

# **The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child Study Guide**

**The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child by Francisco Jiménez**

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## Plot Summary

The Circuit by Francisco Jimenez is about a Mexican boy named Francisco and his family. They cross the border from Mexico to California for a better life as migrant workers. They pack up and move each season to find work only to endure hardships and the struggle of having to start over every few months.

Francisco and his family pass under a wire fence to steal across the border from their native Mexico to California. Once they arrive, work is hard to find. Papa and Roberto, Francisco's older brother, are migrant workers who pick cotton, strawberries and grapes when in season. They move from place to place, eventually ending up in Tent City, a migrant worker camp of tent homes, in Santa Maria. There is no electricity or plumbing. Francisco attends his first American school there. Much to his surprise, his teacher does not speak Spanish. Everyone speaks English and he must too. Francisco mostly stays in his own thoughts during class time and does not accomplish much. He wins a blue ribbon for his butterfly drawing, but he must repeat the grade.

Francisco's new baby brother, Torito, gets very sick and almost dies in Tent City; it is a miracle he lives. The family keeps moving all over California to find work. Francisco wants to have his own cotton sack very much so he can pick with Papa and Roberto to help out the family. Although he fails at the first attempt, he does get a sack. He joins Papa and Roberto picking in the summer months and during certain seasons. He grows tired of picking and instead focuses on the grammar rules of English.

Francisco continues to attend school and starts to learn English words. His favorite teacher, Mr. Lema, sits patiently with him and helps him learn English words during lunch. He promises to show Francisco how to play the trumpet the next day, but Francisco's family leaves town that day. Meanwhile, Mama keeps giving birth to children.

Francisco is excited because the family finally moves back to Bonetti Ranch in Santa Maria. It is an old barracks settlement, but it is a home to him. Papa cannot work anymore due to his bad back. So Roberto gets a janitorial job in the school. This means the family can stay in Santa Maria. Everyone is happy.

Francisco goes to school and starts to learn more English in the eighth grade. His big class assignment is to learn a portion of the Declaration of Independence. He memorizes it and is excited to recite it to his teacher. As he sits in class that day, immigration comes in and gets him. Francisco sits in the back of the immigration car as they go to find Roberto.



# Under the Wire

## Under the Wire Summary

The Circuit by Francisco Jimenez focuses on the life of a Mexican child, Francisco, and his migrant worker family. They illegally cross the border to find work in California. They move from migrant camp to camp each season, thus Francisco and his family must start over constantly.

In *Under the Wire*, Francisco grows up in a small village in Mexico. He hears of the border and of California, but does not know exactly what they are. Papa announces that the family will cross the border and move to California. Roberto, Francisco's older brother, is excited. The family, which consists of Francisco, Mama, Papa, Roberto and baby brother Trampita, travel for two days and two nights by train. This is the first time Francisco sees or rides on a train. The family sneaks under a small hole in the wire fence at the border. A woman picks them up in a car and drives them to a migrant worker camp where Papa, Mama and Roberto can pick strawberries. Papa pays the woman and only has seven dollars left.

Papa finds out there is no work there for two weeks. For the next two week, the family hunts rabbits and birds and eats them by the fire. The Noon Train comes every day to Francisco and Roberto's delight. They wave at the conductor and the conductor waves back. One day, he throws Francisco and Roberto a bag of candy and they are ecstatic.

## Under the Wire Analysis

The border represents a better life for Francisco and his family. Even though Francisco does not fully comprehend this better life yet, he understands that it means a lot to Papa and Roberto. Roberto is particularly excited because he understands there is a better life for the family in California. When the family crosses the border, they literally cross into a more hopeful life. Yet there is no work on the farm for two weeks. This foreshadows a pattern in which the family is looking for work constantly.

The bag of candy symbolizes Francisco's understanding of a better life in the US. He thinks the train is from California, and this train represents riches and the good life. When the conductor throws the bag of candy to him, this symbolizes Francisco is finally in the land of better opportunity. It foreshadows that the family may have some remnants of a better life in California, even though most of their life will be hard.



# Soledad

## Soledad Summary

In Soledad, Papa, Mama and Roberto leave Francisco to babysit Trampito while they go picking in the field. Francisco is lonely. He stands atop Papa's old car to see them work in the fields. They come back for lunch, eat quickly and head back to work. Francisco is sad and wants to go with them. Francisco tries to pick cotton. He is disappointed because he does not pick as much as he wants. He remembers that pickers get paid by the pound, so he mixes in dirt. Papa, Mama and Roberto come back. Mama yells at Francisco because he did not take care of Trampita. Trampita soils himself and breaks his bottle. Francisco proudly shows them his cotton. Papa gets mad because of the dirt. He says they can be fired for adding dirt. Papa says Francisco's job is to take care of Trampita. Francisco whispers to Roberto that some day he will pick cotton with them and not be alone. Roberto puts his arm around Francisco.

## Soledad Analysis

Loneliness starts to take over Francisco. He is not old enough to be a proper caregiver, yet the family forces him into this role. Yet Francisco tries an even more adult role of picking cotton. Francisco strives to achieve goals for himself, even though they may be small. When he does not accomplish this goal of picking cotton, he is disappointed. His disappointment stems from his loneliness. He is not motivated by money, but he is motivated by the fact that he does not want to be alone all day with Trampita. His motivation is good, but Francisco must start small as a caregiver before he can move onto the more adult role of being a migrant worker.

