

Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida Study Guide

Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida by Victor Martinez

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Plot Summary

In *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*, written by Victor Martinez, is the coming of age story of Manuel Hernandez. Manuel, who is also known as Manny, is a young boy growing up in the projects. He lives with his parents, one brother, and two sisters. His father says that Manny is like a parrot in an oven who sits in the shade and complains about the heat. Though the saying is usually indicative of a person who is stupid, Manny's father is using it to describe Manny's trusting nature. He says that Manny is too naïve about the true character of people. Manny sometimes exhibits a deep understanding of others; but, he also gets into a dangerous situation by trusting too much.

Manny's father has been out of work for some time as the story opens. He hates the idea of being dependent on "the welfare," which means the family struggle financially. Manny's mother, Rebecca, hates that her husband is willing to refuse help while his family is in such a serious situation. When Manny's father is floundering with no real direction in his life, he often goes to Rico's Pool Hall. Rebecca compares that to pouring milk down the drain, meaning he is wasting money the family needs for necessities. At one point, Rebecca forces Manny to go with her to make Manny's father come home. She embarrasses her husband in front of the men he considers to be his peers and the fight erupts into violence. Manny's father chases his wife with a gun, and the police arrive to arrest him. Rebecca seems glad to have her husband arrested; but, she's excited when he's served his time and returns home. They pledge to do better toward each other and their responsibilities. Manny's father does find a job.

Manny has an older sister named Magda. Magda works hard at a laundry on a job she hates. She is interested in boys, though her mother tries to keep her from having a boyfriend. One day, Magda arrives home in serious pain, and Rebecca realizes that her daughter is having a miscarriage. Manny is worried about his sister. He sees the tiny fetus that is born very premature and dead on the bathroom floor. They go to the emergency room where they are forced to wait for a long time along with others in dire need of medical attention. It's obvious that the system is overtaxed and the people in need of health care are paying a heavy price. Later, Magda is feverish and ill, but Rebecca says there's no money to take her back to the doctor.

Manny's older brother is named Bernado, whom everyone calls Nardo. Nardo is known as a lazy person because he tries to get out of work when he can. When Manny and Nardo are tasked with cleaning their grandmother's garden, Nardo is the first to quit the job. Later, Nardo gets a job delivering medicine for a drug store and seems to be working harder at taking responsibility for himself.

Manny continues to attend school and his grades are good. His mother briefly tries to send him to a better school but it doesn't work out. Manny sees some other students who get better classes and educational opportunities, and he wishes he could have those things.



He becomes involved with a group of boys who are loosely affiliated but have no established gang ties. One day, one of them shoves an older woman down and steals money from her purse. Manny is caught off-guard by the act and chases his friend down the street. When the police arrive, it's obvious that someone thought Manny was trying to chase down the thief. He recognizes that it was a near miss with the police. He returns home to find Magda asleep on the couch with their younger sister, Pedi. Manny takes a seat and watches the girls sleep. He realizes that this is what is most important in his life.



The Baseball Glove

Summary

In Chapter 1, "The Baseball Glove," Manuel Hernandez, known as Manny, is the narrator. Manny says his older brother is Bernardo, but everyone calls him Nardo. Nardo has had a lot of different jobs, including dishwasher, busboy, fry cook, and parking attendant. He lost one because he didn't show up regularly and another because the boss hated him. Nardo says he liked the job as a busboy at a high-end catering service. He was fired when, acting on a dare, he pretended to be a guest and his boss found him dancing with a girl.

Nardo and Manny get a chance to work in the field. Nardo obviously doesn't want to but he can't avoid his mother's "accusing eyes," especially because their sister, Magda, works hard at a laundry. Everyone tries to push Nardo into getting another job. Their father rants about his "good-for-nothing son" and even tries to make Nardo join the military, saying he'll sign the papers for Nardo to join since Nardo isn't old enough to join on his own. Manny's father had worked as a translator, even though his English was less-than-perfect, but is now unemployed. He spends a lot of time talking about getting a job, but hasn't yet.

Manny says his grandfather was a hard worker all his life, and that he stayed busy even at the end of his life when his mind was no longer functioning fully. He refers to his grandfather's "useful blood." Manny himself feels the need to stay busy with something. In the past, he worked with his cousins selling fruit for his uncle. School will be starting soon for Manny and he knows that he needs money for clothes and school supplies. He also desperately wants a new baseball mitt. Their father is thrilled when Manny and Nardo head off to the fields to pick chili peppers.

When they arrive, the foreman says they have come too late in the day. He finally agrees that they can pick from a row that has limited peppers near the road. No one else wants to pick that row. Nardo and Manny agree and begin to work. They pick for a long time and get only a small number of peppers. It's really hot, and the smell of the peppers burns the throats of the pickers.

Suddenly, many of the pickers drop what they're doing and begin to run from the fields. Manny sees vans and a bus arrive from an adjacent field. He realizes that immigration officials have arrived to look for illegal immigrants. Officials catch many of the runners and put them on the bus. One of the men who ran is released. He tells them that he isn't illegal. He had run because he panicked when he saw the officials. Some of the people are angry as they talk about the uncaring immigration officials.

When the situation is over, the few people remaining begin to turn their attention back to the fields. One man grabs a bag filled with peppers that an illegal picker had harvested, and declared that he was keeping them. Others rush to do the same. Nardo collects a



big bag and announces that he and Manny will cash in on that one. He says Manny will even have enough money to buy his mitt. Manny thinks about the work that went into picking those peppers. He thinks about being on the baseball team at school. He wonders how long it would have taken him to pick those peppers and the thought makes him weary.

Analysis

Since the story is narrated from the limited point of view, there are some things that are never fully explained. The family's finances are one of those situations. When family members are old enough to work, they are expected to do so. Magda works at a laundry. Apparently, her job is hard, manual labor. Manny says that Nardo can't avoid his mother's accusing stare, "especially" because Magda returns home from her hard work. She is staring because Nardo is expected to help with the family's survival, too. The help of both Magda and Nardo is even more important since their father is out of work. Manny needs money to buy his school supplies and clothes, and he wants a baseball glove. It may be that he isn't yet expected to help with the family's finances because he is so young.

Manny uses the term "useful blood" to describe his grandfather's attitude about work. The term indicates that his grandfather needed to work in order to feel that he was doing what he should be doing. Manny feels this as well and says that he's empty without something constructive to do.

The work in the field is brutal. Manny notes that some of the women wear handkerchiefs over their mouths and noses to help cut down on the burning sensation from picking. He also notices that there are some men who are very good pickers. Manny compares himself to these men, saying their hands are a blur of action while he picks like he's "stirring warm honey." Nardo says the men are "wetbacks," indicating that they are illegal immigrants who pick produce all the time. These men are fast because it's how they provide for their families and themselves. They work hard, even though the work is difficult. The hard work examples the lifestyle of the immigrants.

An interesting point in this chapter is that Manny never reveals whether or not he bought his baseball glove. He doesn't say what he does with the money he and Nardo made from the peppers. There is no further mention of earning money for a new glove.

Discussion Question 1

List Manny's family members and what you know about each at this point. Add to the list as more information becomes available.

Discussion Question 2

Describe the situation with immigration officials arriving in the chili pepper field.



Discussion Question 3

Why does Manny say he is like his grandfather? What is the significance of the term “useful blood?”

Vocabulary

vigorously, simmering, translator, miserably, sliver, cheery, flourish, frenzied, commotion, frenzied, veered, cordon



Rico's Pool Hall

Summary

In Chapter 2, "Rico's Pool Hall," Manny says that his father spends a lot of time at Rico's Pool Hall. He and his friends spend their days talking about ways to make money and "escaping back to Mexico." Manny says some of those men were born in the United States.

Manny's mother hates it when her husband goes to Rico's. She says that he is wasting money. Sometimes, she makes Manny go get his father and sometimes she goes along. One specific day, Manny, his mother, and both his sisters are in the car bringing their father home. Manny's father hates the Gracias, a family in the neighborhood. Manny's father once bought a croquet set and the Gracias ruined the set. Manny's father makes a rude comment about the Garcia boys as he passes them on the way to the his family's apartment.

Manny's father doesn't have a job. Manny's mother mentions that some of the men from the neighborhood have jobs provided by welfare programs. Manny's father goes into a rant about how "The Welfare" has to know all about a person's life before providing help. He says that he won't be reduced to begging. Manny's mother asks if it's better to "let the kids starve." After a brief argument, Manny's father says he'll get a job. Then, he rushes into the house.

Manny's mother heads inside and Manny knows their argument will escalate. He decides to leave. He goes across the parking lot where he encounters the Gracias brothers who are tormenting a dog. The Gracias leave the dog and confront Manny. They refer to the comment Manny's father made earlier. When Manny gets away from them, he decides he'll go home rather than risk confronting them again. His mother is watching television, and his father is obviously angry that she's "swooning" over a movie star. When he tries to head back to Rico's Pool Hall, the car won't start. So, he sets out walking across the parking lot. The Gracias follow him from a distance. They toss pebbles in his direction, though they never get too close. Manny and his mother stand at the window and watch.

