

The Corn Grows Ripe Study Guide

The Corn Grows Ripe by Dorothy Rhoads

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Contents

The Corn Grows Ripe Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
1. The Family.....	4
2. The Milpa.....	5
3. Trouble.....	6
4. The Journey.....	7
5. Bushing Milpa.....	8
6. Study.....	9
7. Burning Milpa.....	10
8. Anticipation.....	11
9. The Fiesta.....	12
10. Planting.....	13
11. The Hetz Mek.....	14
12. Drought.....	15
13. Chac Chac.....	16
14. The Rains Come.....	17
15. Harvest.....	18
Characters.....	19
Objects/Places.....	21
Themes.....	23
Style.....	25
Quotes.....	28
Topics for Discussion.....	29



Plot Summary

The Corn Grows Ripe by Dorothy Rhoads focuses on Tigre, a lazy, 12-year-old Mayan boy. When his father is injured, Tigre must become the man of the family by clearing the bush and planting a cornfield. Tigre learns how to be a man and overcome life's challenges.

Dionisio is a 12-year-old boy from a small Mayan village. He enjoys oversleeping and lying around in his hammock. Meanwhile, his whole family rises early to work, even his little sister. Mother and Father spoil Dionisio because his three brothers died of fever during the course of one week. Great-Grandmother tells his parents that Dionisio must learn to work hard. She treats Dionisio sternly because of his laziness and selfishness.

Dionisio's nickname is Tigre (Jaguar) because he looks like a jaguar and he is curious and mischievous. Everyone calls him Tigre. Tigre helps Father clear the bush, so they can plant a cornfield, called a milpa. The next day, Tigre is too exhausted and goes to school. A tree falls on Father and he breaks his leg. Tigre feels guilty. He volunteers to go to the head village to find the medicine man, who is also a bonesetter.

He walks 17 kilometers one way at night through the bush. He is scared, but completes the task, realizing his journey will be easier on the way back. Father will not walk until harvest. Tigre must clear the bush, burn the land and plant the cornfield. Tigre also must continue his school lessons after he works. At first Tigre thinks it is too hard and he cannot do it. Father would not give up, so Tigre keeps going. His work/study schedule becomes easier.

He clears the bush. He burns the land before the rains come, which makes him successful. He plants the cornfield. He also plants chili peppers, squash and beans to sell to others, but this is a surprise for his family. At his school lessons he asks questions and challenges himself. He understands nature with scientific reasoning, unlike his family who explains nature with the gods.

Summer is hot and dry with no rain. The villagers grow worried over the drought. They start to pray and make sacrifices to the corn gods, but still no rain comes. The men and boys of the village have a prayer ceremony in which they choose Tigre to play a frog. The frog represents luck with the corn gods. Only the older boys are usually frogs, so this is a great honor for Tigre. On the third day, rain finally comes in a great avalanche. The villagers rejoice.

Tigre and Father walk out to the cornfield. It is Father's first time seeing the harvest. They are speechless. Large squash and beans grow—and the corn is ripe.



1. The Family

1. The Family Summary

The Corn Grows Ripe by Dorothy Rhoads centers on Tigre, a Mayan boy who must clear the bush and plant his injured father's cornfield. Tigre learns how to be responsible and overcome challenges.

In the first chapter, The Family, young Dionisio oversleeps in his hammock. He thinks he should help his father do chores, but he is lazy. He lives with Father, Mother, Great-Grandmother and Concha, his five year-old sister. They live in a little house of trees cut from the bush. Mayans live by the bush in village life. They believe in gods and supernatural beings. Dionisio's nickname is Tigre (Jaguar) because his skin looks like that of a jaguar and he is curious and mischievous.

The Great-Grandmother resents Tigre's laziness. She is hard on him. His three brothers died in a week due to fever. She thinks Tigre's parents should be harder on him. They go easy on him because of his brothers' deaths. Tigre goes hunting with Father.

1. The Family Analysis

Tigre's motivation is to do whatever he wants. He doesn't think of contributing to the family structure. Tigre acts very much like a child, though he is 12 years old. This foreshadows that Tigre may go through a coming of age in the near future. His family may need him to become a man, something his three brothers never lived to be.

Great-Grandmother represents the matriarch of the household. She tells Tigre when he is wrong, even when his parents do not. She disapproves of his behavior and Tigre feels her disapproval. Despite her position of matriarch, she does not overrule Mother and Father's decision to let Tigre be. Thus, she is a silent matriarch, one who can only spread her influence so far.

2. The Milpa

2. The Milpa Summary

In The Milpa, Tigre, Father and Dog go into the bush, which belongs to the gods. Mayans borrow the land; they do not destroy it. There are ancient cities underneath the bush. Tigre gets excited when he sees the temples. He scrapes the bush off a temple wall and sees a jaguar symbol. He feels it will be a good year for their milpa, their cornfield.