# Inside Out

## Inside Out Summary

In *Inside Out*, the family settles in Tent City in Santa Maria. Francisco goes to school for the first time. On the way there, Roberto tells him the teacher used to hit Roberto with a ruler for not following directions. Roberto could not follow directions because he cannot understand English. Roberto and Francisco get on the bus. It is noisy with a lot of kids. They get headaches. Francisco goes to his first class. Miss Scalapino is his first grade teacher. She only speaks in English. Francisco cannot understand. He gets a headache because of this. He stares at the classroom pet, a caterpillar in a jar. In class, Francisco daydreams he is in the fields with Papa. He pretends to listen to Miss Scalapino. The most popular and biggest boy in his class is named Curtis. However, Francisco hangs out with Arthur who speaks some Spanish. Miss Scalapino forbids them to speak Spanish together.

Francisco stays inside and watches the caterpillar at recess. He likes art lessons. Miss Scalapino lets him draw anything he wants. She tacks up a drawing of his to the board and then it disappears. It starts to get cold and Francisco does not have a jacket. The principal gives him one. It is Curtis's jacket. Curtis gets mad and fights with Francisco for the jacket. They both get in trouble. Francisco is embarrassed. The caterpillar is now a cocoon.

At the end of the school year, Miss Scalapino gives Francisco a blue ribbon for his butterfly drawing, the drawing that disappeared. Francisco is beside himself with happiness and pride. He sees the cocoon opening and tells everyone to look. Everyone gathers around to see the butterfly emerge. Miss Scalapino lets Francisco open the jar. The butterfly flies into the air. Curtis likes Francisco's butterfly drawing so Francisco gives it to him.

## Inside Out Analysis

The transformation from the caterpillar to the butterfly symbolizes Francisco's transformation. He starts out like the caterpillar, not popular or exciting to his classmates. He is confused and does not know how to communicate in English or make friends. As time goes on, Francisco begins to become interested in art and flourishes in this subject. However, like the butterfly in the cocoon, Francisco keeps to himself and does not try to be outgoing or practice English. Once the cocoon starts to open, so does Francisco. He emerges as the best artist in the class and he can at least say, "Look, look" in English when he wants everyone to see the butterfly emerge from its cocoon. The butterfly breaks free and flies. It is Francisco who opens the jar, thus freeing the butterfly. Francisco is free as well because he learns a lot from school, even though his English is not good. Francisco emerges as a child who grows emotionally and in maturity, thus his school year is successful in that way, but not academically.



# Miracle in Tent City

## Miracle in Tent City Summary

In *Miracle in Tent City*, Tent City is in Santa Maria and is a migrant worker camp of tents. The workers who live there are mostly single men who are illegal aliens. Workers pick strawberries in the field. Mama is pregnant. To make money, she cooks lunch and dinner for all 20 migrant workers of the camp. Francisco and Roberto help during the summers and on the weekends. They help cook, clean and take care of Trampita. Mama asks Papa to build a floor for their tent. Francisco and Roberto go to the dump to find lumber. One night they get chased out by the owner, but they keep going to find more lumber for the floor. The dump is right next to Tent City and it stinks.

Torito is born. He is an adorable, cheerful and playful baby boy. Francisco likes his demeanor and likes to tickle him. Miss Scalapino tells Francisco he must repeat the first grade because he does not know English. At two months old, Torito gets very sick. He has a fever, is red and has horrible, continuous bowel movements. They pray to Virgen de Guadalupe. One night, Torito stops breathing and his eyes roll back in his head. Francisco thinks he is dead. He starts breathing again.

Torito gets worse. A woman from Tent City tries to heal him by rubbing eggs on his stomach, but it does not work. Papa and Mama take Torito to the hospital. Papa and Mama keep visiting Torito at the hospital, but children cannot visit because Torito has an infectious virus that spreads to children. The family prays. Francisco has a dream in which the patron saint of children comes alive and sets him next to Torito. Mama makes Torito an outfit because of the dream. Torito comes home from the hospital and Mama keeps the outfit on him for the entire year. She makes the family pray. The doctor says it is a miracle if Torito lives. He lives and it is a miracle indeed.

## Miracle in Tent City Analysis

Torito's illness symbolizes the struggle of the migrant worker. The migrant worker starts out hopeful, cheerful and excited about life in America. Then reality sets in and the migrant worker realizes life is hard in California. He lives in poverty with his family and they must struggle to eat and find work. Things start to get bad if there is no work and no opportunity. Like Torito's illness, it consumes the migrant worker and he is ill with discontent. It invades every part of his body. He becomes frustrated, weak and angry. He must look to a higher power for help to survive. Once he does this, he slowly starts to get better and heal. Torito heals with prayer as well. The migrant worker remains cautious and takes one day at a time. This is the cycle of the first year of the migrant worker. By the end, he has survived in horrible conditions and without being caught by immigration. This is no small feat, an absolute miracle.



# El Angel de Oro

## El Angel de Oro Summary

In *El Angel de Oro*, the family moves to Corcoran. It rains and there is not much to do. The workers cannot pick crops when it rains. To pass the time, Francisco watches the neighbor's goldfish swim in a bowl on the windowsill. Mama names it Angel de Oro. Papa worries because they must move somewhere else if it keeps raining. Francisco goes to school. He meets Miguelito and they promise to meet after school. Francisco is now in the third grade. They play games and meet by the creek. Miguelito snaps off branches and says these are fishing poles. He will teach Francisco to fish tomorrow after school. Francisco looks forward to it all day. However, Miguelito never comes. Francisco checks his tent and it is empty. Francisco is very sad. It pours for several days. The creek overflows and floods Tent City. Then the sun comes out and dries up everything. Francisco tries to save the creek's fish by throwing them back in the creek. He tries to save the last one. He places it in a coffee can on the neighbor's doorstep. That evening he sees it swimming alongside Angel de Oro.