Analysis

Desiring a better life is a theme explored in Chapter 2. Manny says that his father and the other men at Rico's Pool Hall spend hours talking about jobs and schemes for making money. Also, some of the illegal immigrants who had sneaked across the border to do menial work in America are talking about "escaping" America and returning to Mexico. It seems that everyone wants something they don't have.

Manny's father has the attitude that "The Welfare" is an invasion of privacy and that he would be begging if he accepted it. When Manny's mother mentions that other men in



the area have jobs provided by welfare programs, Manny's father goes off on a rant. He says that the government would make a copy of his drivers license if he applied for welfare. His attitude examples another theme about the distinction between social classes. He believes that when the poor seek benefits, the government gets overly involved in their lives. The government stays out of the lives of those who don't need assistance.

The time spent by Manny's father at the pool hall could be spent looking for a job. This behavior examples a crucial part of Mr. Hernandez's character, one that will only change when he's faced with serious consequences.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Manny's father want to spend time at Rico's Pool Hall? Why does Manny's mother disapprove?

Discussion Question 2

Who are the Garcias? What is their role in the neighborhood?

Discussion Question 3

What is Manny's father's attitude about "the welfare"?

Vocabulary

schemes, yanked, raucous, riled, pursed, indignant, weasely, sullenly, ornery, flinching, harranguing



Charity

Summary

In Chapter 3, Charity, Manny's mother decides that Manny should attend a different school. She wants him to transfer to the school where most of the white students are educated because she believes he will get a better education there. When Manny goes to the school to get his records, he encounters a very unhelpful woman. As a result, he isn't able to get what he needs. His father believes Manny should drop out of school and get a job washing dishes.

While Manny is waiting to catch the bus home, a teacher named Mr. Hart arrives. He learns that Manny is considering transferring to the Hawthorne School, and he says that Manny has the grades to succeed there. He offers Manny a ride home. Manny tries to refuse, but Mr. Hart insists. He asks if Manny has enough money to buy school supplies for the coming year. Manny assures him that he does, but Mr. Hart gives Manny 20 dollars anyway. Manny is obviously uncomfortable and changes how he speaks when addressing Mr. Hart. However, he can't find a polite way out of the situation. Eventually, he accepts the ride.

During the drive, Manny comments about the nice neighborhoods they pass. Mr. Hart seems to know that Manny is scared about the potential of moving to another school. He says that it's, "just another place to live." When they reach the complex where Manny lives, Mr. Hart pulls into a parking space and gets out to greet Manny's father. Manny knows his father won't approve of a white man driving Manny home. His father is coldly polite. Mr. Hart leaves quickly. As soon as he's gone, Manny's father digs in Manny's pocket and finds the 20-dollar bill. He says he knows people like Mr. Hart, and he walks away with the money.

Analysis

Manny's parents have vastly different attitudes about work and success. Manny's mother believes that Manny should attend a better school to get a better education. Manny's father believes Manny should drop out and get a job immediately. Manny says his father compares people to money with some people worth a lot and others worth a dollar or even a quarter, dime, or nickel. He says people like the Hernandez family are worth a penny. He also cites his father's belief that people should start at the bottom and work their way up; however, the people he knows only work their way sideways. This is an important example of the family's financial and social situation. They don't really believe they can have a better life, even though they talk about it.

The theme of social class distinction is again exemplified in Chapter 3 by Manny's encounter with Mr. Hart. Mr. Hart says that Manny could succeed in the "white" school, which indicates that he believes there is a difference between the schools. He also



gives Manny 20 dollars, indicating that he knows Manny probably doesn't have enough money for school supplies. It's important to note that Manny is embarrassed about his torn shoes while he's talking to Mr. Hart and that he's too embarrassed to say that changing schools is just his mother's dream. This indicates that Manny is very aware of the differences between social classes.

Manny says that he changes his speech patterns when he talks to Mr. Hart. He begins using what he calls "organized English." He's referring to the use of proper language skills. There are a couple of important points here. The first is that Manny sees Mr. Hart as an authority figure and believes he should speak properly when addressing Mr. Hart. The second is that Manny recognizes the difference between the rough language he uses in his everyday life and the proper English that he is able to speak when he feels it's necessary. Manny's action of changing his speech patterns when talking to Mr. Hart examples his respect for authority. It can also be seen as an extension to the theme of social class.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Manny changes how he speaks when he's around people like Mr. Hart?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the reaction of Manny's father to Mr. Hart's interest in Manny.

Discussion Question 3

Why does Manny's mother want him to attend a better school? What is Manny's father's attitude about education?

Vocabulary

upping, official, smear, spangles, blandly, beholden, sophisticated, glazed, croaking



The Bullet

Summary

In Chapter 4, The Bullet, Manny's father uses the 20 dollars for drinking. He goes on a binge and is gone for 2 days. Manny's mother finally insists they go bring him home. Manny isn't happy about it. Even though he's hungry, but he goes with his mother. At Rico's, Manny's mother berates her husband in front of everyone. Rico refuses to give him any more to drink, and Manny's father leaves the pool hall. Manny expects his father to strike out, but he doesn't. He calls Manny a parrot, which is a reference to an old story. His mother quickly realizes that Manny's father is angrier than he's letting on.

Manny and his mother return home. His mother sends Magda to visit a friend and leaves Manny to take care of Pedi while she goes to a neighbor, Sophie, to get her hair done. Manny's father arrives home and reads a note left by Manny's mother. He rants about her plans to leave him. Manny tries to calm him down but his father begins to search for bullets for his gun. Pedi wakes and tries to help look for the bullets while Manny continues to urge his father to calm down.

Manny follows his father outside in time to see him chasing Rebecca across the yard, her hair in curlers. He doesn't actually fire the gun, but it's obvious Rebecca is afraid. Then Manny hears the sound of a police siren. They all rush back inside just as the police arrive. Rebecca hides the gun but the police see it. Manny's father insists that he doesn't have a gun and that there isn't a problem. One of the officers quickly finds the gun under a bed. He says that they will have to confiscate it. Manny's father objects. One of the officers says they are taking the gun and that the only way Manny's father can get it back is to go to the police station with them. Manny's father continues to say that they can't take his gun. The officers place him under arrest for possession of an illegal firearm. Rebecca becomes angry that her husband won't simply let the police take the gun and yells out that she doesn't care if he is arrested.

After his father and the police are gone, Manny asks how long it will be before his father gets out of jail. Rebecca says that they will want her to pay the bail, and she knows she won't have the money. She says he'll just have to stay in jail until they let him out. Manny goes to Pedi's room. She's crying and hot from all that has happened. Manny gives her one of the bullets she had wanted earlier, and she begins to settle down.

Analysis

Even though Manny is a child, he can see some details about his parents that they can't see in each other. For example, he knows that his mother feels bad about her actions at Rico's Pool Hall. She never meant to embarrass her husband, but that's exactly what happened. When she gets home, she immediately goes to a Sophie's house to get her hair done. Manny's father begins to pace and rant about the fact that she's going to



leave him. Manny knows that his mother is trying to make herself more attractive for her husband as a way of making up – at least to some small degree – for her actions earlier. Manny's father doesn't see anything past his anger.

There is a scene in which Manny's father makes a mess of things as he's searching for bullets. He shoves things off the shelves and creates chaos as he's searching. Manny looks at the items he's shoving and compares that to a better time in their lives, when Manny's father had a good job and came home at the end of each week with boxes filled with food and money for the family's necessities. Manny's father has become bitter since losing that job and he doesn't seem to know how to cope with his emotions. With this in mind, it seems he should realize that he was a happier person when he had a job. That realization would prompt him to get serious about finding another job. He won't come to that understanding until he's spent some time in jail.

The theme of domestic violence is introduced in Chapter 4 when a fight between Manny's parents turns physical. This prompts someone to call the police. Since the person who made the report gives officers the names and address of Manny's parents, the officers feel confident that they are in the right place when they begin questioning Manny's parents. They likely deal with domestic violence on a regular basis and this is one of the book's themes. The officers are willing to let the situation go if Manny's father will simply give up the gun. At first, he insists that they don't have a gun. However, since one of the officers saw Manny's mother go down the hall with a gun, they don't believe him. When they retrieve the gun, they give Manny's father yet another chance to keep himself out of jail by simply allowing them to take the gun. He refuses again, which prompts the arrest. This level of stubborn pride is a problem for Manny's father, and it seems to get him in trouble quite often.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the fight between Manny's parents and the outcome of that fight.

Discussion Question 2

How has life changed so dramatically for Manny's father since losing his job?

Discussion Question 3

What do you see as two of the book's main themes up to this point? Justify your answer with evidence from the text.