Tigre helps Father cut down the bush. It is hard work. Tigre is exhausted but keeps going. He learns what hard work is. They go home after clearing one small corner of bush, and Tigre falls asleep in his hammock.

2. The Milpa Analysis

The discovery of the jaguar symbol symbolizes Tigre may need these qualities to survive this year. The jaguar is curious and mischievous. Tigre may need to employ qualities such as these to help Father cut the bush and plant the cornfield. The jaguar is famous for running very fast. This symbolizes Tigre may have a fast-moving change in his life or may need the physical capabilities of the jaguar to endure this year of cutting and planting.



3. Trouble

3. Trouble Summary

In Trouble, the next morning Father goes to the bush. Tigre feels physically worn down. He chooses to go to school, instead of helping Father. Mother babies Tigre and says he is just a boy and he will help Father tomorrow. Great-Grandmother says Tigre always begins things, but he never finishes them.

Tigre goes to school. He comes to Father lying in the hammock. Two strange men are in the house. Mother is crying and a tree has fallen on Father. Great-Grandmother says he offended the Balams, the corn gods. Father's leg is broken. He had chopped himself free and dragged himself through the bush when the two men found him. Tigre feels guilty. He says this would not have happened if he accompanied Father. Great-Grandmother says it is better he did not go because something might have happened to him. Father needs the medicine man/bonesetter of the head village. Tigre volunteers to go. He sets out on his journey to walk 17 kilometers to the head village.

3. Trouble Analysis

Tigre's motivations change. He wants to do the right thing for Father and the family. He puts his family ahead of his feelings of guilt and his usual laziness. When Tigre volunteers to go, he makes a choice to become a man. This journey represents a coming-of-age for Tigre as he takes the man's role. Tigre slowly changes from boy to man.

Father's injury is a catalyst for change in Tigre. Father must be injured in order for Tigre to go through this major life change. This foreshadows that Father's injury will further push Tigre into change and he will become a man during this planting season.



4. The Journey

4. The Journey Summary

In The Journey, Tigre gets ready for his five-hour, 17-kilometer walk. Tigre has never been in the bush at night. Great-Grandmother packs him food as well as hen and honey for the medicine man. Dog accompanies him. Tigre feels safe in his own village. He sees the Holy Cross. Darkness comes in the bush and he grows scared of the spirits in the dark. He thinks of Great-Grandmother's tales about witches. He knows spirits exist in the light too.

He comes to the head village. The medicine man comes back with him. The journey back is easy. Father is sleeping when they arrive. Great-Grandmother tells Tigre not to worry and everything will be alright.

4. The Journey Analysis

The journey symbolizes Tigre's quest to become a man. He journeys through the bush at night despite his fears. He trudges on with Father and the family in mind. On the journey back, it is easier. Tigre learns a lesson: starting a challenge is the hardest part. Once he overcomes the challenge, the remaining part is easier.

He also learns he needs to leave the safety of the familiar and take risks. Tigre is always safe at home, babied by his parents, at school or in his village. When he journeys out of the village, he realizes that risks are a part of life. He must take risks to accomplish large goals, such as helping Father.



5. Bushing Milpa

5. Bushing Milpa Summary

In Bushing Milpa, the medicine man stays with the family and reads the corn grains. He tells the family Father has offended the corn gods and that it will take him until the harvest to recover. Father is upset because he needs to bush, burn and plant the milpa. Tigre says he will do it. Mother worries about school because the government imposes heavy fines on illiterate children. Tigre will fail his exams. The teacher Don Alfonso volunteers to teach Tigre after school everyday. Don Alfonso says it will not be easy.

Tigre wakes up early and goes with Dog to the bush. At first Tigre thinks he cannot do it. Cutting down bush and studying is too much. He knows Father would not give up. Little by little it becomes easier. In February, Juan Bautista is born. There is another mouth to feed in Tigre's family. As a surprise, he plants not only corn, but beans, squash and chili peppers to sell to those who only grow corn. Tigre works eagerly and finally cuts down the last tree.

5. Bushing Milpa Analysis

Tigre overcomes a major challenge. His motivations are in line with those of Father. They both want to feed the family the best they can. Tigre becomes a man as he realizes this is now his job. However, studying is his job too. He must be literate. Tigre puts effort into both cutting down the bush and studying. Therefore, Tigre is a well-rounded man. He represents a new type of Mayan farmer: one who is literate. Tigre also displays the knowledge of a business man. He strategically plants other vegetables to sell. Tigre takes on many roles now: student, farmer and businessman.



6. Study

6. Study Summary

In Study, Father remains in his hammock. His leg will not heal. His wound opens and closes. The medicine man comes, but nothing works. Father will not walk again until harvest.

Tigre goes to Don Alfonso's house for lessons, which he enjoys. He is a very curious boy and asks intelligent questions. He asks about why fire does not burn live trees. He realizes the sap protects them. Don Alfonso encourages questions, learning, knowledge and curiosity, but Tigre's family does not. They explain everything by way of the gods.

