

# Jumping Off to Freedom Short Guide

## Jumping Off to Freedom by Anilu Bernardo

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## Overview

Jumping Off to Freedom is a harrowing account of life under the communist government in Cuba and of the desperate escape by four people from Cuba to America. David, the central character, begins the novel in jail where he has been held for questioning about the butchering of a stateowned cow. Although he had little to do with the crime, the mere fact that he came under suspicion means that he will be watched by the government for the rest of his life. One false step and he would go to prison to stay.

Partly because of the threat to David and partly because of the sheer misery of his family's existence, David's father Miguel decides to build a boat that he and his son could use to escape to Florida where he hopes to find work and to gain the release of his wife and daughter from Cuba. Such is the nearly intolerable fear of daily life in Cuba that others want to join the father and son on their trip, and two men make their way onto the boat, perhaps overloading it. To "jump off" is Cuban slang for "casting off on raft voyages" to escape Cuba, and much of the novel is an action-packed thriller as David and the three men flee patrols, encounter persistent sharks, cling to life through a fierce storm, and endure the elements of nature. The experience strips them to their essential personalities, driving one nearly mad and revealing hidden strengths of character in David and the ominous Toro.

## About the Author

Ann Reynold (maiden name Anilu Bernardo) writes from the heart in *Jumping Off to Freedom*, because she was born in Cuba and as a child fled the island nation to the United States in 1961, her own jumping off to freedom. She grew up in Miami, Florida and attended Coral Gables High school. She earned a B.A. in Spanish in 1971 from Florida State University, and then she eventually received an M.A. in communications in 1980. She, her husband Jim, and daughters Stephanie and Amanda presently live in Plantation, Florida.

Like many authors for young people, Bernardo began writing as a youngster, originally composing stories and poems in her native Spanish.

Her first published book *Fitting In* is a collection of short stories and was published as part of the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project at the University of Houston. *Fitting In* tied with Margaret Wiley's *Facing the Music* for the Paterson Prize for Books for Young People for grades 7 through 12, and the magazine *Stepping Stones* gave the 1996 *Stepping Stones Book Award* for children's literature to *Fitting In*.

Bernardo participates in the Florida Romance Writers organization and meets in a critique group with fellow writers.

# Setting

The opening events of *Jumping Off to Freedom* begin in Cuba with David's arrest. David, his family, and his girl friend Elena live in a society in which a "groundless suspicion by the neighborhood committee or a neighbor's envy were enough to earn a report and a swift trip to the local detention center." Fear of the government is part of everyday life and underlies much of people's behavior. Whether they are doing something as fundamental to ordinary life as trying to find food for their families or whether they are trying to do something as foolhardy as escape the island by boat, people try to hide what they are doing not only from the government but from friends and neighbors—anyone could be a government spy—and even putting some meat on the table could be cause for investigation.

David's family, friends, and neighbors are so poor they all go without many of the basics of life. Food is scarce and expensive, and people fish and forage for food to supplement their unpleasant diets. With meat scarce, the government supplies people with soy meal that looks like ground beef but tastes horrible. The food supplied by the government is never enough; what is supposed to last four weeks cannot last two. David's mother Rosa treasures her one pair of leather shoes sent to her by a cousin in Florida, and when she sells them she is left barefoot. Telephones are rarities and those who have one share it with neighbors. Buildings and streets are rundown and dirty, with retail stores no longer open because there is no one who could afford to buy anything they might sell. Only the murals extolling the virtues of communism are well maintained.

From the bitter misery of life under a dictatorship the setting shifts to the sea between Cuba and Florida. Miguel and David have built a sturdy boat, using buoyant foam, wood, and other materials scavenged for them by Luis, who has bargained his way into being included in the escape. Toro has the right to drive a truck, and he uses the truck to transport materials to David and Miguel's home. When he bulls his way onto the boat, he possibly overburdens it. The sea is a frightful place, first haunted by patrol boats that will pursue rafters not only into international waters but into the territorial waters of the sovereign country of the Bahamas. Then the hot sun, a storm, food and water deprivation, and sharks threaten the lives of the boat's passengers, making every moment an ordeal that is endured only for the hope of freedom. When David and the others see a battered raft of truck inner tubes and wooden planks with no one on board after the storm, they feel the desperation of their plight. The people who had jumped off on the battered raft had perished, their hopes for freedom ending in anonymous deaths.