Vocabulary

binge, fidgeting, actually, cronies, notch, staunch, grimaced



The Garden

Summary

In Chapter 5, "The Garden," Manny hopes that his mother will actually leave his father or that his father will turn his life around; but, he doesn't really believe either situation will occur. Manny's mother cleans the house and primps in preparation for her husband's homecoming. When he arrives, he promises that he's going to change. He pledges to stop spending time at Rico's Pool Hall and to actually look for a job. Manny's mother promises never to embarrass him in front of his friends. Nardo is drunk when he arrives home and Manny fills him in. The boys know their parents will likely pick fights with the children to keep from fighting with each other, at least for awhile.

Manny's father takes Nardo and Manny to their grandmother's house with instructions to make her garden "spotless" by the time he returns. The boys work hard in the heat. Nardo is the first to quit, saying he's going to get some Kool-Aid from their grandmother. He promises to be right back, but Manny knows it's an empty promise. Manny washes his hands in the hydrant, and Nardo returns with iced drinks. He asks if Manny is going to keep working, but Manny says he's done. Nardo agrees.

Nardo announces that their grandmother, Rosa, is awake, which surprises Manny. Manny thinks about his grandfather. He was ill for a long time. By the end of his life, he remembered only the desert he crossed to reach America. Their grandmother talks about her own memories, including a time when her garden and their neighborhood were beautiful places.

Only a few months later, Grandmother Rosa dies and the family gathers at her house. Manny remembers a time when his grandmother's cat, Horacio, caught a mouse in the living room, playing with it before eating it. Manny tells Nardo about a dream he had in which he was walking with Grandmother Rosa during an earthquake. He says he woke up "in a cold sweat." Nardo says it's a warning from their grandmother that Manny would die alone in a cold place. Manny hits Nardo and they scuffle until their father makes them stop.

Manny goes outside to escape the situation in the house. He can hear the adults talking inside. He thinks back to the moment at his grandmother's funeral when he'd been called to the side of the casket. Everyone in the family was to touch the hand of the dead person; so, Manny had obediently touched his grandmother's hand. He now recalls his reaction, which was grief fueled by the realization that she would soon be nothing but dirt. He imagines that her soul will "blossom in another garden." He doesn't know if that's true, but he hopes it will work out that way for his grandmother.



Analysis

There isn't a great deal of information about the relationship between Manny and his grandmother, but it seems that he might be attached to her or that he might at least have been interested in having a closer relationship to her. This is supported by the fact that he has a dream about her and that he has a hope for her soul at the end of her life.

Manny's dream about his grandmother following her death is filled with imagery. He talks about walking with her, which indicates that she is in good health compared to her situation at the time of her death. He also dreams about an earthquake, which could be a symbol of her death. Finally, he says he woke in a "cold sweat." This is likely just a physical reaction to the dramatic dream. The fact that Manny tells Nardo about the dream indicates that he really does want to have a good relationship with his brother. Nardo claims to have the ability to interpret dreams because of a birthmark shaped like an angel's wing. It seems that Nardo might have used this as an opportunity to reassure Manny, but he doesn't. This is an example of Nardo's immaturity, especially compared to Manny's emerging maturity.

The final paragraph in this chapter is about Manny's hope for Grandmother Rosa's soul. He makes a reference back to the conversation they have when Manny and Nardo are cleaning the garden, in which Grandmother Rosa talks about the beautiful garden and neighborhood of her younger days. Manny now hopes that her soul will go to a beautiful place and become something lovely again.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the day Manny and Nardo clean Grandmother Rosa's garden. What does she talk about during their visit?

Discussion Question 2

What is Manny's hope for Grandmother Rosa's soul? What do you think prompts this thought?

Discussion Question 3

Describe the dream Manny has about his grandmother. In your opinion, what is the significance of the dream?

Vocabulary

hoisted, menacing, rustling, swaying, burnished, assuring, gulps, groped



The Rifle

Summary

In Chapter 6, "The Rifle," more information is shared about Magda, Manny's older sister. For example, she loves music. Her favorite stars are Elvis Presley and Smokey Robinson. Since she works at Valley Laundry, she has money to buy records. Magda sometimes bribes Manny to do the things she wants. One day, she promises him a cherry pie and a root beer if he'll watch Pedi while she goes out. He is also told to keep her plans secret from their mother. Manny knows Magda has a boyfriend and that it's supposed to be a secret. Manny watches on this specific evening as she meets up with a blond boy. They disappear into a wooded area.

Left alone to watch Pedi, Manny comes up with the idea of looking for his father's gun. After his arrest, Manny's father spent 150 dollars on a lawyer to get the gun back. He finds it but then puts it aside to try to entertain Pedi. She's angry at first because Magda is gone, but Manny distracts her with dominoes. Pedi throws a fit but eventually calms down and says she forgives Manny. She falls asleep and Manny returns his attention to the gun.

Manny discovers that the gun's mechanism is jammed and he works with it. It suddenly slides easily and the gun fires just as Pedi walks through the door. Manny fears he shot her and is very relieved when he discovers she's safe. Pedi doesn't know what happened, and no one else saw it. Manny hides the gun in the closet.

Magda arrives home just before their mother. Pedi begins to tell Rebecca something, but she falls asleep before she can complete the thought. Manny's mother questions Magda about her appearance. Magda lies, saying she's trying on clothes because she might dress up for work the following day. Rebecca knows Magda is lying but can't really say that. She pleads with Magda not to make mistakes with her life. Magda becomes furious and threatens to move out with her friend, Linda. Magda leaves the room, and Rebecca begins cleaning.

Manny thinks for a long time about his family. He's relieved that he didn't kill Pedi with the gun. He thinks about Nardo, who spends a lot of time with his drinking friends. He thinks about his mother who seems to try to solve problems by cleaning the house. He thinks about his father, who seems to spend all his time butting his head against a wall.

Analysis

Manny doesn't explain his fascination with the gun, but it's obvious that he wants to have the weapon in his hand. This relates to the theme of domestic violence. In many cases, victims of abuse become abusers, and Manny may be unconsciously following the cycle of his father being an abusive person. Manny does not plan on firing the rifle. However, he continues to work the firing mechanism until it does fire. His first thought is



that he's probably killed his sister, Pedi. The possibility terrifies him and makes him queasy, even hours later.

Magda's exact age is not revealed, but she must be in her late teens or even early 20s. When Rebecca catches Magda in a lie about having been out with a boy, she urges Magda to think about her decisions. Rebecca says she doesn't want Magda to make the same mistakes Rebecca made in her youth. This indicates that Rebecca considers her marriage a mistake and that she might even have been forced into marriage by a pregnancy. This is an important look at Rebecca's character. Another important point of this exchange is that Magda threatens to move out if Rebecca continues to push the issue. Rebecca backs down because she knows that Magda might do that, and that the family is greatly dependent on Madga's pay for their daily needs.

Pedi is attached to Madga and she apparently prefers Magda to any other family member, with the possible exception of their mother. Manny talks a bit about their relationship, including how Magda deals with Pedi when Pedi is being difficult. Manny doesn't have the same level of patience, but it's obvious that he does care about his sisters though he doesn't really verbalize that until later in the book.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Magda. What might her dreams be for her future?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Rebecca seem so worried that Magda is secretly dating?

Discussion Question 3

What is Manny's reaction when the gun goes off? Why do you think he's interested in the gun?

Vocabulary

coaxed, shuffling, screeching, sulking, hoisting, flange, sparkle, radiance, echoing, spiraling



The Boxing Match

Summary

In Chapter 7, "The Boxing Match," summer comes to an end. Manny returns to the same school, despite his mother's earlier desire that he move to a better school. Manny spends lunch time with his friend, Albert Sosa. They sit at a specific picnic table outside so they can catch a glimpse of Miss Van der Meer, though they never verbally admit that's why they sit there. One day, a big boy named Lencho Dominguez arrives at their table. He says they are ridiculous for watching Miss Van der Meer. Lencho then asks Manny if Nardo might join his boxing team. He pushes Manny to say he'll ask Nardo. Miss Van der Meer leaves her classroom surrounded by students. Lencho heads her way, almost brushing into her as he passes. Manny shouts at Lencho that Albert will join the boxing team, then shouts a false-sounding "hi" at Miss Van der Meer, who waves politely. Lencho doesn't have much luck with his recruiting efforts, but he does get a student named Chico to join. Much to Manny's surprise, Albert also joins.

Lencho is a junior member of a gang called the Berets. Even as a Junior Beret, he feels he is "halfway better than a plain nobody." The Berets believe whites are focused on keeping "brown people down." The Berets hate the white people for that reason. For the next 3 weeks, Manny hangs out with the 3-member boxing team as they train. They are planning to fight members of the school's boxing team. Coach Rogers heads up the J. Edgar Hoover High School boxing team and he's not happy about Lencho's "maverick" team. The star of the school's team is Boise Johnson. Manny says that Lencho is able to inspire the small team.

One day, Miss Van der Meer calls out to Manny. He's surprised that she knows his name and more surprised when she asks if he believes Lencho can win the match. She tells Manny to wish him good luck for her. Manny says he will, but he doesn't.