One hen dies, which is bad for Tigre's family. The next day one more hen is dead. They fasten the coop with a stick. The third day two hens are dead. Great-Grandmother says there must be a hole. A vampire bat gets inside. Tigre questions her and asks why a vampire bat would go inside the coop if there are plenty of hens walking around in the neighbors' yards. She says the vampire bat searches for the same blood. Tigre inspects the coop and finds a bat. The bat was inside the whole time.

6. Study Analysis

Father's condition foreshadows that Tigre must take over the entire process of planting the cornfield. He is the sole breadwinner and takes the man's role of his family. Tigre learns to be responsible.

Education helps Tigre understand how nature works and how life works in his world. The Mayans explain everything with the gods. But in reality, there is a scientific reason for almost everything i.e. weather, change of seasons, etc. The bat symbolizes Tigre's advancement in education over his family. Tigre is the man of the family, but he also begins to outgrow his family. He knows more than they do. He learns about science and nature. Tigre's education defines him as a person, but separates him from his family.

7. Burning Milpa

7. Burning Milpa Summary

In Burning Milpa, in March the Mayan Indians burn their milpas. Heat rises up and smoke overtakes the village. It is an oven. Tigre gets excited to burn his milpa. He counts 23 fires in the north, south and east. Father says uncle will come and help Tigre. But uncle is delayed, so Tigre must burn the milpa by himself. Father says the wind gods will help him.

Tigre stands at the edge of the milpa and starts to burn it. The fire catches fast. Smoke is all around Tigre. The wind gods come and burn the milpa. The winds die down. Tigre looks at his milpa. The fire burns his face and ruins his clothes. He had a good burn.

Back at the house, Father states Tigre looks like he had a good burn. Tigre agrees.

7. Burning Milpa Analysis

The burning of the milpa represents a death inside Tigre. The child in Tigre dies, along with the laziness and selfishness. Tigre is no longer a boy. He is a man, who takes man's duties upon himself. Burning the milpa signifies a dangerous, manly duty. Once the milpa burns, Tigre's adult self emerges. He experiences a coming-of-age as he sees his field successfully burned. He and Father can relate to each other on an equal level as they acknowledge that Tigre had a good burn.



8. Anticipation

8. Anticipation Summary

In Anticipation, the next day it rains. The rain is good because it fertilizes the soil. Other men in the village congratulate Tigre because they did not burn their milpas before the rain. Father is happy because they would have had to wait two to three weeks to burn because the land has to dry out before burning. Tigre does a good job. He gets cocky and says there will be a good harvest. Great-Grandmother says not to boast because he has not seen the corn yet.

May 3rd is an upcoming event for the village. It is the day of the Holy Cross. There is a huge festival with dancing, feasting and ceremonies to the patron saint. There are cowboys and bull riders. Tigre makes a rope to enter into the cowboy festival. Father says he is too young, but then stops himself because Tigre already takes on responsibilities of a man. Tigre starts to make the rope, but gets caught up in little boy games. He chases a yuc, or small deer, around with his friends and they shoot it. Tigre feels badly for killing the yuc and goes back to making the rope.

8. Anticipation Analysis

The rope symbolizes Tigre's entrance into full manhood. However, he works on the rope on and off because he is still attracted to little boy games. Thus, he is stuck in a world between manhood and childhood. This world is called adolescence. On one hand, Tigre is a man. He takes on the responsibilities of his family. Father acknowledges him as a man. On the other hand, Tigre is still a boy. He still wants to chase around the deer. Yet when the children shoot the deer, Tigre feels badly. He realizes he has taken a life, a realization of a man. He goes back into the man world by making his rope.



9. The Fiesta

9. The Fiesta Summary

In The Fiesta, it is a hot April and Tigre works on his rope for the upcoming celebration for the day of the Holy Cross. He strengthens his arms and his will. He can now stick to doing things he does not like. The village anticipates May, especially the day of the Holy Cross. All the villagers prepare. They clean the church. The dance platform is ready. The men of the village chop down trees to make the bullring. The villagers paint statues of the saints. On May 3rd no one comes from the neighboring village. On May 4th, however, travelers, the orchestra, bull riders and cowboys all come. It is a day of excitement, music, laughter, dancing, feasting and prayer. There is a huge fiesta. Villagers dress up.

Boys come with their ropes. Tigre sees he cannot win. Some of the ropes are beautiful. They look smooth like glass. The boys put incredible amounts of time and energy into making their ropes. But Tigre's is not the worst rope. He is right in the middle. The boys, including Tigre, must stay the night in the house of the fiesta leader. They cannot sleep the entire night as a test of physical and mental strength.

They go to the bullring. Some boys get hurt. Tigre jumps on a fence post. His family watches him. Tigre goes home. Great-Grandmother mentions the rope and how he was impatient to get it finished. But she says his rope was not the worst one. Tigre says next time, he will do better. She says she believes he is right.