# Social Sensitivity

The essential attractions of *Jumping Off to Freedom* are the daring escape across the sea and the evolution of the principal characters, but it is also plainly a book concerned with social issues. Cuba is the last communist regime in the New World. This makes Cuba of special interest to people interested in politics or the issues of human rights. Bernardo paints a bleak picture of a Stalinist state in which people have little say in what happens in their lives. The only freedom of choice available seems to be in criminality, and nearly everyone seems to be a criminal to some degree. Mothers buy food from illicit sources in order to feed their families; workers pillage carelessly stored goods. Toro has gained his reputation for fearlessness partly through bravado and partly through using his truck to make illegal shipments. He has gained a tiny degree of freedom by stealing meat from the government and selling it or giving it to others. A man of fundamental decency who gives the meat he had taken from the butchered cow to Pepe's family rather than selling it, Toro appears to be a dangerous renegade because criminal behavior is the only way he can better his life.

The issue of the *balseros*, the people who flee Cuba on rafts and boats, is also significant. Cuba, the United States, the Bahamas, and those who sail freighters and other ships through the seas around Cuba (some *balseros* end up heading south to the Dominican Republic or are driven eastward or westward by the elements), have had to contend with the problem of people desperate for liberty sailing in decrepit boats, homemade boats and rafts, and even individually in inner tubes or holding on to pieces of wood (apparently hoping to swim the distance from Cuba to Florida). Bernardo seems very knowledgeable about the experiences of the *balseros* and does not exaggerate the danger or their suffering. In *Jumping Off to Freedom*, a freighter passes the refugees by: There was no mistaking it. The crew had seen them.

"I had heard of ships passing up stranded rafters, but I didn't believe anyone could be so cold blooded," David said, robbed of enthusiasm.

"They claim it's too inconvenient," Toro said in anger. "they have to wait in port and stick to the government's procedures when they rescue rafters."

"How can they live with themselves?"

Rescuing people stranded at sea would seem to be a simple issue, but as Bernardo points out, it is not simple; ships will pass by *balseros*, leaving them to die. Is this an issue that governments should settle? Does such behavior violate international laws governing ships at sea? These questions go unanswered, but the issue is one likely to stir the hearts of young adults.

Those nations on whose shores the *balseros* may land have different policies regarding the refugees; the Bahamas seem to lack the resources to keep Cuban patrol boats away from some of their more remote islands, which means the guards may violate Bahamian borders in pursuit of the *balseros*. Each nation has laws governing the



processing of refugees, and there is the concern that some refugees may be true criminals and not political refugees. The Cuban government has at least once released murderers and other dangerous criminals and sent them on their way to the United States, where some of them committed crimes such as armed robbery, drug dealing, and murder. Thus the United States requires an investigation of nearly arrived baltersos before they may legally remain in America. Delays in the processing of refugees often results in anger and disappointment for people seeking better lives in the United States. Even so, as *Jumping Off to Freedom* illustrates, America offers the promise of opportunity; David and his companions want to live where they just have the chance of bettering their lives through hard work.



## Literary Qualities

The narrative of *Jumping Off to Freedom* uses the sea voyage as both a test of emotions and a literary device through which David can come-of-age. In this dual context, David must face the extreme stress of a life-threatening situation, and his reactions to that pressure reveal the essence of his changing nature and personality. During the voyage he must grow in order to survive; retaining his prejudices could prevent his cooperating with his companions, and without cooperation they could all die. An interesting foundation for his growth is his compassion. His sensitivity to others is evident in his concern for his mother's shoes and his concern for Elena's safety. It is also evident in his attitude toward Luis for whom he feels pity more than anger, even when Luis endangers himself and the others. When David can extend his compassion to Toro, he has made a significant breakthrough in his personal evolution—he has become able to include people who are unpleasant under the canopy of his compassion. The testing demands of this ordeal have not brutalized his nature but have actually developed, strengthened, and extended his character. His bravery and fierce struggle to survive do not make him contemptuous of the weak, bullying, or combative. They give him instead an understanding of weakness in others and the ability to interact with them in an honest and forthright way.





## Themes and Characters

"Every goat, pig and cow is numbered and accounted for," declares Miguel, pointing out that the Cuban government owns all the nation's farm animals and keeps track of them. This sets forth one of the central themes of *Jumping Off to Freedom*, life under a repressive government. People have few choices in their lives; they are told where to go and what work they shall do. Advancement consists primarily of gaining a privilege from the government such as a license to drive or a registered bicycle. Access to food is limited and regulated by the government. A fruit-bearing tree in a backyard is a treasure.