The gym is packed on the day of the match. Members of the Berets are there to support Lencho. They've paid for the supplies, and Manny is responsible for having the ring corner organized. He worries that he might overlook something. Lencho makes it clear he doesn't want to be bothered with details.

Albert's match is first, and he loses. When Albert begins to cry, Lencho tells Manny to take him to the locker room. Chico is just getting dressed, and he panics when he sees Albert's bloody nose. Manny convinces him to go on into the gym. The Mexicans cheer loudly when he walks in. Manny begins strong but is soon in trouble, despite Lencho's advice. Chico is knocked out and has to be carried from the ring.

Lencho is up next. A member of the Berets pushes Manny out of the way and takes over his job, helping Lencho with his gloves. Lencho holds his own for the first round, but he begins to have trouble in the second. By the third, he's barely standing. He's obviously beaten, but he doesn't fall down. At the end of the fight, everyone knows who won. The



members of the Berets stand together and talk. Later, they evict Lencho from the Junior Berets because he embarrassed them. Lencho is so confused at the end of the fight that Manny has to go to him to get his gloves off.

Analysis

Manny describes his friend Albert as being skinny and not overly sure of himself. Manny's comment to Lencho that Albert will join the boxing team is meant to be a joke such as boys of this age would play on each other. Manny says that he's surprised when Albert actually joins. He thinks Lencho is happy just to have two boys who will do what he says, and that he wouldn't turn Albert away even though he isn't likely to ever be a good boxer. Manny says Albert may be trying to prove something to his father, which indicates that the relationship between Albert and his father probably isn't very good. This kind of home situation is often seen in people of Manny and Albert's social class where the fathers may be more critical and unloving because they came from similar situations.

Manny mentions briefly in the early part of this chapter that Lencho is a member of the Junior Berets. The Berets are a gang that believes whites are the enemy. They see whites as oppressors. This attitude makes Lencho believe that he's better than most people because he's a member of the gang, even though he's only a junior member at this point. Gangs like this are part of the social class system that's prevalent for Manny and his friends. This relates to the theme of social class distinction as one of the book's themes.

Manny isn't really friends with Lencho, and he doesn't seem to have any real respect or admiration for him. He talks about Lencho's action when he passes so close to Miss Van der Meer that he almost bumps into her. It seems that Manny sees that act as one of disrespect. However, Miss Van der Meer later tells Manny to wish Lencho good luck. Her comments to Manny seem almost unprofessional, as if she has a crush on Lencho. Manny knows that Lencho would have rude comments about Miss Van der Meer's comments, and he doesn't seem to want to give Lencho the opportunity to make those. That's why he doesn't pass the message on. While Manny is susceptible to the normal attitudes and thoughts of a teenage boy, he is also very mature in many ways and doesn't allow himself to be dragged to Lencho's level.

At one point, Miss Van der Meer makes a comment to Manny that references Shakespeare. Manny doesn't get the reference. He says that the students in his class don't read anything like that and he wishes that he could be transferred. This indicates that Manny longs for a better education and that he sees differences in teachers. This is another important look at Manny's character.

The boxing match is a sporting event but it's also more than that for a lot of people. The school is divided with Mexicans supporting Lencho's team and blacks supporting the school team. Manny says the school is mainly black but a lot of Mexicans from the community turn out for the fight. There are some arguments during the fight, but



everything becomes very quiet when it's obvious that Lencho has lost. This demonstrates the social class distinctions that are seen throughout the book. Though finances play a role in most of these social class examples, it's purely ethnic in this case. The social class distinctions are one of the book's themes.

Manny describes the look of defeat on Lencho's face as it becomes obvious that he has lost the match. One of the Berets had forced Manny out of the way when the bout began, but he walks away as it comes to a close. It's obvious that the Berets are angry that Lencho lost because it let them down in a very public display. An important piece of information is that Manny goes to Lencho and helps him take off his gloves. He says he does it because Lencho wants someone to take them off; but, the Beret who had been supporting Lencho isn't willing to stand by him once Lencho loses the match. It's Manny who takes that role, indicating that he's the kind of person to see a situation through to the end, regardless of what others think of him.

Discussion Question 1

Why doesn't Manny tell Lencho that Miss Van der Meer wished him good luck? What does this say about Manny and about Lencho?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the boxing match. Why is it such an important event for so many people?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Manny the one who helps Lencho remove his gloves at the end of the match? Why is that important?

Vocabulary

tournament, anticipation, spectacle, anxious, exaggerated, boost, stampede, buffeting, stoking



Family Affair

Summary

In Chapter 8, "Family Affair," Manny says that Magda comes home in severe pain. She vomits on the front steps and passes out. Manny doesn't know what's wrong, but his mother insists on Manny getting Magda into the house quickly. After getting her to the bathroom, Manny waits outside. After awhile, he is called back in to help. He sees a tiny baby and watches as his mother cuts the cord and puts the baby into the toilet.

They take the bus to the hospital. Rebecca says she knew she should have demanded answers about Magda's whereabouts over the past months. She says she's glad Magda's father isn't home, which makes Magda whimper.

At the hospital, they have to wait a long time with other people. Magda says she has to use the restroom. Manny helps his mother get Magda to the restroom. They are so focused on helping Magda that they walk into the men's room. Magda faints. When Manny rushes to the receptionist for help, the woman is more interested in the fact that they went into the men's room than the fact that Magda fainted. She finally helps them get a wheelchair but says they still have to wait for the doctor to have time to see them.

They return home that evening, but Manny wakes in the night to find Magda running fever and in obvious distress. Manny says they should take her back to the hospital, and he argues with his mother. Rebecca finally says they don't have the money to take her back to the clinic. Manny's father gets up and says they should put Magda in water to bring her fever down. Manny's father carries Magda to the bathtub and puts her in, then holds her there. Eventually, Magda's eyes begin to see clearly.

Analysis

Manny's mother immediately insists on getting Magda inside the house. There's no doubt she's concerned for Magda, but she also knows all the neighbors will see the spectacle and come to their own conclusions about it. There's little doubt that women of Rebecca's generation tend to see pregnancies out of wedlock as something shameful.

The scene in which Magda miscarries is somewhat graphic, and some readers might find it disturbing. Manny describes the baby as being tiny but with the basic features of an infant. He says the baby's hands are raised in the air, as if depicting a victory. Rebecca flushes the infant down the toilet. Her motivations are not explained. It's left to the reader to decide what drives the actions of this scene and whether the reactions are appropriate.

There are some important looks at family dynamics in this chapter. First, Rebecca rants about how Magda's pregnancy is her fault. She really can't control Magda at this point because Magda is making her own money. Actually, she is able to live on her own, if she



chose to do so. However, Rebecca still wishes she had done more to try to make Magda make better choices. Another inner look at the family occurs when Rebecca and Manny argue about Magda's situation when she's so ill. Manny tries to push Rebecca to say they'll go to the hospital. Rebecca says they have to be careful not to let Manny's father find out about the problem. She fears that he'll be angry and blame Manny for not taking better care of Magda. Finally, Manny's father becomes involved and is obviously concerned about Magda, indicating that he does love his children even when he is so brusque.

Magda has to wait for a long time before being seen at the hospital. Manny says that his mother expects people to be rude to them. The attitude of the receptionist indicates that she believes the doctors are very important people and that she expects everyone to be respectful to the point of honoring them. Once again, this examples the theme of distinctions between social classes.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Magda's situation and her mother's reaction to it.

Discussion Question 2

How is Magda treated at the hospital? Why do you believe her mother expects to be treated this way?

Discussion Question 3

How does Manny's father become involved in Magda's health crisis? Why is his action unexpected?

Vocabulary

brusquely, shrieked, dangling, murky, flicker, mussed, commotion, peered



Dying of Love

Summary

In Chapter 9, "Dying of Love," Manny's father gets a job in an office building, and Nardo gets a job delivering medicine for Giddens's Pharmacy. Manny sometimes goes with Nardo on his Saturday deliveries. One Saturday, he hears his father singing a familiar ballad while he bathes. Manny has heard it many times before but has never been certain of the words, which his father sings in Spanish. He says his father is either singing that he wants to "die of love" or that he wants to "live with love."

Nardo hasn't told his boss that Manny is helping with deliveries, but it's too cold for Manny to wait outside. He casually looks around the store while he waits for Nardo. Mr. Giddens tells Manny that he and Nardo should get going because the other delivery drivers have already gone. He then says that he knows that Manny is helping Nardo with his deliveries. Manny goes to the storeroom where Nardo is counting prescriptions, and they talk briefly about the fact that Mr. Giddens knows they are working together.

To keep up the appearance that he isn't really working with Nardo, Manny goes back through the store to exit the front door. On the way, he sees Mr. Giddens' daughter, Dorothy. Mr. Giddens calls to Manny and introduces them. Manny knows something isn't right about the situation. Mr. Giddens says Dorothy is choosing invitations for a party she's throwing. He tells her to get one more invitation and to invite Manny. It's obvious Dorothy doesn't want to do that, but she reluctantly gives in. Manny accepts the invitation, even though Dorothy hasn't written the date or any other information on it yet. She smiles at him as they part, and Manny holds onto that smile as a positive sign.