## El Angel de Oro Analysis

Miguelito represents the friend that Francisco always wants. He is a playmate that understands Francisco and he will teach him things. Francisco longs for such a friend because he always moves. The kids in school do not understand his family or life situation. Francisco feels hope when he begins his friendship with Miguelito, but it only lasts a day. Reality sets in and Miguelito's family moves somewhere else because of the rain.

Angel de Oro represents consistency in Francisco's life. Things are so inconsistent—Miguelito and his family move and Francisco does not stay in one school. He sees Angel de Oro every day in the same windowsill. Francisco likes that it is something he can rely on day in and day out, a rarity for a child of a migrant worker.





# Christmas Gift

## Christmas Gift Summary

In Christmas Gift, right before Christmas, the family is about to move from Corcoran to find work. They dig in trash cans to find food. Mama makes soup with vegetables and fruit from the trash and bones from the butcher. A young couple knocks on the front door of their tent. The woman is pregnant. The man sells little things for money. Papa says his family is broke too and cannot buy anything. The man pulls out a beautiful, handmade handkerchief. Mama says it is beautiful. Papa says they cannot afford to buy anything and escorts them out. There is a new member of the family, Ruben, Francisco's baby brother.

They move to a migrant camp and sleep on a mattress in a tent. Francisco anxiously awaits Christmas morning. He hopes for a ball. Mama quietly wraps the Christmas gifts and places them next to the children's shoes. Francisco is excited. Everyone is sad on Christmas morning. Each child only receives a bag of candy. Papa and Mama look incredibly sad. Papa presents Mama with a present, the beautiful handkerchief.

## Christmas Gift Analysis

The handkerchief symbolizes a remnant of hope. As the book begins, the reader sees the family's life will be continual struggles, but they do have breakthroughs of hope. This is one such breakthrough, where hope takes over. Papa cannot afford the handkerchief, but he buys it anyway. The happiness it brings to Mama and the family also brings hope. It is one more thing to keep them going. Life in California is hard, but hope is around every corner, even on the dreariest of Christmases.



# Death Forgiven

## Death Forgiven Summary

In *Death Forgiven*, a friend of the family smuggles a parrot from Mexico. Named El Perico, it is the family pet. He is a family member who flies around in the home. Francisco spends hours teaching him to say "periquito bonito" or little, beautiful parrot (*Death Forgiven*, p. 47). The whole family loves the parrot. Francisco plays with him constantly and gives him kisses. El Perico loves the neighbors' cat named Catarina. They become good friends and eat from the same plate. When the neighbors come over without Catarina, El Perico gets very upset and flaps his wings.

One night the parrot has a fit because the neighbors come over without Catarina. He shrieks loudly and feathers go everywhere. Papa enters the home in a bad mood because work is scarce and grape season is almost over. He grabs a broom and hits El Perico hard. The parrot falls to the floor. Francisco, Roberto and Mama cry. Papa shouts at them to stop. Francisco runs out of the home, screaming and crying. He falls to his knees and prays for the parrot. Then he prays for his father. The children find a cigar box and use it as a burial casket for El Perico. They bury it and mark the gravesite with a cross of sticks. Francisco visits his grave everyday until he must leave two weeks later.

## Death Forgiven Analysis

El Perico symbolizes happiness and comfort for the entire family. He is an escape from their dreary, everyday life. El Perico is colorful, talkative and loves to play. He is much more than a family pet. When Papa kills him, it kills a part of Francisco. He sees his father has a bad flaw: his temper. So he prays for the parrot and his father because he loves them both. The family sense of fun and happiness is gone as El Perico dies and it is just another tragedy of their hard life.



# Cotton Sack

## Cotton Sack Summary

In Cotton Sack, the family travels back to Corcoran to pick cotton. They find work at a labor camp. Papa unfolds the sacks to pick cotton. Francisco is surprised because there are only three sacks. He asks where is his sack? Papa says he is too little. Francisco says last year he picked without a sack. Papa shakes his head no. Papa sews the sacks. Papa folds his cotton sack to use as a pillow. As a nightly ritual, Papa takes aspirins and smokes cigarettes. There is another new baby. This time, it is a girl named Rorra. Rorra sleeps in a crate and the family shares one mattress. It rains hard. Francisco wakes up to see Papa smoking. They cannot pick when the cotton is wet. It is too heavy and throws off the weighing.

Since they cannot pick, Mama makes breakfast and they do household chores. Papa does not feel well. He keeps taking aspirins and smoking. It rains on and off for several days. Finally, the rain lets up and they wake up to the labor contractor honking his horn. He drives up and down the row of cabins honking and waking up the workers. Francisco, Papa, Mama and Roberto drive off to the field to pick. It is a good crop. The plants are tall and ripe. Francisco helps Papa and Mama load their sacks. He is the only picker without a sack. Francisco and Roberto bring the sacks of cotton to the weigh station. They have 600 pounds and receive 18 dollars.

The labor contractor says the family can stay in the cabin until the next crop, which is two to three weeks later. Francisco goes to school. He is still determined to get his own sack. It is cold during Thanksgiving weekend, but Francisco, Papa and Roberto pick in the cold. Francisco's hands turn numb. He is too cold. He pees on his hand for warmth, but that does not help. He must stop and go over to the fire. He does not earn his sack.

## Cotton Sack Analysis

Francisco's obsession with getting his own sack serves as motivation to help his family. All he wants to do is prove he is a man and a wage earner. He looks forward to proving he is worthy of his own sack because he wants to feel important and contribute to the family. At first, he does a good job. However, when it turns cold, he cannot handle the situation. He tries to warm up to no avail. Francisco is motivated to earn his sack no matter what, even if it means risking frostbite and peeing on himself. In the end, he cannot prove himself as a picker ready for his own sack. This saddens him, but his motivation is still to get that sack. This foreshadows Francisco's future motivation in other areas of his life. Perhaps he will be motivated to learn English or do well in school.