9. The Fiesta Analysis

The rope symbolizes the true spirit of manhood. A man takes his time with the important things in life. He does not rush, as Tigre does with making the rope. A man appreciates the journey of the task. As Great-Grandmother points out, Tigre is not at this level yet. He still has the child in him. The other boys, older and very close to manhood, appreciate the experience of making the rope. They put in an enormous amount of effort.

Tigre is not the laziest anymore because his rope is not the worst. He is right in the middle, advanced for his age compared to some of the older boys, but he does not surpass them. The rope symbolizes the order of men. Some are boys, some are half boys and half men like Tigre, while the rest are almost men. Those who make the best ropes are closest to manhood. Therefore, Tigre has halfway to go.



10. Planting

10. Planting Summary

In Planting, the fiesta is over. The rains have not come. Everyone uses the words "famine" and "drought." It is very scary. One night, it finally rains. The weather assists the villagers. Tigre is up before daylight and he is ready to plant. Great-Grandmother has his bag ready. The earth is finally ready for planting. Father instructs to make holes in the soil with the stick and drop the seeds in each one.

The village is full of hurrying men walking to their milpas. The ground is wet and soft. It is ready for seeds. Tigre pokes a hole with his stick into the soil. He drops a few grains of corn. He also drops beans and squash seeds. He covers the hole with the edge of his sandal and steps down. This is how Tigre plants seeds.

10. Planting Analysis

The idea of planting seeds symbolizes a new life coming forth. The new life is Tigre, a newly informed young man. He is no longer a lazy boy. He is an adolescent who takes on the burdens of his family. He makes good decisions and, so far, is successful. He plants the seeds of his new life and once they spring forth, he will be closer to becoming a good man.

The danger of no rain foreshadows that there may be a drought or famine in the future. The villagers are lucky because rain comes, but next time, they may be in serious trouble. Tigre's hard work could be for nothing.



11. The Hetz Mek

11. The Hetz Mek Summary

In *The Hetz Mek*, in the summer, there is hardly any rain. In June, the first green chutes of corn start to spring forth. The men cannot wait for their harvest. There is sun and heat. There are a few light showers, but nothing to sustain a harvest.

Juan Bautista, known by his nickname of Chan Tata, is four months old. On this day, the family will have the Hetz Mek ceremony for him. It is a ceremony where the baby is carried across the hip for the first time. The family prepares for the ceremony. They all wear their best clothes. Mother's father and mother come. They are the godparents.

There are nine objects on the table that Chan Tata needs during his life: "an ax, a machete, a book, a pencil, a prayer book, grains of corn, a pair of sandals, a planting stick and a piece of money" (*The Hetz Mek*, p. 67). Tigre notices Grandfather has a new gun, which he lays outside, against the house. Tigre notices guns a lot.

Chan Tata is brought in and the ceremony begins. Mother walks him around and picks up all the objects. He is solemn and a good baby. Grandmother says Tigre was merry during his Hetz Mek. He laughed and thought it was a game. Grandfather says he forgot something. He goes outside and comes back carrying the gun. He gives the gun to Tigre, saying he does man's work, so he should have a man's weapon. The family knows of the surprise, but Tigre does not. He is shocked and happy.

11. The Hetz Mek Analysis

The Hetz Mek ceremony represents a coming-of-age in a Mayan baby's life. Like Tigre, Chan Tata must face a challenge. The baby successfully completes the challenge with his solemn personality. He holds each object and seems to understand the seriousness of the ceremony. Chan Tata's name translates to "little father." Thus, Chan Tata seems to be a naturally-born man or caretaker. This is in contrast to Tigre, who laughed throughout his own ceremony. Tigre takes a long time to realize his lessons and become a man. Chan Tata seems to be a man from birth.

The gun represents another step into manhood for Tigre. Mother and Father recognize his entrance into manhood. This confirms that they do because they told Grandfather and Grandmother about Tigre. Tigre gains respect as a man with this gun.



12. Drought

12. Drought Summary

In Drought, the dryness continues. It gets very bad. It is August. The heat continues. The corn dries up in the fields. There are less tortillas to eat. Great-Grandmother says the gods punish the farmers because they no longer engage in prayers or ceremonies. These prayers and ceremonies show respect for the gods and bring rain. The villagers pray and make sacrifices. In church, there is a praying ceremony or vigil. The villagers try to appeal to the saints. They are desperate for rain.

Great-Grandmother talks about her memory of the great drought. Old people and the very young died. Only the strongest people survived. Men killed birds, including holy doves, and ate them. Men ate bark and leaves off trees. The drought happened a long time ago, when she was a little girl, but she remembers it clearly. She starts to eat less and less to save food for the family. Father says Chac, the Mayan rain god, must forgive them.

