is the mean grandmother that makes all of the daughter-in-laws miserable. She is harsh, blunt, and overly dramatic. When we read her story, however, there is a reason she is so harsh. Her mother died when she was very young, and her father remarried, sending her away to live with and work for her aunt. She was pawned off to the Reyes family where she became the household servant and personal caregiver of Eleuterio and Narciso. However, when she met Narciso she immediately fell in love, and he used the opportunity to have sex with her in the house. When he gets her pregnant, his father makes him marry her. Narciso starts traveling a lot for business and ends up bedding and falling in love with another woman. Because Soledad is used to being lonely, she doesn't give it much thought, especially since she has no real model for how a marriage should be. Instead, when her son Inocencio is born, she vows to devote her entire life to him. Even when her other children are born, her love does not dissipate from her Inocencio, rather she neglects the others to better care for him.

Her life comes crashing down when she sees Celaya for the first time, and sees how Inocencio looks at his baby girl. Right then, Soledad realizes that she is no longer her son's queen. His wife was not a threat, but his little daughter won the battle for his attention. This is the reason why she is so cold with Celaya; it is pure jealousy. She spends the rest of her life putting Celaya down in front of Inocencio and anyone else to





whom Inocencio will listen. She dies in Inocencio's house in Texas, still bitter and with everyone more relieved than sad about her death.

She comes back to visit Celaya as a ghost. She tells Celaya that she wants her to tell everyone her story, her true story and why she was so bitter in life. As a ghost she sits with her granddaughter and recounts the tragedies of her life. The two bond in this way, and Celaya can rest assured that her grandmother never really hated her, but was just sad her son found another love.

## **Narciso - little Grandfather**

He was a mama's boy, always clinging to her for support and advice. He cowers in front of her, and when she is irrational, explains to everyone that she acts that way only because she is a mother and that is how mother's act with their boys. Narciso entered the military, though his only job was to burn dead bodies killed in the Ten Days war. He impregnates Soledad and marries her with his father's advice. He is remembered for having three ribs removed and as his wife's doormat when they get older.

## **Regina**

Regina is Narciso's mother. Her story parallels Soledad's, except we don't know much about her childhood. She is a very abrasive woman that will disrespect a pregnant woman just to respect her son. She does everything for Narciso and disregards her husband as a useless man since he cannot hustle in hard times. This was the only real model that Soledad had of a marriage and perhaps this is why she was so abrasive to other women in her life and so indifferent to her husband.

## **Amparo**

She is the washerwoman in Soledad's house. She would have been the next generation of unhappy women married to Reyes men, except when Inocencio impregnated her, he was not forced to marry her. She continues working in the house even after having her daughter Candelaria.

## **Candelaria**

Candelaria is the daughter of the washerwoman Amparo. She is also the secret daughter of Inocencio. Everyone seems to know that she is his daughter except for Zoila.



## Ernie

Ernie was Celaya's first real boyfriend. He is completely silly, dorky, and ridiculous. He is not handsome at all, but Celaya finds him endearing. He is sensitive and is often ridiculed by Celaya's brothers, though he is so oblivious he doesn't care. Celaya feels the need to protect him. She devises a plan to marry him by running away to Mexico, but he bails at the last minute. He says that Celaya is not good enough to be his mother's daughter-in-law and leaves her in Mexico. A few months later he gets a good Catholic girl pregnant and is forced to marry her.

## Viva

Viva is Celaya's best friend. She is a couple years older than Celaya and a bad influence on her. However, she is the only female influence that Celaya has. Viva's parents are very kind to her, always asking her what she wants and what she needs. Celaya both admires her and is jealous of her. Viva also encourages Celaya to move out on her own and be different than every other Mexican girl.



# Objects/Places

## Caramel Rebozo

A rebozo is a Mexican shawl. Throughout this story, the one thing that Soledad and Celaya both admire and love more than anything is the caramel rebozo that Soledad's mother was working on before she died. She never got a chance to finish the shawl, but it was given to Soledad nonetheless when she was sent to live with her aunt. Early on, Celaya notices the shawl and asks if she can have it. When her father tries to buy a silk shawl for Celaya, the grandmother says there is no way a girl like Celaya will ever appreciate such a fine shawl. When the Grandmother dies, the shawl is passed down to Celaya, and she treasures it just as her grandmother did. There is also an interesting parallel between the unfinished rebozo and the flow of the story. The grandmother is constantly braiding and unbraiding the fringes, taking the weave apart and reweaving it just for therapeutic reasons. The book is written much in the same way where a story is told, then in the next chapter it is explained and told a different way. This continues until the end where there is still no real ending to the story.