# The Circuit

## The Circuit Summary

In *The Circuit*, the peak of the strawberry season is over. Ito, the Japanese strawberry sharecropper, does not smile. The workers do not pick much. By the end of August, most of the workers have left. Francisco waits every evening to hear Ito announce they are done picking for the day. They pack up and move again. Papa is very proud of his new, broken down car. They travel to Fresno and stop at a labor camp there. It does not need more workers. They go further. They find work and they are allowed to stay the whole season. They live in a garage. Francisco, Papa and Roberto pick while Mama takes care of the children. Francisco and Roberto run away when they see the school bus so they do not get in trouble for not attending school. They pick grapes day in and day out. Francisco's body finally gets used to the hard work.

The grape season ends. Francisco gets to go to school, but Roberto does not. Francisco is in the sixth grade. His teacher is Mr. Lema. Francisco is nervous and wishes he was back in the fields picking. Mr. Lema asks him to read, but Francisco remains silent. Mr. Lema says he can read later. Francisco goes to him at lunch and asks Mr. Lema if he can help him with the new words. So he and Mr. Lema spend lunches together as Mr. Lema helps him. One day, Mr. Lema says he can teach Francisco how to play the trumpet. Francisco is so happy, but returns home to find the family's belongings in cardboard boxes, ready for another move.

## The Circuit Analysis

The circuit is the perfect analogy for the way of life of the migrant worker and his family. They must always be ready to move on at a moment's notice. There is often no warning, especially for the children. When it is time to move, it is time to move. There are no attachments for a migrant worker because he is on the circuit, a vicious cycle of finding work to support his family. The children get hurt most on the circuit because they cannot complete a full year at school, nor can they bond with friends or classmates. Life is a mere cycle of unpacking and packing again. Disappointment is a major part of this cycle. Francisco struggles with this part the most. Just as he feels settled and happy, it is time to move on again. The circuit will never allow him to have a normal life, like his American classmates.



# Learning the Game

## Learning the Game Summary

In *Learning the Game*, Francisco is in a bad mood because it is the last day of school before summer vacation. All of his classmates get to do fun things in the summer, but he has to pick. Francisco is in the seventh grade. Francisco figures out how much time there is before school starts again. He figures out it is four and a half months. He must pick strawberries for 10 weeks in Santa Maria and then pick cotton and grapes for another eight weeks in Fresno.

Francisco plays kick-the-can, a children's game with his siblings and the other migrant worker children. Carlos is the oldest and he is bossy. Everyone has to play by his rules. Francisco does not like playing with Carlos. Carlos gives orders and tells everyone what position to play. Francisco says Manuelito should be the guard, but Carlos says Manuelito is too slow and cannot play. Francisco insists to let Manuelito play, but Carlos says no. They play and Francisco feels better.

The next morning the alarm goes off. It is time to pick again. Francisco is very unhappy. He, Papa and Roberto drive to the fields. They see a young man, Gabriel, jump out of the labor contractor's truck. He is another picker. Ito, the Japanese sharecropper, asks Papa to show Gabriel how to pick, since it is his first time. Papa shows him and invites Gabriel to lunch with them. Francisco and he trade tacquitos for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Gabriel says his family still lives in Mexico and that Papa is lucky to see his own family everyday. Gabriel misses his family very much. He sends them money, but he says after he pays the contractor room and board, he has virtually nothing left. He says the contractor is a crook.

They pick from six in the morning to six in the evening everyday. Francisco looks forward to seeing Gabriel. One day, the contractor calls on Francisco to help Gabriel. The contractor wants Gabriel to plow the fields like a horse, with a rope tied around his waist pulling a plow. Gabriel refuses, saying only oxen do this job in Mexico. The contractor gets mad and hits Gabriel. Gabriel is about to fight back, but remembers his family. Gabriel says that the contractor cannot force him to do the wrong thing.

That evening, Francisco goes to play kick-the-can. He tells Carlos that Manuelito must play. Carlos says no and pushes and trips Francisco. Francisco walks off and everyone follows him. Realizing that he has no one to play with, Carlos relents. Manuelito can play.

The next day, Francisco finds out Gabriel is fired. Papa says the contractor will pay in this life or the next. Francisco plays his last game of kick-the-can that evening.

## Learning the Game Analysis

Gabriel is a symbol of the migrant worker's hero. He is a man who will stand up to the authorities and for what is right. He is shocked when the contractor wants him to plow like an ox. He will not relent and give in to the contractor's wishes. This strength shows a side of the migrant worker that the reader has not yet seen in the book. The reader usually sees migrant worker men who do exactly what they are told and accept horrible living conditions. Gabriel is the first character to fight for what he believes in. Francisco has never seen someone like this before. He is fascinated with Gabriel's sense of right and wrong and his ability to stand up for himself. Gabriel does not accept the usual migrant worker treatment.

Therefore, Francisco learns from Gabriel and decides to stand up to Carlos. Without Gabriel as an example, Francisco would not be able to do this because he has never seen this behavior before. Francisco turns into the children's hero and does what is right in the situation. This represents emotional growth and maturity in Francisco as he discovers what is right and wrong, and how every man should be treated regardless of socio-economic status.



# To Have and to Hold

## To Have and to Hold Summary

In *To Have and to Hold*, it is time to move again. This time they go to a town called Orosi. Papa hears of a grape grower there who gives the migrant workers nice places to live. They drive by the school and Francisco pulls out his penny collection. Francisco's favorite pennies are his 1910 Lincoln Head penny and his 1865 Indian Head penny. Papa gives him the 1910 penny from his earnings. It is old and valuable and it is the year Papa was born. It was also the year of the Mexican Revolution. Many of the rich hacienda owners treated the farm workers like slaves. So the farm workers revolted. Papa's mother favored the Revolution. Papa says many hacienda owners buried their jewels and money in the ground and yellowish red flames will shoot up if a person digs for it. That is when Francisco starts to collect pennies, when he receives the 1910 penny. He treasures this coin.