The Cuban government, police, and military are shown as relentlessly intolerant of dissent and independent behavior. To survive people try to make whatever they are doing look ordinary, and they try not to be found anyplace where they might not usually go. The government prefers to punish malcontents rather than just let them leave Cuba. For those jumping off to freedom, government patrol boats offer only fear, without hope of help: Miguel didn't dare voice his fears.

He knew the danger in store for them was more malevolent than David's concern. He had heard that patrol boat crews destroyed rafts even with people still clinging to them, forcing the drowning men and women to climb into the patrol boat. Their methods included water cannons to dislodge the people and sink the vessel, or heavy sand bags dropped to break apart the flimsy materials that kept them afloat. Often, the sand bags landed on an unfortunate rafter, taking him under along with the remains of the raft.

Whether their quarry was taken back for punishment or received his punishment at sea, the guards had accomplished their orders.

That people risk such harsh treatment and retribution for a slim chance of crossing the sea to the United States shows their desperation. The repressive government creates lives of fear and desperation as it denies people freedom to move, to find employment, and even to speak what is on their minds.

How the yearning for freedom can overcome one's fears is another significant theme. Miguel and Toro best know the dangers of a sea voyage on a homemade boat made out of scraps yet they risk everything to escape Cuba. Miguel is motivated by the dangers to his son of a cruel government that now has David on file as a potential troublemaker; he also finds his family's misery almost intolerable and hopes to be able to free them. Toro has lived on the edge of legality, and he now fears identification and arrest after the capture of his partner in the butchering of a cow. Once his girlfriend rejects him, he has many reasons to flee Cuba and little beyond his sister to make him wish to stay in such a freedomless country. Luis's reasons are simple and elemental; he finds life in Cuba beyond toleration and yearns to live in a country where his hard work will bring him rewards. For David, America promises opportunities to grow and to better himself. They know that they face sharks, patrol boats, witheringly hot sun, storms, and other hazards that could easily kill them, yet they risk their lives on the hope that they might be



fortunate enough to survive a passage to a foreign, unfamiliar, and chaotically energetic country where they at least might hope to improve their lives.

One of the outstanding aspects of *Jumping Off to Freedom* is how well the characters are developed. Bernardo defies stereotypes and even reaches beyond them. Toro is the character likeliest to be a stereotype. He is a loudmouth who makes cruel jokes and who forces his way onto David and Miguel's little boat. He also seems to have a history of betrayal since he supposedly abandoned to the police his partner in the butchering of the cow. Toro can be cruel to the point of villainy as, when on the boat, he teases Luis who has gradually become mentally unbalanced by the ordeal of their escape. To make matters more ominous, he thinks about taking over command of the boat. Toro notes that Miguel has weakened himself by relinquishing his ration of water so that David may have more, and soon he may have to take charge because Miguel will be too weak. It is in Toro's observation of Miguel's foregoing water—something missed by David—that a clue to his strengths is found: he is a perceptive observer. From the very unpromising beginning of a man given to bravado, bullying, and cruel jokes, grows a better man. When David explores the raft they find at sea, Toro helps even at risk to himself; he could have let David go, keeping their meager supplies for himself.

About Miguel, Toro says, "The wind picked up early this morning. The sea is choppy . . . We should tie him to the beams so he doesn't get washed off."

Eventually, he shares his personal supplies with the others because "sharing was the only decent choice."

The potential stock villain turns out to be someone much more interesting—a man with personal weaknesses but with an underlying foundation of moral decency. Character growth is one sign of good characterization, and in Toro's case his character grows logically out of the events he endures.

David also grows in what is for him a coming-of-age story. He is a very angry fifteen-year-old in Cuba who sees only a future of inescapable misery for himself and those he cares about. He is suspicious of everyone, even his girl friend Elena, to whom he is overbearing. His sea journey is the catalyst for many positive changes in his character; he learns to be less dogmatic in his opinions, more forgiving of those around him, and more careful in making judgments about others.

David in Cuba was totally certain in his judgments: there were good guys and bad guys and he knew one from the other. During the sea voyage David learns not only that the seemingly cruel Toro can have a good character, but that he can have wrong opinions and make false judgements.