Nardo teases Manny about Dorothy that day, and he tells Magda about it. Magda and Nardo tell Manny that Mr. Giddens is manipulating him. Dorothy's parents are going to be out of town on the night of the party, and Mr. Giddens is obviously going to ask Manny to keep an eye on things. Manny argues that Dorothy's invitation was genuine; but, Magda and Nardo know that's not the case. Manny gets mad when Magda makes a rude comment about Dorothy being white.

Manny hears Magda and Nardo talking after he leaves the room. Later, Magda realizes that Manny is really upset over the situation. She urges him to be careful. Manny struggles over the coming days, wavering between the desire to attend the party and the knowledge that it's a mistake. On the night of the party, Nardo gives Manny a ride.

Manny arrives at the party, and there's a bit of a stir among the young people there. Then a girl named Gloria asks Manny to dance to a slow song. Manny agrees, but his attention is obviously on Dorothy. During the dance, Manny accidentally presses his leg between Gloria's legs for a second. Gloria begins to yell and someone turns the lights back on. Some boys confront Manny. He goes through a door but finds himself in an enclosed yard. He can't get away. One of the boys says Manny should stop bothering



Dorothy. Manny sees Dorothy and a group of girls watching through a window. The boy looks questioningly at Dorothy, and Manny knows he's asking if the confrontation was as much as she'd requested.

Analysis

It's significant that Nardo is holding down a job again. He has worked before, but he always quit or was fired after a short time. He seems to be settling into this position. It could be that he's becoming mature enough to understand how to hold a job.

The scene in which Nardo is preparing for his delivery route is another example of social class distinction. The other boys have already gone on their routes, but Nardo is still sorting through his deliveries. Manny notes that the other boys want the deliveries in the neighborhoods where people tip the drivers for their service. He says Nardo won't get tips because he delivers to the poor neighborhoods where they don't tip. It's not clear whether Nardo accepts those deliveries willingly or if it's an assignment. However, he does his job just the same. Perhaps, Nardo understands these poor people and their situations.

Nardo and Manny, working together on the Saturday deliveries, get finished faster than the other delivery boys. The brothers then sometimes stop for food and spend some additional time together. This examples relationships in the family, which is a theme.

There is some important information in this chapter about the relationships among Magda, Nardo, and Manny. Manny is obviously excited about attending Dorothy Giddens' party until Nardo and Magda tease him so much about it. At one point, Magda realizes that Manny is really upset about the situation, and she softens her tone and her words. She urges him to use his head and to be careful not to get hurt. When Nardo and Manny are headed to the party, Manny asks Nardo what he should do. This indicates that Manny trusts Nardo's opinion, despite the teasing. Nardo seriously thinks about Manny's question and says there's nothing wrong with trying to have a little fun. Later, Manny tells Nardo about the incident at the party. Nardo says those attending the party would have found some way to ensure that Manny was forced to leave, no matter what Manny did. This indicates that both Nardo and Magda are honestly worried about Manny's feelings and that they don't want him to get hurt, despite their teasing attitude. These relationships are a major theme in the book and drive the action in several of the chapters.

When Manny goes outside Dorothy's house, he catches the sight of his own reflection. He says he sees "a ridiculous boy, a clumsy boy." He knows he is seeing himself, but he says it doesn't really look like him. Manny has felt out of place from the moment he arrived at Dorothy's party, and he sees himself in the reflection like he imagines the others at the party see him. Manny is fully aware at this moment of the differences in his social class and that of those attending Dorothy's party. The scene is also filled with imagery and poetic prose, which are literary devices seen in the book.



Discussion Question 1

Describe Nardo's job and Manny's role in it.

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Manny agrees to attend Dorothy's party? What do Nardo and Magda say about Manny's plan to attend?

Discussion Question 3

What happens after Manny's arrival at the party?

Vocabulary

geezers, roused, callouses, ballad, hoarded, exasperated, assurance, mocking, predicament, mimicked, sheen



A Test of Courage

Summary

In Chapter 10, "A Test of Courage," Manny says his encounter with Dorothy Giddens has changed his perspective of himself. He knows that he's nowhere "close to being smooth with girls" because he's too afraid to talk to them. Manny says there's a girl named Imelda Rodriguez who wears "clodhopper shoes" and has crooked teeth. But, he'd be devoted even to her if she showed him any attention. He confides this thought to his friend Frankie. Frankie understands and feels the same.

However, Frankie says he knows where there are some different girls. He says it's easy to get to know these girls. They plan to go there the following day. Frankie and Manny go to the Callaway Projects where Manny is introduced to a guy named Mondo and his half-brother, Eddie. There are other boys hanging around and two girls, Rita and Patty. Frankie tells Manny that he can "kiss and make out" with one of the girls if he passes the initiation into Mondo's gang.

Frankie tells Manny that he has to pass the "Test of Courage" in order to become a member of the Callaway Projects Gang. Manny later learns that the boys have been trying to decide if the girls should be members of the gang and that Rita suggested that they make out with new members as a means of ensuring the girls would be allowed in.

While having a conversation one evening, Mondo says he spent time in Juvenile Hall for stealing a car. Mondo talks briefly about stealing cars but assures Manny that they won't be stealing any cars. Mondo says the gang will be buying a car and that Manny will be included if he passes their test.

Manny is afraid that he will appear scared during the test. He fears that he might disgrace himself by begging for mercy. Manny walks with four guys, including Mondo and Frankie. Manny knows that Mondo and his half-brother, Eddie, are more serious about the initiation. The two girls are allowed to go along, but Mondo warns them that they can't become squeamish over the situation. Manny is not prepared when Mondo and Eddie knock him down and begin hitting him. He can smell the scent of the dirt, but he doesn't feel any fear as the four beat him. Manny just continues to think about the reward – being able to hold one of the girls in his arms.

When the beating is over, Manny hears Patty laugh. Manny feels of his lip, which is split. Eddie gripes about Manny's action, but Frankie says Eddie should shut up. Frankie puts his arm around Manny's shoulder and tells him that it's going to be alright.

Analysis

Manny is naturally interested in girls, which is why Frankie's suggestions about the girls at Mondo's house capture Manny's attention so fully. Frankie says that one of the girls,



Rita, will kiss anyone. That also captures Manny's attention. Frankie calls the girls "pollitas," which translates to "little chicks." Manny says the nickname sends "a current of excitement rushing through my chest." His natural interest in girls is coloring his judgment, but he does seem to feel a little concern that the girl named Patty is Mondo's girlfriend. Manny doesn't really have the level of respect for these girls that he would normally have, which is a sign of his immaturity. His attitude seems believable and acceptable at this stage in the story and at this point in his coming of age.

Manny says that he is afraid of the Test of Courage; but, his fear is not about the beating. He's actually afraid that he'll show fear and embarrass himself in front of the others. This seems an appropriate reaction considering the situation.

Mondo has been in trouble prior to the day he meets Manny, and he's proud of that. He talks about being in "juvy," which is a slang reference to a juvenile detention center. Apparently, in trying to impress Mondo, Frankie said that Manny had been in juvy, too. The entire situation with the gang is very tame compared to more serious, established gangs. The purpose of this gang is trying to make a few boys feel important.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the Callaway Projects Gang.

Discussion Question 2

Why does Manny say he's afraid that he'll show fear?

Discussion Question 3

What is the Test of Courage? How does Manny make it through it?

Vocabulary

squeamish, mock, clodhopper, twined, irrigation, craned, throaty, juvenile, glimpse



Going Home

Summary

In Chapter 11, "Going Home," Manny wakes the morning after the Test of Courage with bruises, but he feels a sense of accomplishment. He thinks back on the test as something dangerous that he survived. Manny is supposed to meet the other members of the Calloway Projects Gang at Long's Drugstore. However, he has made a recent decision to help more around the house. For this reason and also because he doesn't want to attract more attention from his mother, he starts on his chores.

He rushes through cleaning his room and raking the yard. He thinks back to the previous evening with Rita, when she'd "stabbed the inside of my ear with the moist tip of her tongue." He's particularly excited about the fact that she hinted of "more surprises." Manny thinks about his grandmother's warning that it was not good to breathe in too much happiness.

Manny yells at his mother that he's going to play baseball. She yells back that he should stay at home. She says she's going with Manny's father that afternoon to "negotiate something about Grandma's house." It's assumed that Rebecca will inherit her mother's house because she's the oldest child.

Manny gets his old baseball glove so that he can make his mother believe he's going to play baseball. He says it's an important game. Rebecca seems skeptical, pointing out that the wind outside is too strong for baseball. She points out that Manny came home late the previous night. She looks him over and gives in, warning him not to come home late. Manny says there seems to be an understanding between them, not at all like the relationship between Rebecca and Nardo.