A friend named Carl gives Francisco the 1865 Indian Head penny in the fifth grade. They both collect coins, so Carl invites Francisco back to his house. Francisco has never been in a house before and is impressed with the rugs and the lighting. Carl shows him his impressive coin collection. Francisco says he thought all pennies were Lincoln Heads, but Carl says no. Francisco says he will trade his Lincoln Head for one of Carl's Indian Heads. Carl gives one to him instead. Carl asks to go to Francisco's house and see his collection. Francisco does not want him to see where he lives. He says he will bring it to school, but never does because the family moves again.

Francisco asks Mama what Orosi means. Oro means "gold" in Spanish and si means "yes." Francisco thinks it is a good sign. He writes this down in his beloved notepad. He starts the sixth grade in Orosi. The class plays a game where whoever looks up a word in the dictionary faster than anyone else gets a point. Francisco is behind in English and never wins. Instead, he memorizes grammar rules in the fields as he picks. It makes the time go by faster.

They move into a real house. The second floor is unusable, but the first floor has two bedrooms and a kitchen. Francisco takes out the pennies, and Rorra, his little sister, asks if she can have one. He says no. Francisco and the family are excited they are living in a house.

The next day, Mama and the children go to the store while Francisco cleans up from picking. She gives him a penny in change. He goes to put it in his collection, but his two beloved pennies are gone. Rorra has gumballs. Francisco is furious and runs out of the door. Mama sits down beside him and tells him the story of a man who saves pennies, but is sad and lonely. She says not to be hard on Rorra.

The next morning, Francisco covers his notepad with wax paper to keep it clean. Roberto gets gas at the store. Roberto says the gas is not kerosene and Papa should



not put it in the stove. Papa does it anyway. When Mama lights the stove, the stove bursts into flames and the curtains are on fire. Roberto throws water on the fire, but that makes it worse. Papa orders everyone to leave. Papa gets their savings box. Francisco wants to go back in for his notepad. The house burns to the ground. Francisco cries. Mama says if whatever is in the notepad is in Francisco's head, it is not lost. Francisco agrees.

## To Have and to Hold Analysis

Francisco's love of the pennies represent Francisco's love of material things. He does not have this love until he starts to see the American children close up. He goes to school with them and sees what they have. He visits Carl's house and sees he has rugs and lighting. He is impressed by what he sees. The pennies are Francisco's possessions, something that he does not usually have. When the schoolchildren also discuss their exciting and fun plans for summer vacation, Francisco does not want to talk about his plans to pick. Nor does he want Carl to see where he lives. Thus, Francisco learns shame for not having material things. He starts to lose sight of what is important.

When they move to the house, the whole family is excited about living in a real house. The family is also consumed with this idea of materialism. However, as everything gets taken away from them by the fire, reality sets in. They are a poor, migrant worker family. Stripped of all these "luxuries," they have nothing but each other. Material things are not important. Family is most important, and being healthy and alive is important. Material things do not matter as long the family unit stays intact.



# Moving Still

## Moving Still Summary

In *Moving Still*, Papa lies on his back and complains of his pain. It is the end of a picking season and Roberto is the only one working while Francisco goes to school. Papa stops complaining one day because immigration has swept through the camp and the family is safe. Francisco experienced an immigration raid in Tent City. He was playing with his sister and someone yelled immigration. The immigration men in green uniforms took away many people. However, they were lucky. Mama and Roberto were in town. Papa showed his immigration card and the officers did not question the children. This memory scares Francisco.

Papa says not to trust anyone and to tell everyone they were born in California. Papa grows angry because he feels useless. He cannot work because of his back and he cannot protect his family from immigration. They are scared immigration will come again and they decide to move back to Bonetti Ranch in Santa Maria. It is safer there. Francisco likes it there. It is a home to him.

Back in Santa Maria, Roberto starts tenth grade. Francisco starts eighth grade. He is good in math and often gets to sit in the first seat for his great test scores. Papa's back worsens. Papa cannot work anymore. Roberto decides to go to Mr. Sims, Francisco and Roberto's principal, and ask for a full-time, year-round job. Mr. Sims gets Roberto an interview, but it is only for a lawn mowing job once a week. Roberto is disappointed. He talks to Mr. Sims again and he gets a janitorial job at the school.

Francisco must memorize a portion of the Declaration of Independence, including the famous "all men are created equal" line and recite it. He grows nervous with all the big words. He studies and he helps Roberto at his janitorial job. Life is good for the family with Roberto's job. The day Francisco must recite, he goes into class nervous, but he is ready. He has it perfectly memorized. As he waits his turn, immigration officers come into class and pull out Francisco. He sits in the immigration car as they head to the other school to get Roberto.

## Moving Still Analysis

The "all men are created equal" memorization is direct social commentary on what happens to Francisco. He is a person like everyone else. He should have the same opportunities as everyone such as life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. As a human being, he is also entitled to an education. However, it all gets taken away in one moment, the moment he is about to recite. He is about to state that he is equal, but in reality, he is not. He is illegal and he is not a part of this country. Sadly, Francisco is taken away by immigration, and most likely shipped back to Mexico. This is direct social commentary on how illegal aliens are treated as second class citizens. Even though

they may try to fit in, learn the language and work hard, they are not equal to Americans.

The author, Francisco Jimenez, went through similar experiences as a migrant worker child. This ending makes the reader think about what is right and what is wrong with America's immigration laws. Jimenez challenges the reader to look at migrant workers in a different way and have sympathy for them. He seems to want the reader to understand the plight of the illegal alien and how important it is for the illegal alien to have certain, inalienable rights.