When Toto reveals that he is Tomas Pico, the man who supposedly left his partner to be captured by the police, David shouts, "You are the one who left Pepe behind! That was you. Wasn't it?"; he will not listen to Toro's explanation. He soon realizes, however, that "He'd found that Toro could be unselfish and brave. In spite of his low opinion of Luis, he had put the man's life above his." Then David realizes that "his anger for the man was

no longer driving him. He'd had reason to be angry before. But that was on dry land, at a time when their human struggles were measured in standard scales." This is a mature realization on David's part, a sign that he is leaving childish petulance behind and is crossing the psychological divide between youth and manhood.



## Topics for Discussion

Note: *Jumping Off to Freedom* involves some intense moral issues and would be a good work to use as the foundation for a discussion of ethics.

1. Why are the characters in *Jumping Off to Freedom* so very secretive? Are they too paranoid?
2. Should the people in the novel be sent to prison if they kill and butcher a cow that does not belong to them?
3. Cuban police track down David because his bicycle is registered to him. Do you own a bicycle that has a license? Should you be worried that the police can use that license to keep track of you?
4. "You simply do what's right," says Toro to explain why he swam after Luis to rescue him. Was that smart? Should he have let Luis go and not have risked dying himself?
5. Why do the males speak to the females harshly? Do they lack respect for women?
6. Toro turns out to be a good man.  
  
Is this surprising? Does Bernardo do a good job of showing how an outwardly intimidating man could really be a compassionate and courageous man?
7. When does David stop being an angry boy and become a man?
8. Should anyone help the Cuban refugees flee Cuba?
9. What should the United States do to help Cuban refugees?
10. Why do the women not accompany the men on their journey? Are the reasons good ones?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What is the history of the balseros, the people who flee Cuba on rafts and boats? What motivates them to take the terrible risks that they do?
2. How long has Cuba had a communist government? What government did it replace? How did it replace the previous government?
3. What is life like for a fifteen-year-old boy or girl in Cuba? What aspects of that life appear in *Jumping off to Freedom*?
4. Why are young people sent into farmlands to harvest crops? What is the experience like for them? Are grownups also sent into the farmlands?
5. What property in Cuba does not belong to the government? Why not?
6. Why would the Cuban government want to prevent malcontents like the balseros from leaving Cuba? After all, the refugees in Florida often send American currency to relatives in Cuba, and that currency will find its way into the Cuban economy.
7. Is taking government goods the way Luis does for building the boat not stealing? Has he done something bad? If someone stole from an American naval station would he not have committed a crime? Where is the moral and ethical ground between stealing on the one hand and escaping tyranny on the other?
8. What has been the effect of the Cuban refugees on Miami and southern Florida? What roles do they play in the economy? How many have become American citizens? How do they affect local politics?
9. What opportunities await David in America? What challenges will he face? Will he go to school? What challenges await the men he escaped with?
10. How do teenaged Cuban refugees adjust to Florida's society?
11. Men and women seem to have very different roles in the Cuban society portrayed in *Jumping Off to Freedom*. What are their different roles in modern Cuban society? How are their roles shaped by their culture?
12. What rights does a person accused of a criminal act have in your community that David does not have in *Jumping Off to Freedom*?
13. What happens, if anything, to the families in Cuba of those who have fled Cuba?
14. What species of shark live between Cuba and Florida? Which ones are dangerous to humans? What makes them dangerous to humans?



15. Do Cuban patrol boats violate national boundaries in pursuit of refugees? If so, how often? How do the governments of the nations whose borders have been violated react to the intrusions?

16. What is the Brothers to the Rescue? What do they do? How many people have they helped to rescue?

17. David is not related to Elena, which means he cannot help her to come to Florida the way he and his father can help his mother and sister.

Are there any ways that he can help come to Florida, or have they lost each other forever?

## For Further Reference

Larson, Berry. *School Library Journal* 42, 7 (July 1996): 98. According to Larson, "David's story is a political statement, a study in group dynamics, and a coming-of-age novel." He criticizes the novel for overstated character development.

O'Mally, Anne. *Booklist* 92, 17 (May 1, 1998): 1498. "The writing style may be as choppy as the sea at times, and readers may wonder about these boat people's seamless arrival in the Florida keys, but survival story fans and readers looking for breath taking action will not be disappointed."

## Related Titles

Fitting In is a collection of short stories about teenaged Cuban girls coming of age in Miami. Their efforts to fit in the somewhat alien American culture are movingly portrayed.





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