12. Drought Analysis

Religion motivates the Mayan villagers. The villagers believe the gods control the weather. Back in Mayan times, this was a common belief. Gods explained the mysteries of nature and science. Tigre and the villagers are motivated to engage in religious ceremonies to appeal to the gods. The gods answer prayers; but when the gods do not answer their prayers, they move to extreme forms of religion, such as sacrificing and holding vigils. The end motivation of the villagers is for a good harvest. They seek forgiveness from Chac, the rain god. If he does not forgive them, there will not be a harvest. The villagers stay motivated to gain this acceptance, since it is their only chance for success.



13. Chac Chac

13. Chac Chac Summary

In Chac Chac, the entire village waits for the medicine man to come to the prayer ceremony. Father is not allowed to come because the villagers think he is cursed (due to his injury). The villagers choose Tigre to represent the family. They build the altar. During the ceremony, the family representatives, all men, go down to a well. They pass through the well and come out with holy water. Men and boys go into the bush to find animals for sacrifice. On the third day, it is still hot and cloudless.

During the ceremony, Tigre's friend's father is chosen to represent Kunku Chac, the leader of the rain gods. They pick Tigre to be one of the frogs, which is a great honor. A frog is usually an older boy. Those who are chosen for frogs are seen as lucky to bring rain. The ceremony commences. The medicine man kneels and prays. The men and boys do the same. Kunku Chac rises to his feet. The sound of thunder is heard. The frogs croak. The medicine men still prays. Every man prays for rain.

When the ceremony ends, Tigre goes home. Father asks how it went. Tigre says the men think he is lucky because he was chosen as a frog. Great-Grandmother scolds him for bragging. She says if he is the favorite, why do the rain gods withhold rain from Tigre's harvest? Mother defends Tigre, saying it is an honor to be a frog at 12. Father says he feels the rains will now come.

13. Chac Chac Analysis

The prayer ceremony is the manifestation of the villagers' motivation for rain to come. They have tried everything else, but the situation remains dire. They must employ a prayer ceremony. Throughout the book, the Mayans come together in times of celebration, such as with the May 3rd festival and Hetz Mek. This time, however, they must motivate and come together in a time of danger and need. The Mayans seem to motivate in both happiness and sadness. In fact, in sadness, they go to great lengths to appease the gods. Men and boys are motivated enough to dress up in costume and act out a play. It is the male demographic of the villagers who must take the ultimate responsibility in saving their harvest.

When Father says the rains will come, this foreshadows that the curse has been lifted. The rains will come any day now. The village will hopefully be saved from drought and famine.



14. The Rains Come

14. The Rains Come Summary

In *The Rains Come*, the next day the sun and the heat continue. On the second day there is more sun and heat. The situation seems hopeless. On the third day, Tigre starts to see clouds coming from the east. Tigre shouts that he sees clouds. His family and the villagers hear him. They come out of their houses. They look up into the sky. The clouds spread and fill the sky. The villagers laugh and cry. Children shout about Chac, who saves them. The sound of thunder is heard in the distance. Rain is definitely on its way. Lightning flashes. Wind bends trees and knocks over plants and leaves.

The rain falls hard like an avalanche. The villagers are happy and excited. They believe Kunku Chac, the leader of the rain gods, answer their prayers. Mothers kiss their children. Some villagers shout. Great-Grandmother cries. It is an emotional time for the entire village. Rain falls so hard, mothers usher children inside their houses. Rain beats on the roofs. It is a glorious sound. Tigre lifts up his face and feels the rain on the corn.

14. The Rains Come Analysis

The number three symbolizes happiness and hope for the villagers. The festival of the Holy Cross is on May 3rd, which is a day of celebration and complete happiness. In Chan Tata's ceremony, he has nine objects to hold. Nine is a factor of three. In other words, three times three equals nine. Chan Tata must pick up all nine objects and circle the table nine times. In this chapter, on the third day, the rains come. This represents the ultimate happiness because the villagers will have a harvest. Three seems to bring luck to the villagers and their harvest.



15. Harvest

15. Harvest Summary

In Harvest, it is late September. Father, Tigre and Dog go to their milpa. Father can finally walk again. It is Father's first time seeing the milpa. It rained recently, which is a good change compared to the summer scare of drought. Plants grow and so do beautiful flowers of all colors of the rainbow, such as yellow orchids. Birds sing happily in the green leaves of the trees. Nature flourishes, even in the cool air, and makes the land colorful, beautiful and plentiful.

Father and Tigre sing with the birds. They sing happy songs. The whole year, they dedicated their life and thoughts to the harvest. They have been through a horrible famine scare. Tomorrow is a significant day because they must prepare the earth oven to make roasted ears of corn, called pibil nal. They are excited to see these green ears because they have only been eating dried corn for months. They will offer the first pibil nal to Kunku Chac and the Balams. They will also offer it to San Diego in the church.

They come to their milpa. They are speechless. It is larger than Father has hoped. There are beans on vines and thick squash. These are Tigre's surprise to Father. Lastly, they see stalks droop. The corn is ripe.