# Characters

## Francisco, Panchito

Francisco is the narrator of this book. His family affectionately refers to him as Panchito. At the beginning of the book, he is a small child from a small village in Mexico. His family decides to illegally cross the border into California for migrant work opportunities. Francisco stays home to take care of his baby brother while Mama, Papa and his older brother Roberto pick crops in the field. Francisco is not happy that he stays behind. He does not go to school most of the time because he must help out his family. When he does go to school, he is frightened and intimidated because everything is in English. He cannot understand the teachers or his classmates. He has a hard time making friends. He also has a hard time because his family moves so often to find work. Francisco moves each crop season and cannot sustain a normal friendship with other children.

At the migrant worker camps, Francisco makes friends with the other kids, but he also has responsibilities to help Mama cook and clean dishes. Once he is a little older, Papa lets Francisco pick with him and Roberto. Francisco finds out it is back-breaking work and starts to look forward to going back to school. It makes him sad to see other children go to school when he cannot. Francisco is a hard-working and loyal boy who cares about the welfare of his family and always puts their needs first.

Once Francisco goes to school more often, he begins to understand more. He is an intelligent boy who excels in math, but he does not excel in other classes because of his poor English. He treasures the teachers who help him along. Francisco also uses his memory to his advantage. He memorizes grammar rules for English while he works in the field. By the end of the book, he sees the importance of education as a means to help better himself and his family.

## Papa

Papa is the father of Francisco, the narrator. He is an uneducated, Mexican man who must find work to support his growing family. He decides his family should illegally cross the border into California for opportunities for a better life. Once they cross the border, Papa is distraught because he cannot find work immediately. Papa then finds work picking various crops during various seasons. Papa has a resilient personality; he can always bounce back from any challenge. He is a hard worker who tries his hardest to make money for his family. He is also a loving father who wants the best for his children. He grows extremely worried when Torito, Francisco's baby brother, is very sick.

Papa also has flaws. He has a temper. He gets very angry one day and kills a parrot, much to the horror of Francisco and Mama. He smokes cigarettes and takes aspirin every night for his bad back. He worries constantly about money and where the next job will be. When it does not stop raining and he cannot pick, he obsessively worries. He



also worries about whether the family saves enough for the winter months. As the main provider of the family, Papa holds a lot of responsibility and has a lot of stress.

By the end of the book, Papa cannot work anymore due to his bad back. He must give up his provider role and pass it onto Roberto, Francisco's older brother. For Papa, this is a hard realization, but he must do it for his family.

## **Mama**

Mama is Francisco's mother. She is an uneducated Mexican woman who has many children with Papa. She is a sweet and caring mother who loves her family dearly. She cooks for the migrant workers and stays home with all the children to take care of them.

## **Roberto**

Roberto is Francisco's older brother. He works with Papa in the fields. He is a good older brother to Francisco. Occasionally, Roberto attends school, but by the end of the book, he is the man of the house and he must work to support the entire family.

## **Trampita**

Trampita is one of Francisco's baby brothers; Francisco must take care of him while his family works.

## **Torito**

Torito is Francisco's favorite baby brother. He is happy and chubby and loves to laugh. Torito gets very sick, almost near death, but he recovers and it is considered a miracle.

## **Miss Scalapino**

Miss Scalapino is Francisco's first teacher in California. She only speaks in English and she only wants Francisco to speak in English. She lets Francisco draw whatever he wants in the art lessons and gives him a blue ribbon for the best drawing.

## **Curtis**

Curtis is a strong, bigger boy in Francisco's class. He is a bit of a bully. He and Francisco get into a fight. Later on, Francisco gives Curtis his blue ribbon drawing and they become friends.



## **Miguelito**

Miguelito is a boy who promises to teach Francisco how to fish. However, the next day, Francisco cannot find him anywhere in the camp. His shack is empty. Francisco never sees Miguelito again.

## **El Perico**

El Perico is the family pet parrot. His life ends tragically when Papa kills him in rage.

## **Mr. Lema**

Mr. Lema is a beloved teacher of Francisco. He patiently teaches Francisco English words and works with him during lunch. He is about to teach Francisco how to play the trumpet, but the family moves that day.



# Objects/Places

## La frontera

La frontera is the Spanish word for border. In this book, it refers to the border between California and Mexico.

## El Rancho Blanco

El Rancho Blanco is the village Francisco and his family originate from. It is a small village in the barren, dry hills to the north of Guadalajara, Mexico.

## Noon Train

The Noon Train comes by every day at noon through Guadalupe, a labor camp town near the California-Mexican border. Francisco loves to watch the Noon Train and wave at the conductor, who waves back. One day, the conductor throws Francisco a bag of candy.

## Jalopy

A jalopy is an old, broken down automobile.

## Tent City

Tent City is a farm worker labor camp owned by Sheehey Strawberry Farms. It has no address. It is the rural part of the town of Santa Maria. The residents are illegals who are pickers like Francisco's family.

## Mi'jo

Mi'jo is a Spanish word that combines "mi" (my) and "hijo" (child) together. It is an address of affection from parent to child.

## Angel de Oro

Angel de Oro is the name of a goldfish that lives in a bowl on the windowsill of the shack next door. Francisco and Mama enjoy watching the fish swim.



## **Virgen de Guadalupe**

Francisco and his family pray to the Virgen de Guadalupe, a manifestation of the Virgin Mary, in times of hardship.

## **Kick-the-can**

Kick-the-can is a children's game, similar to the American children's game of tag, that Francisco and the other migrant worker children play.