## San Antonio

A town in Texas where the family moves to after the Grandmother buys everyone a house. Everyone hates it there because it is not home, and the Mexicans there are completely different than those in Chicago.

## House on Destiny Street

This is Soledad and Narciso's house in Mexico City. It is the house that the family drives to every year and where Inocencio and his brothers and sister grew up. It harbors a lot of happy, painful and lonely memories.

## Acapulco

The Mexican beach town where Inocencio leaves his mother. During one particular vacation to Acapulco, Celaya first realizes that there is something very familiar about Candelaria.

## Skin Color

Skin color is used to determine a person's social class. It is very interesting how aware everyone in the family is of everyone else's skin color. Celaya, for instance, is mesmerized by the color of Candelaria's skin because it is a beautiful caramel color. It is a color she has not seen before. Celaya's aunt name is Aunty Light Skin because she is



so pale. This skin color secured her a job, though a sketchy one since it is never really revealed. The darker the person, the harder they have to work to survive.

## **Tres Reyes Upholstery**

The business that Inocencio creates with the help of one of his uncles. He also works with his brothers, who always give him grief for taking his job too seriously.

## **Maxwell Street**

An open air market in Chicago that the family goes to every Sunday instead of church.

## **Zocalo**

The main plaza in Mexico City.

## **Chicago**

The city in Illinois where the family ends up. Regina's brother went to Chicago to avoid getting drafted, and Narciso went there to avoid fighting in the war. It is home to all of Inocencio's children, despite its terrible winters and cold, dreary apartments that the family is forced to live in because they cannot afford any other place.

## **Picture of Narciso**

There is a picture of Narciso that Soledad holds in her armoire. It is a picture of him with the true love of his life, though she is torn out of the picture. Soledad assumes there was someone else in the picture, but never asks who it was because a part of her does not want to know who that woman was. Still, she keeps the picture for her to remember what her husband looks like, since he is gone so often.

## **Three Ribs**

Among Soledad's prized possessions are the three ribs that Narciso lost. He tells an interesting and valiant story about how he lost them, but the truth was that the doctors cut them out to save his lung that collapsed from running so long and hard. His mother, however, says he lost the ribs from sheer fright, and nothing else.



# Themes

## What it Means to be Mexican

There is so much reference to skin color, language fluency, family, and point of origin that the average person has to ask "What is a real Mexican?" Is it the person from Mexico City, cultured with just enough Indian blood to never forget the tragedies that ensued, but Spanish enough to not show the Indian that exists? Or is the Mexican in the north, close to the border that eats the flour tortillas instead of the corn tortillas eaten in the middle and southern states? Perhaps it's even the Mexican-Americans that call themselves Chicanos, or Xicanos, that want desperately to belong to a past that even the Mexican-Mexicans barely admit to. The author is both strong and subtle about the racial and cultural cues she chooses throughout the book. They range from blonde to black hair, blue to almost-black eyes, and can speak Spanish, English, French, and even German. A Mexican can be Catholic or Jewish depending on where you go in the country. The book suggest that there are many different kinds of Mexicans, different ways to be Mexican, and that each Mexican has a unique story to bring to the table. Nobody got to where they are the exact same way, and while it is a Mexican goal to be perfect and have the best story, tragedy will and does exist, and even that is part of what it means to be Mexican.

## Neither Here Nor There

Inocencio Reyes sat on an interesting border where he felt more Mexican than the Mexican-American's and even more American than they. He served in the U.S. Army, something that many of the people would never put themselves through because of the generation they were in. He spoke proper Spanish and knew about what it meant to be a real Mexican, not what people thought it was to be Mexican. Yet he was never taken seriously by those here nor there and was even accused of not having immigration papers by the border patrol. Inocencio existed in an odd place where he could never fit in because he was not full Mexican, American, nor Spanish, and while many were probably in his same situation, nobody admitted to it. He was a person that knew about different worlds, different cultures and values, and each was unique and could not mesh easily. Towards the end Inocencio simply tried to get his kids to appreciate one another as family. It didn't matter what skin color they were, or how they got to where they were. He just wanted them to know and believe that wherever they are in life, their family would always be around to help out.

## Mexican Racial Politics

The color of someone's skin is very important in Mexican society. A few shades can determine how a person will be treated throughout life. If they are lighter, then the luck of society will follow that person, if darker, then he or she must prove they are better



than the color of their skin. People always want to marry higher up in class; thus, they aim for someone lighter than they to better the race. In this book, Regina was the first to do this by marrying a Spaniard, who knew that she was below him, but since he impregnated her, he had to marry her. They had a son who also impregnated a girl, but was not honorable and marry her and left his quarter-Spanish daughter, who turned out darker than he and thus an embarrassment. The Grandmother is always making comparisons to people's skins in a negative way, yet Celaya can find the beauty in a seemingly dark Candelaria, that the Grandmother cannot see. Celaya is almost envious of Candelaria's caramel skin because it is such a nice shade.