When Manny reaches the meeting place, he finds the others are already there. Mondo laughs at a woman struggling to keep her dress down in the fierce wind. They watch a black man selling newspapers, but he moves away when he catches Eddie staring at him. Another boy named Gody suggests they find a woman and steal her purse. Mondo considers the suggestion, including that "white ladies" usually have at least 20 or 30 dollars. He then says that most of the white ladies shop on the other side of town. Eddie says he believes he can catch the man selling newspapers, but Mondo shuts down that idea as well.

They seem to run out of ideas altogether and Eddie keeps suggesting they find the man selling newspapers. The wind keeps blowing, and Mondo points out a tree that's being whipped violently. He says the weather is "not good" and heads across the parking lot. He doesn't let the others join him, saying he's probably going to watch television with Patty. As he's leaving, an older man leaves the store. Mondo acts like he's going to hit the man, but he doesn't. Eddie is disappointed.



Eddie says they should get away from the trees. He says he and Manny are going to the mall. Frankie wants to go along, but Eddie refuses. He and Frankie are soon in an argument. Frankie asks if Manny is really going with Eddie and Manny says he is. Frankie has told Manny that Eddie hates whites and that he sometimes hits people for no reason at all. Manny thinks about that now and wishes he had thought of it before agreeing to go with Eddie. Manny looks at Frankie, hoping that Frankie will call out one more time, but he doesn't.

It begins to rain, and Manny is about to suggest that they go home when he sees that Eddie is tense and focused on a woman coming out of the Guarantee Savings Bank. She struggles with her raincoat and the wind as she finds her car keys inside her purse. Eddie waits until she's almost in the car, then lunges against the door, smashing the woman's hand. He grabs her purse and rushes back across the street where Manny is still standing. He runs past Manny and back toward Long's Drugstore. Manny chases him, and Eddie turns for a moment. From seeing Eddie's profile, Manny realizes that he's the boy Magda was seeing before she miscarried.

Manny suddenly doesn't want to catch up with Eddie. Instead, he wants to catch Eddie and tell him that he's wrong to treat people so callously. He wants to say that Eddie was wrong to hurt the woman outside the bank and was wrong to hurt Magda. He knows, however, that Eddie wouldn't understand at all. Manny loses sight of Eddie as he reaches the man selling papers. He asks, "where did he go," knowing the man would know who "he" was. The man looks toward a specific corner. Then, he looks past Manny. Manny turns and sees a police car approaching. Manny is about to run, but the newspaper man tells him to wait.

One of the officers asks Manny if he was the one "chasing that guy who stole the lady's purse." Before Manny can say anything, the newspaper man says that Manny was chasing him. The officer asks which way the thief went and the newspaper man points them in the right direction. The newspaper man says he knows Manny was with Eddie earlier but that the officers should "deal with their own kind as they see fit."

Manny heads for home. As he passes the Garcia's house, he notices that some of the boys are outside. For the first time, he isn't afraid. One of them quickly notices Manny, but he apparently sees something different in him and he doesn't harass him. Instead, he offers Manny some apples, but Manny declines and continues to walk.

Manny arrives at home as the sun comes out. The room is so bright that he realizes how tired his eyes are. He wobbles as he walks inside. Magda and Pedi are asleep on the couch. Manny looks carefully at Magda. He notices that her hair is not teased and she has mascara running from the corner of one eye.

Manny takes a seat in his father's chair and looks at his sisters. He knows that he'll never again see anything as wonderful as his sisters, sleeping on the couch. He adds that the entire room adds to the perfection, including the "lumpy cherub angels" and the "squiggly TV." Manny goes on to talk about the idea that his mother spends a lot of time trying to hold their home together and that his father spends a lot of time trying to tear it



apart. He feels that he's been away for a long time and that now he's where he belongs. He continues to sit. The room closes in around him as he falls asleep.

Analysis

Manny says that Rebecca seems to know that he isn't really going to play baseball when he leaves the house, but she doesn't call him on it. He says that she has recently taken a similar track with Nardo. She leaves Nardo alone and hopes that it will turn out for the best. She seems to have come to the conclusion that griping at Nardo doesn't accomplish anything. Manny says that his mother looks at him differently when she's talking to him. She looks as if she's ready to let him go, even though she knows he's lying to her about the game. Manny says she seems to have the attitude that he will do the right thing. This is an important look at the relationships between family members, a prevalent theme.

Manny talks about Eddie and Mondo, who are half-brothers but look nothing alike. Mondo looks like he is of Mexican descent, but Eddie looks very much like a white boy. That's why Manny believed Magda's boyfriend was white when he saw him the first time. Eddie's hatred of whites may be an exaggerated response to his desire to fit in with his own family. When the newspaper man sees the police coming, he helps perpetuate their impression that Manny was chasing Eddie in an effort to get the woman's purse back. He tells Manny that they can deal with "their own in their own way." He obviously thinks that Eddie is white, like the officers. These social class distinctions continue to be a main theme.

Manny sees the woman that Eddie is about to rob before Eddie assaults her. He thinks that she is attractive but notes that she looks differently after the attack. He feels sorry for her almost immediately, but he also admits to feeling a little shiver of excitement. This is another example of his emerging maturity. He has been noticing girls, and this woman awakens a primal instinct in his mind. When he chases after Eddie, he quickly realizes that Eddie is the boy who was seeing Magda before her miscarriage. He says that Magda stopped seeing him, saying she didn't really like him, but it's obvious that he believes Eddie treated Magda poorly. It's at that moment that Manny really begins to feel angry at Eddie for his actions. The important aspect of this is that Manny doesn't really commiserate with the woman who was robbed until he thinks about Magda.

The final scene of the story is of Manny at his home. He is suddenly fully aware of his place in his family and in his home. He evaluates four members of his family at that moment. He talks about feeling protective of his sisters and of his love for them. He talks about his mother's work as she tries to keep the home together and of his father's work as he tries to tear it apart. This is not the first time Manny has talked about his father's lack of commitment to the family. Interestingly, Manny's father now has a job and is apparently contributing to the family's finances, but Manny still sees him as the person who is trying to tear the family apart. Another interesting aspect of this scene is that Manny doesn't mention Nardo. It may be that he feels Nardo can take care of himself. It's left to the reader to decide why Manny doesn't mention Nardo in this scene.



Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Manny doesn't mention Nardo in the final scene of the book?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the incident involving the woman Eddie robs.

Discussion Question 3

What happens to Manny during the robbery to change his perspective of his situation? Do you think he'll continue to be involved with the Callaway Projects Gang?

Vocabulary

furious, darkening, cackled, scowled, scramble, squelched, prolonged, ominously



Characters

Manuel Hernandez

Manuel is known to everyone as Manny. He is a young boy who lives with his parents, his older brother named Nardo, an older sister named Magda, and a younger sister named Pedi. Manny and his family live in the United States. They are poor and each longs for a better way of life. Manny observes the desires of each member of his family, including that his father's friends talk of returning to Mexico while his mother wants Manny to get a better education.

Manny is an intelligent youngster. He makes good grades at school and there is talk at one point of Manny transferring to a better school. One of his teachers notes that his grades are good enough to make it in a better school. Manny doesn't focus much of his story on education, other than to note that there are many things he doesn't know. He is aware that he would learn more in another school.

Manny has some friends, and he seems easily led into awkward situations. He accepts an invitation to a party without understanding that he isn't really welcome. He joins a group that follows a young boy's claims to be a good boxer and they are all hurt when their boxer doesn't win. He is interested in girls but is extremely shy. He is maturing quickly at this age, beginning to understand what's really important and what only seems important. He is also devoted to his family though he fully sees their faults and short-comings. As the story comes to an end, Manny understands that his two sisters are the most important people in his life and that he should pay more attention to caring for them.

Rebecca Hernandez

Rebecca is Manuel's mother. She hopes that her children will have a better life than she has had. This includes her hopes for Manny. She wishes that he could attend a better school and chooses the school where white students are educated as the object of that dream. She goes so far as to send Manny to pick up copies of his grades in preparation for changing schools, but the change never happens. Manny says that this is his mother's dream, but he never expects it to happen. The fact that Rebecca holds onto this hope is a sign that she realizes an education is a major key in a better future.

Rebecca holds a similar hope for Magda, though in a different way. When Rebecca becomes certain that Magda is sneaking out of the house to spend time with a boy, Rebecca pleads with her to stop. Rebecca says she doesn't want Magda to make the same mistakes she made in her own youth. This indicates that Rebecca feels she might have accomplished a better life for herself if she hadn't married young and become responsible for children at such a young age.



An important aspect of Rebecca's character is seen in her actions toward her home. She often begins cleaning when things are stressful in the house. Manny says that she isn't really accomplishing anything, but acknowledges that it makes her feel better to push the dirt around from one room to another in their apartment.

Rebecca is a sincere woman, though she sometimes struggles to deal with situations and her own emotions. In some ways, she is less mature than Manny in this area. She is a likable and believable character.