## **1910 Lincoln Head Penny**

Papa gives Francisco his 1910 Lincoln Head penny. It is old and is a collectible item. Francisco treasures it because it is the year his father was born.



# Themes

## Wandering

The book is called *The Circuit* because the family's life is literally a circuit or cycle of moving. The family must move from migrant worker camp to camp to find work each season. As the season changes, the family moves again. Thus, they are migrant worker gypsies or wanderers. Unlike gypsies, Francisco and his family wander with the intent of work. The wandering occurs when the weather changes, so the family must live according to the seasons. It is not only Francisco's family who are wanderers, but the entire illegal migrant worker population must suffer this life as well. Therefore, these workers always must start over and create a new life every few months or so. This is taxing on the workers and their families because they cannot lay down roots or build upon a foundation. They must pack and move all the time.

Francisco and his family become experts at packing and moving. In fact, one day when Francisco comes home from school excited because his teacher Mr. Lema will teach him how to play the trumpet the next day, he sees cardboard boxes in the family's shack. He knows, with sadness in his heart, he must move again, and he must move immediately that day. Again, the family must uproot their lives and wander. This wandering impacts Francisco greatly because he cannot keep friends, nor can he stay long enough in one school to learn English properly. Instead, wandering is a priority.

By the end of the book, the family grows tired of the gypsy lifestyle. They do not want to wander anymore. Papa cannot work because of his back, so Roberto gets a janitorial job at the school. The family will stay in Santa Maria and not wander anymore. It is a hopeful and happy moment when the wandering is about to cease. Unfortunately, this does not happen because immigration gets Francisco and Roberto. The wandering will most likely continue for these two boys, but back in Mexico, not in the United States.

## Forgiveness

A major theme of this book is forgiveness. Francisco must learn as a child to constantly forgive. He cannot live in a world of anger and stubbornness because he must constantly adapt and move on. Every time his family drags him from one migrant camp to another, he must forgive. He must forgive his parents who pull him away from friends, new schools and his education. He also must learn to forgive others quickly because there is always a chance he will never see them again. For example, he forgives Curtis, a boy who fights him at one school, and makes friends with Curtis despite their initial fight. He forgives Miguelito, a boy who is his dear friend. Miguelito up and leaves one day without telling Francisco and, in his heart, Francisco must forgive him. The idea of letting things go or forgiveness is a constant theme with Francisco. It makes him a strong, resilient child.





The hardest part for Francisco is forgiving his family. Francisco loves his pet parrot as does the rest of the family. In a blind rage, Papa kills the parrot, leaving Francisco distraught. This happens in the chapter named "Death Forgiven." Francisco has no choice but to forgive Papa for what he did, so he does. Francisco's little sister Rorra steals his beloved, collectable pennies to buy two gumballs. Mama tells Francisco he must learn to forgive her. Francisco learns through forgiveness, his family is more important than any material object. Forgiveness gives him the ability to move on and start over time and time again—a quality that will hopefully serve him well as an adult.

## Loneliness

A major theme of this book is loneliness. In the lifestyle of the migrant worker, loneliness is a normal part of life. Firstly, the worker and his family must leave their home, family and friends in Mexico to start a new life in America. They only have each other. While at the migrant camps, they work in the fields all day long. There is no time for chatting, laughing or friendship. In fact, when Francisco finally works in the field, he feels the loneliness. There is nothing to do, but pick strawberries, grapes or cotton. So he memorizes grammar rules to make the time go faster.

Francisco is lonely as a small child when Papa, Mama and Roberto first leave him at the camp to babysit his baby brother for the entire day. Francisco is a child who is frightened and feels very lonely, but he must do this for the family's welfare. Francisco is lonely as he grows up as well. He cannot stay in one place to make good friends. When he tries to make friends, either he moves or his friends move. At school, when he is around other children, he cannot communicate in English with them, so he is alone once again. In school when he cannot understand his teachers, he must imagine things in his head. He stays alone with his own thoughts.

The family is surrounded by loneliness as well. Mama and Papa do not have time to make friends with the other migrant worker families. The family is large with many children, so Francisco has many brothers and a sister, but like his parents, he does not have a friend on his level to understand him. Loneliness does not consume the family, however. The most important thing is finding work and this supersedes any feelings of loneliness.



# Style

## Point of View

The book is told from a first person point of view. The reader receives an in-depth look at Francisco's inner thoughts and feelings this way. Francisco is a very emotional boy, and this first person point of view shows his emotions and reactions to every situation or hardship that he and his family must endure. Therefore, the first person point of view is very tightly-written to expose Francisco's most private thoughts and feelings. For example, Francisco must move constantly from place to place for Papa and Roberto to find migrant work. On the outside, he just moves and does not say a word to his family. However, the reader receives a look into his private thoughts and sees that Francisco is usually upset and lonely from being uprooted so much.

The first person point of view gives Francisco, a child, a voice of importance. Otherwise, the voice might be lost in importance if it is in third person. In first person, Francisco is an authoritative, observant and reliable narrator. He has many observations and feelings that are like an adult. However, he is a child and feels the same frustrations, anger and happiness that regular children do.

The story is told through exposition and dialogue. In the exposition, the reader receives descriptions of the various migrant worker camps and schools Francisco attends. The exposition reveals Francisco's inner thoughts. The author uses dialogue within Francisco's family frequently. Interspersed in the dialogue are Spanish words and sayings. Many of them are not translated into English, leaving a reader who is unfamiliar with Spanish to guess at the meaning.

## Setting

The book begins in Mexico, right at the border. The family sneaks under the wire border fence to the barren land of a migrant worker camp in California. The camp is very poor and the workers and their families live in tents without electricity or plumbing. This is the usual setting of the migrant worker camps that the family moves to. They live in a small tent and must huddle together to eat and sleep. The remainder of the book moves from one migrant town to another migrant town. The movement depends on the season of the crop being picked. Thus, Papa and Roberto spend much time in fields, such as cotton and strawberry fields.