At the same time, this desire to be whiter, more Spanish is something that is frowned upon once the family crosses the border. The girls in Texas hate Celaya for claiming she is Spanish, even though she is at least part Spanish. They believe she is sticking her nose up at the other girls who all claim they are Mexican, though it is assumed most were born in Texas and have never even been to Mexico. Thus Celaya straddles a world where she is Mexican, of Spanish descent.

## Caramel Rebozo

The caramel colored rebozo is one of the most visited items in this book. It serves as a comfort item for both Soledad and Celaya. Soledad's mother died when Soledad was very young. She never got to enjoy her mother the way a daughter should. Soledad learned very little of her mother's skill at making rebozos and knew just a few simple patterns. When her father sends her to live with her aunt, the only memory Soledad has of her mother is the rebozo. Celaya, on the other hand, had her mother growing up, but her mother was never really there for her. Anytime Celaya had a question or was feeling depressed, her mother would yell at her, telling her that her feelings were ridiculous and inadequate. When the Grandmother passed away, the rebozo went to Celaya and she would carry it just as her grandmother would. Because Celaya does not know how to weave, but she would suck on the ends for comfort. Soledad and Celaya were both very alone their entire lives, even though they had lots of family around them. The rebozo symbolizes unity for them and strength to get through their days.

At the same time, the rebozo is a representation of people's lives. It is important that it is unfinished, because this symbolizes how a person's life is never complete, even when they are dead. There is always a story left to be told, a question that was never answered or never asked. The fringe of the rebozo is like the fringes of people's lives, the unfinished business that lurks in the rooms of households like huge elephants that everyone ignores. Those that are curious enough to know about unfinished business, like Celaya, constantly get yelled at for asking too many questions, being too nosy and intrusive. The rebozo was the only comfort Celaya had from all this neglect and bad treatment for simply wanting to know the truth. The rebozo was the only true thing that Celaya and the grandmother had.



# Style

## Point of View

The point of view is mainly written in the first person, with the exception of an active narrative between Celaya and the Grandmother and Celaya and her mother where she is getting information for the book. The reader never really knows if she is really talking to these people, or perhaps it is a dream or the people are talking to her from the dead, which is very common in Mexican narratives. However, it is implied that when Celaya is talking to her Grandmother, it is really her grandmother's ghost. Soledad's ghost appears to Celaya in the hospital and asks Celaya to tell the Grandmother's story, which is what the second part of the book is about. It takes a while to catch on and to understand what is going on at the beginning of the chapters because it is not clear who is talking until several chapters in, but once the reader is immersed into the story, it is easy to follow who is talking and when.

Towards the end of the book there is a quote section where many different characters throughout the book speak candidly about the same stories told in the book. This section is all told through those people and is a feast of funny stories and even some truths.

## Setting

The book takes place in four different locations. It starts out in Chicago Illinois, where Celaya's father owns an upholstery business. The family lives in a dreary apartment that is overcrowded by furniture that is too big for the place. Celaya does not have her own room, and sleeps in one of the reclining chairs that her father brings home from his business.

The story then moves to Mexico City where the evil grandmother and the little Grandfather are introduced and their stories explained. The grandparents live in a house off Destiny Street in Mexico City. It is ideally located near everything and has enough rooms and space to hold the entire family. Following the death of the Grandfather, the setting moves back to Chicago where the evil Grandmother convinces Inocencio to move his family to San Antonio, Texas. The house in Texas is dreadful and has been torn down and added onto for years. It looks like a house with no plans, one that someone forgot to finish, or didn't know when to stop working on it. Celaya is still without a real room in this house because her grandmother moves into the room that was supposed to be for her. The story remains here for a while until Inocencio has it with Texas and its natives and finally moves the family back to Chicago after the evil Grandmother dies. The story spans several years, several generations; its present time takes place somewhere during the seventies.