Magda Hernandez

Magda is Manny's older sister. She works at a laundry, and it's obviously demanding work. She loves music and is devoted to Pedi. She begins a secret affair that is cut short when she becomes pregnant and miscarries. Magda seems to be a sincere young woman who takes on a great deal of responsibility. For the most part, she does her duty without verbal complaints. However, she does threaten at one point to move out on her own, which she knows would be a blow to the family's finances.

Mr. Hernandez

Mr. Hernandez is Manny's father. He is struggling as the story opens, mainly because he has lost his job and is ineffective in his effort to be the head of his home without that stability. He talks a great deal about getting another job but spends all his time and money at Rico's Pool Hall instead of actually looking for a job. He rants about "the Welfare" and refuses to take part in any government program, though it means his family is in a serious financial situation. He is stubborn and self-centered, but Manny talks about the fact that his father was different before he lost his job. This seems to indicate that a lack of purpose is driving Mr. Hernandez to be a different person. He is not likable throughout most of this story. In many ways, he seems to be the typical abusive, drunken immigrant with no real motivation for a better life.

Grandma Rosa

Manny's grandmother is very old by the time this story takes place. Manny spends some time helping clean her garden just a short time before she dies. She talks about her memories of years earlier when her garden and the neighborhood were beautiful. He seems to have a bond with her and hopes that she has a bright place in the afterlife.

Mr. Hart

Mr. Hart is one of Manny's teachers. He is a sincere character who seems to genuinely want to help Manny. He says that Manny's grades indicate he could succeed at a better school, which seems to indicate that he believes the school really is superior. He insists



on giving Manny 20 dollars for school supplies and on driving him home. Mr. Hernandez is polite, though cold, to Mr. Hart. Mr. Hart does not stay long.

Albert Sosa

Albert is Manny's friend, and they spend a lot of time together at school. He seems to be from a similar background. He is skinny and lacking in self-confidence. He joins a maverick boxing team led by a classmate named Lencho, apparently in an effort to prove himself.

Lencho

Lencho is a student at Manny's school who starts his own boxing team. He is self-confident and seems to fully believe he can win his match. He is a junior member of a gang called the Berets. Lencho is shocked when he is beaten and the Berets kick him out of their gang because of his loss.

Nardo Hernandez

Benardo is Manuel's older brother. Everyone calls him Nardo. He is known to be overly lazy though he has held some jobs. He is something of a dreamer and seems to wish for a different kind of life, though he also seems to accept that he will never have anything different.

Pedi Hernandez

Pedi is Manuel's younger sister. She is somewhat spoiled because of the attention of her older siblings, especially Magda. She doesn't have a lot of interaction with the other characters of the story because she is so young. As the story comes to a close, Manny realizes how much he loves Pedi and that he has a responsibility to protect her. In this way, Pedi is a major part of Manny's emerging maturity, which is one of the book's themes.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Welfare System

The welfare system is an important part of life for the people of Manuel's neighborhood. His father adamantly refuses to take a welfare job, saying it puts him in their debt. His pride is also at work here because he doesn't want anyone else to think that his family needs to be on welfare, despite the fact that many in their neighborhood are dependent on welfare in some form.

Useful Blood

This is a term Manny uses to describe his grandfather's attitude about work. The term indicates a drive to perform useful tasks. Manny says that his grandfather always worked hard. When his mind and body broke down, he still roamed around the house, fixing anything that caught his attention. Manny feels this same need to be doing something constructive.

The Rifle

There is a gun owned by Manny's father that Mr. Hernandez uses to threaten Rebecca. He doesn't actually fire at her, but the altercation catches the attention of neighbors, who call the police. Manny later finds the gun and accidentally fires it, almost striking Pedi. The idea that he might have killed his sister makes Manny physically ill as he thinks about it later.

Valley Laundry

This is where Magda works. Magda hates the labor intensive job; yet, she continues to work at the laundry because it's expected of her.

The Berets

This is a gang and its members are of Mexican descent. They hate whites because they believe whites are oppressors. There is also a group of Junior Berets, and Manny knows Lencho who is a member of that group. The Berets kick Lencho out after he loses the boxing match, saying he embarrassed them.



The Boxing Match

This is a match between three of the school's boxing team and three other students, Lencho, Albert, and Chico. Manny becomes the official trainer for Lencho's team. He is supposed to take care of the three members' needs during the fight. The match ends with Lencho, Albert, and Chico losing their matches.

Gidden's Pharmacy

Nardo gets a job at Gidden's Pharmacy, and Manny spends his Saturdays helping deliver prescriptions. Mr. Gidden doesn't mind that Manny is helping, and he calls on Manny to serve as a chaperone of sorts for his daughter's party. There is not a lot of detail offered about the business itself. It seems like a typical pharmacy for the particular time and place of the book's setting.

Dorothy Gidden's Party

Dorothy Giddens is the daughter of the man who owns the pharmacy where Nardo works. When she is hosting a party, Mr. Giddens insists that she invite Manny. Manny hopes the invitation is real, but Nardo and Magda know that Mr. Giddens just wants Manny to tell him what happens at the party. Manny does not receive a warm welcome. He is literally run out of the party shortly after his arrival. The party is another example of making a distinction among classes.

Callaway Projects Gang

This is the name of the gang started by Mondo. Manny is introduced to the gang by his friend, Frankie. The gang is barely being started at the time of Manny's introduction, and the members are only doing minor criminal actions during Manny's involvement.

Long's Drugstore

This is a store where Manny is supposed to meet other members of the Callaway Projects Gang. They plan to steal some small items there, hoping to sell them to raise some money. The situation gets out of hand, and Manny almost gets in serious trouble over his involvement. The incident at Long's Drugstore causes Manny to reevaluate his life. His re-evaluation helps him to mature. Maturity is a theme in the book.



Settings

Rico's Pool Hall

This is where Manny's father spends a lot of his free time. Rebecca hates that her husband spends so much time there because it's literally taking food from the mouths of their children. Rebecca often sends Manny to retrieve his father from Rico's. At one point, Rebecca goes herself and embarrasses her husband in front of his friends. It's not until after he's arrested that Manny's father admits he spends too much time at Rico's talking about getting a job instead of actually looking for a job.

The Hernandez Apartment

This is where Manny and his family live. It's obviously in a complex for low-income families. Some of them are also of Mexican descent. The apartment is sufficient in size for the family of six. Manny talks about his mother's collection of "what nots" and that his mother often cleans the apartment as a way of dealing with stress. Manny and Nardo share a room, indicating it is probably a 3-bedroom apartment.

Grandmother Rosa's Garden

Grandmother Rosa is Manny's maternal grandmother. She talks with Manny and Nardo for awhile one day when their father orders them to clean up the garden. The boys work hard at the project for several hours, but the garden is still pretty desolate when they finish. However, Grandmother Rosa remembers a time when the garden and the entire neighborhood was beautiful and lush. Her memories make an impact on Manny. When she dies just a short time later, he remembers her words and hopes that her soul makes a transformation to a beautiful place, just as her remembered garden. That garden represents the past for Grandmother Rosa and represents Manny's hope that she will have a beautiful afterlife.

The Hospital

This is where Manny and his mother take Magda after she miscarries. Magda is very ill, and there are other sick and injured people in the waiting room. They are all forced to wait a long time for care. The facility seems to be understaffed and over worked. The setting is significant because Manny points out that they are not treated well there, but that his mother expects this kind of treatment.



Manny's School

Manny attends a school that is populated largely by Mexicans and blacks. Manny's mother wants to send Manny to the school where most of the whites attend because she believes he will get a better education there. Manny's teacher says he believes Manny could make it in that school, indicating that he also believes the "white school" provides a better education.



Themes and Motifs

Coming of Age

Manny seems to have the typical characteristics of a boy of his age in the time and place of the story. His family situation is chaotic and sometimes tragic. His life is unstable, and he doesn't really have anyone he can truly depend on for productive guidance. Despite this, he matures dramatically over the course of the book. The most obvious sign of this theme is seen in Manny's realization that his sisters are very important to him. He seems to know this as a fundamental truth long before he is able to put it into a coherent thought. His ability to verbalize their importance is a sign of his maturity.

Manny also comes to understand more about other people and his environment as he matures. He wants the party invitation to be genuine, so makes himself believe that it is. In this situation, Manny is much more naïve than Madga and Nardo. They understand more about the distinctions among social classes, which they've learned as they matured. Manny only accepts it after he shows up at the party and is humiliated by the way he's treated there. Though it isn't fair, Manny learns an important lesson from the situation and that's another part of his maturing process.

Yet another example is seen when a boy at Manny's school, Lencho, begins the boxing team. The boys who become involved could probably have become members of the school's team, but they don't. It seems they don't want to be part of the organized group but want to do things their own way. While Manny never puts this lesson into words, it's obvious that he understands both the lesson and the fact that it's important to stand by your friends.