While living in the migrant worker camp called Tent City in Santa Maria, Papa builds Mama a floor for their tent. Francisco and Roberto go the dump next door to retrieve old lumber. The family finally has a floor in the tent. This is a luxury for them. They move to a town called Orosi and the family has a house for the first time. The second floor is not usable, but the first floor has two bedrooms and a kitchen. Behind the house is a barn and vineyards. The house is a step up for the family.



Throughout the moves, Francisco goes to public school. Not much description is given of each school, and they all seem like typical, American schools. By the end of the book, Francisco is excited to move back to Bonetti Ranch in Santa Maria. They live in a barracks there and it is like home for him. They live in the same barrack they did the year before. It has electricity, but they cannot drink the water. This last setting looks the most hopeful for the family, especially since Roberto gets a janitorial job. However, immigration gets Francisco and Roberto and they must move back to the original setting of Mexico.

## Language and Meaning

The language of the book is very simple and child-like. Since the narrator is a child, the language has a young, simple tone. There are some difficult vocabulary words interspersed throughout the story, but they would be difficult for a child, not an educated high school student. The language is written for a young reader, perhaps a child around ten to twelve years old. However, the language also has a universal quality; it is not too immature for a young adult or an adult reader to enjoy.

The language of the characters is simple and does not include much slang. However, there are many Spanish words and expressions throughout the book. Yet, the interesting part is the author chooses not to translate each expression or word. Instead, the reader must guess its meaning most of the time. If the reader is not familiar with Spanish, the meaning may be lost in translation.

Description is not extensive in the book. There are descriptions given of the migrant worker camps so the reader can understand what deplorable conditions Francisco and his family live in. These camps are generalized in their descriptions, and after a while, they all seem the same. This is because the camps all have the same, bad conditions for the illegal worker. The most description given is to Francisco's thoughts and feelings about situations and hardships. Thus, the language tends to be emotional, so the reader can receive the meaning through the emotion.

## Structure

The book is comprised of twelve chapters. Each chapter has a specific name, which summarizes what happens in the chapter. The chapters range from three pages to fourteen pages long. The chapters have very short paragraphs with very short, simple sentences. The book follows a timeline: the characters' lives as they travel throughout the migrant farmland of California season by season in order to find work. Long spans of time move time along. In other words, one chapter may be about one migrant camp in the summer season and the next chapter is about another camp in the fall season. However, it is an easy timeline to follow. The reader knows exactly where he is in the timeline.

The plot of the novel is simple and without subplots. The novel is about Francisco and his migrant worker family who steal across the border from Mexico to California for a

better life. They move from migrant camp to camp finding work and struggle in hardship as a family.

The book's pace is normal and moves moderately. It is neither fast-paced or slow. It is the right speed for a modern day child or even adult reader. It is a very easy to read with some mildly difficult vocabulary interspersed throughout the story. The book does not use profanity or slang terms. There are Spanish words and expressions interspersed throughout the text and the author chooses not to translate them. The plot pulls the reader into the migrant worker world of camps and the vicious cycle of moving all the time. The book is a relatively easy read and entertains as a whole.

## Quotes

"We were going to make the long-awaited trip across la frontera to California." (Under the Wire, p. 2)

"I had a feeling Mama was not telling us all she knew." (Miracle in Tent City, p. 32)

"But he was right. It took a miracle." (Miracle in Tent City, p. 35)

"I visited his grave everyday until we moved to Corcoran two weeks later to find work picking cotton." (Death Forgiven, p. 50)

"I knew then I had not yet earned my own cotton sack." (Cotton Sack, p. 60)

"I turned around and looked at our little shack for the last time." (Cotton Sack, p. 64)

"When I opened the door to our shack, I saw that everything we owned was neatly packed in cardboard boxes." (The Circuit, p. 69)

"That was the last time I played the game." (Learning the Game, p. 79)

"Well ... if you know what was in your librito, then it's not all lost." (To Have and to Hold, p. 93)

"Mama was right. It was not all lost." (To Have and to Hold, p. 93)

"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." (Moving Still, p. 109)

"The instant I saw the green uniform, I panicked. I wanted to run, but my legs could not move." (Moving Still, p. 111)



## Topics for Discussion

Does *The Circuit* symbolize anything else besides the movement of the migrant workers? Is there another underlying circuit in this book? Does Francisco have a circuit of thoughts or emotions in him which are cyclic? Explain.

The seasons are an important part of the circuit in this book. How are the seasons used to reflect the mood or tone of the book? Are any of the seasons more important or less important than the other seasons?

Who is the head of the household in Francisco's family? Do you think his family is patriarchal or matriarchal? Explain why. When Roberto gets a janitorial job at the end of the book, is he the patriarch of the family or not? What qualities make a matriarch or patriarch?

Do you believe tolerating illegal immigration is acceptable? Do you find Francisco's story one of triumph and heartache, or one that should never be told? Are migrant workers unsung heroes or are they unwanted immigrants—in the book, and in today's society?

How is Francisco educated in the book? He does not have a normal education, but in what ways does he learn to educate himself? Who are his unorthodox teachers in this self-education and what do they teach him?

What are the instances of unconditional love in this book? Who shows the most unconditional love? How is unconditional love defined in this world of poverty and despair? How does it compare to our modern day interpretation of unconditional love?

Immigration is a hot, political debate due to Arizona's new immigration law. What are your general feelings about immigration from Mexico, of both legal and illegal immigrants? Do you think a family like Francisco's should be given a chance to become US citizens or not? How would you feel about the current political climate if you were an illegal immigrant?