15. Harvest Analysis

As Father, Tigre and Dog walk to the milpa, the health of the plants foreshadow a successful harvest of corn. The birds sing. Beautiful flowers grow. Nature is alive and well. These are all positive signs for a healthy harvest. Father and Tigre join in Nature's happiness. They sing happily. The year has been so stressful because of father's injury and the famine scare. It is now time to be happy.

They walk as Father and Tigre, or man and man. They check out the milpa together. They walk as equals, feeling the same emotions of pride and joy. Tigre finally understands the rewards of hard work. He knows what it is like to taste sweet success of overcoming a challenge. The ripe corn symbolizes his rebirth as a young man. He saves the family. He saves Father. These are two things a man does unselfishly. Tigre is finally a young man.



Characters

Dionisio or Tigre

Dionisio or Tigre is a 12-year-old, Mayan boy. He lives in a small Mayan village. His father is a farmer. His family works hard, but Dionisio is lazy. He likes to lie around in his hammock. Mother and Father spoil him because his three brothers died in one week. Dionisio's nickname is Tigre (Jaguar) because he looks like a jaguar and he is curious and mischievous. Everyone calls him Tigre. Tigre loves to ask questions and understand the science of nature. His family cannot help his quest for knowledge because they are not educated. Tigre enjoys his education. It quenches his thirst for knowledge.

In the beginning, Tigre acts like a selfish little boy. However, when Father gets hurt, Tigre must act like man. He takes on the role of the man of the family. He clears the bush, burns the land and plants the cornfield. He is the sole breadwinner of the family. He shoulders the responsibilities of his injured father. He also turns into a businessman because he plants squash, beans and chili pepper as well. He will sell these to others. Tigre changes from a selfish boy into a young man. He understands how much his family needs him and relies on him. He understands the stresses of being a farmer, especially when the drought happens. Most of all, Tigre understands how to overcome life's challenges. He knows when he starts a task, he must finish it and complete it to the best of his ability.

Great-Grandmother

Great-Grandmother is also known as Mamich, or little grandmother. She is Tigre's great-grandmother. She is very old and wrinkled. She lives with the family and helps them with chores. She is stern with Tigre. She thinks he is lazy and his parents spoil him. She disagrees with how they let Tigre do whatever he wants while the rest of the family works. Great-Grandmother gives Tigre disapproving looks or makes nasty comments to him. She is the only person who reminds Tigre that he is selfish. She openly voices her opinion that Tigre needs to work and learn how to be a hard worker. Her voice is strong, but his parents still spoil him.

Great-Grandmother gives Tigre the push he needs when he starts to become a man. She packs his bag every morning before he goes to the field. She encourages his steps toward becoming a farmer. She lives by her own set of rules because she is of the eldest generation. She believes in discipline and humility. She has memories of the great famine when she was a little girl. She watched people die of hunger and men eat tree bark. Great-Grandmother is very wise. She does not give Tigre her approval in order to keep him humble. When Tigre boasts about his successes, she grows angry and warns him against his behavior. She represents reality for Tigre, since she reminds



him of the reality of the situation. Tigre would be lost without her guidance and discipline.

Mother

Mother is Tigre's mother. She is kind and caring. She loves her family and worries about them.

Father

Father is Tigre's father. He is a corn farmer. He breaks his leg, so Tigre must take over planting the cornfield.

Concha

Concha is Tigre's five-year-old sister. She helps the family do chores.

Don Alfonso

Don Alfonso is Tigre's teacher. He teaches Tigre after work and encourages him to ask questions.

Juan Bautista or Chan Tata

Juan Bautista or Chan Tata is Tigre's newborn brother. He is serious and solemn.

Dog

Dog is Tigre's dog. He accompanies Tigre during his journey.

Medicine man

The medicine man or bonesetter comes to help Father with his leg. He also leads the prayer ceremony.

Kunku Chac

Kunku Chac is the leader of the corn gods.



Objects/Places

hammock

A hammock is a net tied onto two trees. The occupant lies down in the middle and sways back and forth. In the book, Tigre and his family use hammocks as beds.

the bush

The bush is the jungle.

Milpa

Milpa is a planted or unplanted cornfield.

tassel

A tassel is a group of stem-like flowers which grow atop the corn stalk.

vaqueros

Vaqueros are cowboys.

Hetz Mek

Hetz Mek is a Mayan ceremony performed for a four month-old baby. The mother walks the baby around a table with nine objects for her/his life. The baby holds each object. The result of the ceremony is the baby can now be carried across the hip.

lelem

Lelem is a machete, or large knife. Kunku Chac uses a lelem to conjure lightning.

atole

Atole is a drink that consists of boiling ground corn in water.



Chac Chac

Chac Chac is a Mayan ceremony to bring rain.

yuc

Yuc is a small deer.