## Language and Meaning

The book is written mainly in first person narrative. The narrator is Celaya who retells all the stories she has heard throughout her life. The language is very casual and very revealing of the way a Mexican-American would talk. There is peculiar grammar syntax that allow the reader to see how a Mexican-American thinks. At times, entire sentences are translated directly into English from Spanish. This is apparent when there is odd wording and sentence structure. Yet this technique only adds charm to the book. In addition, the stories may appear to be scattered, random, and many stories are left unfinished. One of the main focuses in this story is the black rebozo that Soledad's mother was making that nobody knew how to finish. This book is much like that rebozo. It twists and turns and nobody really knows how the fringe ended up the way it did, and nobody can uncover the truth because it was so intricately designed. The fringe is left unfinished much like many of the stories. However, throughout the years, Soledad learns to unravel and weave again what her mother had created, and the unfinished stories that stopped so abruptly throughout the book all come to a fine finish at the end of the story. Everything eventually comes together, and it is nice to think that the rebozo may have been finished, too. Perhaps that is why the grandmother was haunting Celaya. Her unfinished business was the rebozo and her family.

## Structure

The book is divided into eighty-six short chapters, all little stories of their own. Some of the chapters are completely irrelevant to the story but are so entertaining that they add much to the narrative. Some chapters are introduced by songs or poems, and some are just filled with thoughts that everyone in the room is having about a given subject or even about nothing at all. This is done in order for the reader to hear the different voices and different things going on within the book and throughout the characters' lives. There is never a dull moment in this family, and every word and every story is picked out perfectly to make sure the family's legacy will be carried out positively throughout the years. Just as in Celaya's family, whenever there is a weak story or a negative one, that story is quickly forgotten and followed by such a positive event that the reader forgets about all the negative that preceded. Toward the end of the book, the reader no longer hates the evil Grandmother, and even warms up to her a bit for being a caring soul whose greatest sin was loving her son too much. The reader finds out that Celaya has been talking to her Grandmother's ghost for half the book, without knowing it earlier. There are so many flashbacks in this book that one really has to stay focused and read actively to stay on top of things. Either way, it is cleverly written.





## Quotes

"'It is no disgrace to be poor,' Uncle says, citing the Mexican saying - 'but it is very inconvenient.'"

"Sin padre, sin madre, sin perro que me ladre." Chapter 25 pg. 119 (Without a father, without a mother, and without even a dog that will call for me)

"San Martin de Caballero, trae al hombre que yo quiero." Chapter 22, pg. 102

"His wife didn't understand about art, how by creating something you can keep yourself from dying." Chapter 27, Pg. 127

"The soul never ages, the soul, ball of light tethered to that nuisance the body." Chapter 32, Pg. 149

"As in all wars, those who flourish are not the best people but the most clever and hard-hearted." Chapter 32, Pg. 149

"The Devil knows more from experience than from being the Devil." Chapter 34, Pg. 159

"When the labor began she felt her body lurch forward on its own accord like a piece of machinery, like a chariot, like a wild horse and she dangling from the stirrup." Chapter 40, Pg. 191

"Maybe God made babies beautiful because they needed so much care." Chapter 42 Pg. 192

"'The Mexican team...was playing against a local team of Mexicans from over here, American Mexicans...People think because we carry the same blood we're all brothers, but it's impossible for us to get along.'" Chapter 49 Pg. 216

"For a long time I thought the eagle and the serpent on the Mexican flag were the United States and Mexico fighting." Part III pg. 235

"We're so Mexican. So much left unsaid." Chapter 86, Pg. 428



## Topics for Discussion

What is the connection between the rebozo and Celaya? Why does she want it so badly and why won't her grandmother let her have one? What are the underlying reasons for the way the grandmother acts towards her rebozo?

Why do you think a Mexican mother loves her sons more than her daughters? Is it a void that the husbands create within them, or fear of competition with another female?

If Mexican women were more educated about their social status and responsibilities, would so many have gotten pregnant out of wedlock in this story, or tried to use getting pregnant to keep a man?

What would have been different if Narciso and Eleuterio were allowed to marry for love and not out of obligation? Would their lives have been different, or were they more after the chase?

Why is it that the women in the family were more interested in marrying up in class?

Eleuterio, Narciso, and Inocencio all slept with lower class servant women. Why did they choose these women specifically to sleep with, and not go after a classier, more dignified woman? Did they subconsciously intend to use them for sex and nothing else? What does that say about their character?

Narciso had an affair with a black woman when he was in the states, which nearly killed his father. Yet, the father slept with a woman that was very dark herself and of the lower class. Had he taken Regina to Spain, his family would have reacted the same way he did towards Narciso's love. Why wasn't he more open to him loving her sincerely? How would things be different for Narciso had he been allowed to bring home his black girlfriend? Would the fight for her place in the family have been too much to bear?

Celaya wanted to get married to Ernie but for all of the wrong reasons. She never seemed very much in love with him, but thought it was very reasonable to marry him. Why do you think this is so? Does it have to do with the model of marriage that she was accustomed to seeing?