Themes

Adolescence

One major theme of this book is adolescence. Tigre begins the book as a child. He is selfish, thinking only about what is good for him. He is lazy and does not help the family with chores. When Father gets injured, Tigre must take over the role of the man of the house. Tigre is 12 years old, right at the beginning stage of adolescence. He must make a choice. Either he stays a selfish boy or moves onto adolescence by preparing and planting the cornfield. He chooses the latter. Tigre sees what a man's work is. He understands how hard his father works. Additionally, Tigre must attend school lessons after work. He takes on the role of an adult as he works and studies.

Even though he does man's work, he slips back into childhood. For example, he chases a small deer with his friends. They shoot the deer. Tigre feels guilty and returns to the man's world by throwing himself into man's work. As he wavers between these two worlds, one of child and one of man, this signifies he is a true adolescent. Adolescents waver between both worlds as well. Another example is when Tigre makes the cowboy rope for the festival. Rope-making is usually for the older boys, but Tigre takes on a man's duties. His rope is average; it symbolically sits right in the middle. Thus, Tigre is still in the middle, not a man and not a boy. Tigre is an official adolescent now as he tries to manage the man's world and still stay a child at times.

Forgiveness

One major theme of this book is forgiveness. Many characters must learn to forgive. The family has suffered a great tragedy. Three of Tigre's brothers died in one week of fever. Mother and Father must learn to forgive the gods for this tragedy. They seem to do so, and in fact, they conceive and have another boy called Chan Tata. Tigre must learn to forgive himself. He does not clear the bush with Father one day and Father gets hurt. Tigre blames himself for the accident, thinking it never would have happened if he was there. Tigre must forgive himself and move on. He does so by taking a journey and helping Father.

The Mayan villagers are strictly religious. Their gods decide if they will have a plentiful harvest. They pray to Kunku Chac, the leader of the corn gods. They have prayer vigils and make sacrifices, such as killing a hen, for him. They have a Chac Chac, a Mayan prayer ceremony to bring rain. They do all this for the gods to forgive them. They think the gods punish them because they have not done enough ceremonies and prayers. In other words, they have not revered the gods. The Mayan villagers think if the gods forgive them, the rain will come and the drought will be over. They pray very hard. On the third day, the gods forgive them. The rain comes down in sheets. This forgiveness is the greatest gift the Mayan villagers could hope for. It brings them happiness, health and a plentiful harvest.



Borrow From Nature

One of the major themes of this book is borrow from nature. The philosophy of the Mayans is to borrow from nature. They should not possess or destroy nature. They should treat it with respect. Tigre does so when he prepares and plants the cornfield. He cuts through the bush. When he burns the cornfield, he puts nutrients back into the soil by burning it. Then when he plants the cornfield, he uses a simple stick to make holes. He throws seeds in each hole. He does not use primitive machinery or anything harsh to till the soil or plant. He also plants squash and beans, adding to the variety of vegetables. He utilizes the land in the healthiest way possible.

When the harvest comes, Tigre and Father walk to the cornfield. On the way, they observe the beauty of blooming nature. The birds sing happily. The beautiful flowers bloom in a variety of colors from the rainbow. The vegetation of the bush is green and lush. Nothing is destroyed. They have taken care of the land and the land grows back to its natural and healthy state. The cornfield has thick squash and plentiful beans. The corn husks are green and ripe. The land gives the people what they need, as long as they take care of it. Tigre and Father reap the benefits of borrowing from nature. They will even offer the first corn to Kunku Chac, leader of the corn gods. Tigre and Father remember to respect nature at all times.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of the book is third person. This point of view is reliable, proven by the fact that narrator knows the actions of the events Tigre reports on and the observations he makes of other people. The point of view is important to the book because a major aspect of the book is the emotional growth and development of the main character, Tigre. There could not be the dramatic impact of this growth and development if the reader cannot see into Tigre's thoughts and most personal fears. Tigre is a 12-year-old boy who does not have much dialogue, so the point of view gives the reader a deep look into Tigre's mind. The point of view is a close third person because Tigre deals with intense emotions of becoming a man and overcoming the challenges of a man.

The story is told mostly through exposition with some dialogue. The passages have some description and they are short, but they do give a personal look into Tigre's fears and development from boy to man. This method is most likely used in order to keep the reader focused on Tigre. He spends the book cutting the bush, burning and planting a cornfield. The reader must see the experience of farming through Tigre's eyes to understand the full scope of his experience. The reader would be lost if s/he is not privy to Tigre's thoughts. The reader sees when Tigre is fearful, proud or happy, as s/he feels these emotions along with Tigre.

Setting

The setting of the book is a small Mayan village. Tigre lives in a hut-like house. It has a thatched roof. His family sleeps in hammocks, not beds. The house is used for doing chores, especially for cooking meals. The family cooks meals of corn and vegetables. They use the land for everything. Tigre goes into the bush to farm. The bush is a thick jungle. It is scary at night because spirits roam around in the bush, but they also roam around in daylight. On the walk to the cornfield, there are temples hidden under the bush. These ancient temples are of Mayan society. The bush covers everything. Tigre cuts down the bush and burns the land. Smoke and heat fill the village as Tigre and other farmers burn their cornfields.

Once the cornfield is burned, the rains come. They make the soil soft and wet. It is ready for planting. Tigre walks to the bush and plants the cornfield. The cornfield is an open space, now filled with holes. In the holes are seeds Tigre has planted. During the wait for harvest, there is a festival in the village. The village has a bullring, freshly painted saint statues and an altar to the gods. When the drought comes along, the male villagers go into a well to get holy water. They perform a ceremony to bring rain in which each man plays a part. The drought makes the village hot and dry. On the third day, the rain comes, soaking the land. The harvest comes in September. The cornfield is lush



with plentiful corn and vegetables. The bush is green and luscious with beautiful, colorful flowers. The last thing Tigre and Father see is the green stalks of healthy corn.

Language and Meaning

The language of this book tends to be informal. The sentences are constructed in a manner that is common of everyday people, yet the book is set in the time of the Mayans. The sentences follow the complex rules of grammar. Slang is not used. Tigre, the main character, does not have much dialogue. When he thinks, he uses everyday language to express his thoughts and emotions. There are moderately difficult vocabulary words interspersed throughout the text. The language adds a depth to the book that allows the reader a glimpse into the customs, traditions and fears of Tigre's family and the Mayan world in general.

The language of the book tends to characterize the exotic culture of the Mayans. Most of the book is told in exposition. There is not a lot of dialogue. The focus tends to be on the farming experience and the end result of the harvest. Weather is also an important element to the book. The language displays how important weather is to the characters and their harvest. When talking about the weather, the language expresses joy or tragedy. Interspersed throughout the book are Spanish words. There is a glossary in the back for readers to understand their full meanings. The words derive from Mexican or Mayan Spanish. They give meaning to the book by displaying how the Mayans eat, work and celebrate joyous occasions. Many of the words relate to food or the harvest, therefore, the reader sees through the language, how meaningful food is in the Mayan culture.

Structure

The book is comprised of 15 chapters, each approximately five pages long. Each chapter has a number and a name that foreshadows or relates to an event in the chapter. The chapters tend to be normal length for a children's book and have short passages of description. Short amounts of time pass in a few paragraphs. Larger spans of time pass in between chapters; for example, one chapter takes place in April and the next chapter takes place in May. The time line of the book consists of Tigre's life from early spring to fall as he cuts the bush, burns and plants his family's cornfield. Tigre reports the most interesting or important events to him as he prepares for the harvest.

The plot of the book is fairly simple and without subplots. The book is about Tigre, a 12-year-old, Mayan boy who is lazy and selfish. When his father gets injured, Tigre must take on a man's duties of preparing and planting the cornfield. Tigre learns how to overcome challenges and be a man.

The book's pace is fast due to the author's use of short passages and short chapters. The dialogue is quick and to the point. The book is an easy read and the plot engrosses the reader into the world of the exotic Mayan culture. The story line is linear with a few stories from the past, such as Great-Grandmother telling of the famine when she was a

little girl. There are no long sections of back story. The book is quite easy to read and entertaining as a whole.



Quotes

"From the bush came life—corn, animals, healing herbs, wells with water." The Family, p. 16

"The bush belonged to gods, not to man." The Milpa, p. 21

"He is always ready to begin things. He must learn to finish them as well." Trouble, p. 28

"I will make our cornfield. I will finish bushing. I will burn." Bushing Milpa, p. 37

"But an almost inherited ability for learning persists in a few." Study, p. 44

"Great joy filled Tigre. All through the bush, he thought, men are burning as I am burning." Burning Milpa, p. 52

"It was now easier for him to stick to unpleasant things." The Fiesta, p. 58

"Weather was assisting man." Planting, p. 64

"He who does a man's work should have a man's weapons as well." The Hetz Mek, p. 70

"The rain will come." Drought, p. 75

"And in the heart, in the soul, of every man was the silent imploring prayer—Give us rain." Chac Chac, p. 79

"And all about them, stalks drooping with their precious burdens, the corn grew ripe." Harvest, p. 83



Topics for Discussion

What do Mayans keep sacred in this book? What do their rituals say about Mayan culture? How does Tigre go against Mayan culture?

How is religion viewed by the Mayans? Do they worship the gods unselfishly or with selfish purpose? What do the gods represent for the Mayans?

What does this book say about education? Is it useful or does it make Tigre an outcast? How does Tigre use education to advance himself? Do the Mayan villagers and Tigre's family use education in any way?

Are the female characters strong or weak in this book? Who is the strongest female character and why? Who is the weakest and why? Do the male characters treat the females as equals or inferiors?

What does the corn represent, beside food? How does corn shape the life of this Mayan village? What does Tigre learn about the importance of corn?

What does Chan Tata represent? He is a solemn and serious baby. How is he the opposite of Tigre? Will he grow up to be like Tigre?

Describe Tigre's coming-of-age. What lessons does he learn? How does he change as a person? Is he a man by the end of the book?