In some ways, Manny is more mature than his parents. Typically, this theme is exemplified by young people, but Manny's father is an example in this book. In many ways, he exemplifies the coming of age theme. As the story opens, Manny's father is spending hours talking and drinking at Rico's Pool Hall. He and the men there talk about finding good jobs or "escaping" the United States in favor of Mexico. It's not until after his arrest that he accepts that he is basically hiding at Rico's. He pledges that he'll actually look for a job instead of talking about it. This realization is a sign that he's coming to understand that he has been making excuses for himself. Manny's father recognizes that he needs to make changes, and he does make some move toward changing by the end of the book.

Nardo also matures as the story progresses. He is known as a lazy person and doesn't seem to care what other people think of him. However, Nardo is holding down a decent job near the end of the book and seems to be proud of this accomplishment. His attitude, though not the focus of the book, does seem to change some over the course of the story.



Family Dynamics

The relationships between the members of Manny's family are important to the story because these dynamics drive most of the action. Of special note is the relationship between Manny's parents. They are often thoughtless and violent toward each other as is seen in the scene in which Manny's father chases his wife with a gun. When the police arrive, Rebecca tries to hide the fact that Manny's father had a gun, and she initially denies that he threatened her at all. When that doesn't keep the police from searching the house, she seems happy that Manny's father is being arrested. However, she is excited when he's being released from jail and spends a great deal of energy trying to make sure everything is perfect for his homecoming.

Similar scenes are seen between these two characters throughout the story. For example, Rebecca nags at her husband because he hasn't gotten a job. He grows increasingly defensive, though he never gets any closer to actually looking for a job. His temper flares at the slightest provocation, and he insists that his pride is wounded when Rebecca insinuates that he isn't trying to find a job or support his family.

Manny's relationship with his parents is somewhat typical with some noted exceptions. Manny's mother often calls on Manny to retrieve his father from Rico's Pool Hall. It would seem that his mother would use Manny's older brother, Nardo, for that task. Yet, she always calls on Manny when his father hasn't come home on time. Manny's father is openly hostile toward Manny and goes so far as to say he doesn't love any of his children except the youngest daughter. When a teacher gives Manny some money for school supplies, Manny's father takes the money and uses it to buy liquor. While Manny's mother has dreams of a better education for Manny, his father insists that he is old enough to drop out of school and get a menial job.

The relationship between Manny and his siblings seems typical and reasonable for the characters. Manny is protective of his younger sister; but, he doesn't really know how to relate to her. He knows how to manipulate her, at least to some degree. He uses this knowledge when he's left alone with her. Nardo and Magda are easily angered at Manny, as is typical of older siblings to the younger members of a family. They tease him a great deal when he's invited to a party at a girl's house. Both Magda and Nardo know that Manny is being set up for an embarrassing evening. They share this with him, but not in a way that expresses concern. They seem amused by the situation and anxious to let Manny fail.

The relationship between Magda and her mother is strained. Rebecca sees Magda headed for the same mistakes Rebecca made in her own life. She tries to keep Magda from making those mistakes, including marrying young. Instead of listening to her mother's words, Magda ignores them because she thinks that her mother is trying to control her actions. Magda and Pida have a very close relationship. Pida sees Magda as a mother figure and clings to Magda. Pida may also have that close relationship with her mother, but it isn't seen as readily as the relationship between Pida and Magda.



Social Class Distinctions

Manny lives in the “projects,” which indicates that he and his neighbors are poor. The poverty is plainly seen in their everyday lives. Manny's mother comes up with a plan to send him to a different school where the “white kids are educated.” She obviously believes Manny will receive a better education there. When Manny goes to the school to get his records in preparation for the transfer, the secretary looks at his request with obvious disdain. She isn't helpful, and Manny actually leaves her office without his records. When he goes to a teacher for help, that teacher genuinely considers Manny's request. He says that Manny's grades are sufficient for him to succeed in that new school and seems to believe that Manny would be better off if he transferred. This seems to indicate that the teacher, like Manny's mother, believes that Manny would get a better education if he transferred. This teacher's reaction seems to validate the idea that the schools are not equal and that the “white kids” are getting more opportunities for a better education.

After Manny talks with his teacher, Mr. Hart gives Manny 20 dollars and insists on driving him home. Manny knows that everyone in the neighborhood would notice Manny arriving home in a nice car with a white man in professional clothing. They would immediately assume that Manny had gotten into trouble. This is another example of the class distinction. White men in professional clothing never arrive in the neighborhood on social calls, and their arrival always means something negative has happened. In most cases, the white man in a nice car would mean the police had become involved. Manny tries to keep Mr. Hart from going all the way to his house, but Mr. Hart doesn't realize Manny's intention. He goes to Manny's front yard and greets Manny's father. Manny's father points out that he has dirt on his hands as an excuse not to shake Mr. Hart's hand. He is polite, yet unfriendly. It's obvious that he's not pleased with Hart's presence. When Mr. Hart leaves, Manny's father demands to know if he gave Manny money. It's noteworthy that Manny's father jumps to this conclusion. This is another example of the class difference. Mr. Hart realizes that Manny likely needs money for school supplies if he moves to this new school, and Manny's father knows that Mr. Hart would have made that gesture.

Another example of this theme is seen in Manny's father's attitude about “the welfare.” He doesn't want to be on “the welfare” and refuses to ask for benefits for a couple of reasons. He believes the government becomes intricately involved in a person's life once they apply for benefits. He also believes others in the neighborhood would think badly of him if he took that step. The idea that others would think badly of him doesn't really hold weight because Manny points out that there are lots of people who are on welfare.

Yet, another example of making distinctions among social classes is seen in the Berets and Junior Berets. They believe the whites are oppressors and their entire focus, from Manny's view, is their hatred of whites. Lencho belongs to the Junior Berets and sees himself as superior to others because of it. Ironically, this gang perpetuates social class distinctions which the members are so against.



Violence

Violence is a common occurrence in the story, and it seems to be an accepted aspect of everyday life. One of the most notable examples of this theme is seen when Manny's parents get into an argument that escalates into a serious fight. Manny's father is at Rico's Pool Hall when Manny's mother, determined to make him come home, embarrasses him in front of his friends. This makes Manny's father so angry that he gets a gun and goes after his wife. He chases her with the gun and seems intent on actually killing her, though there's no way to know for certain what he would have done if he'd caught up with her. Someone calls the police before that can happen and their arrival interrupts the fight. With the arrival of the police, Manny's parents rush back in the house and attempt to hide the gun. Manny's father, however, refuses to stop arguing with the police over the gun. Manny's mother tries to stop the officers from arresting her husband; but, she finally gives up and says they should just take him to jail. The officers arrest him.

An important aspect of this situation is that Manny's mother is terribly excited when her husband is about to be released from jail. She goes to great lengths to make his homecoming a happy time. Once he arrives home, the couple talks about their marriage and each makes promises about their future actions. This seems to indicate that they are putting more effort into their marriage and that they might become happier together. However, that may not be the case. Manny and Nardo talk about the situation and both seem to know that these kinds of conversations and promises have occurred before this time. Yet, their parents always return to their arguments and violent confrontations.

Another example of this theme is seen in the confrontation between Manny and some boys in the neighborhood. The Garcias brothers are rightfully known as trouble makers. They don't seem to harass the adults in the same way they terrorize the children. Manny's father recognizes them as a problem in the neighborhood. When they confront Manny one day, he immediately knows that he's in trouble. He gets out of that situation without any major injuries. Later, he avoids the possibility of coming across them rather than risk another confrontation.

The Desire for a Better Life

Manny and Nardo are working in the chili pepper field when officials from immigration arrive to take illegal workers into custody. These people have apparently managed to enter the United States illegally and are working menial jobs because they see this as a better life than the lives they were living in Mexico. One man admits that he ran from the immigration officials, even though he is actually a legal American resident. The officials released him immediately upon seeing that he was well-fed. This indicates that the American resident does have a better life than those illegal immigrants. This desire for a better life is one of the book's themes.

Another example of this theme is seen in the second chapter. Manny's father spends time at Rico's Pool Hall where he and other men talk about "schemes" to make money



and ways they could “escape back to Mexico.” These men are in the country legally and some of them are American citizens, having been born in the United States. They have the right to work and could likely go to work in the fields like the illegal immigrants do. But, they don't take those opportunities. Manny's father eventually admits that he's spending time at the pool hall talking about needing a job instead of actually looking for a job. These men talk about their desire for a better life, but they don't do anything to actually get it.

Manny's mother wants him to attend a better school, which is her way of trying to help him get a better life. Manny encounters obstacles and one teacher steps up to help. This teacher says that Manny has the grades to make it in a better educational system and apparently believes that Manny could have a better life with this change. He goes so far as to give Manny some money for school supplies, but Manny's father takes the money and Manny never actually makes the change to another school.

Manny's father believes that hard work is the only way to reach a better life. He thinks Manny's time would be better spent if he drops out of school and gets a job, even a menial job. It seems likely that some of Manny's father's ideas are motivated by greed rather than any hope that Manny will have a better life. He seems to want the children to get jobs so they can earn money that would be used for the family. He doesn't see any profit to long-term goals, probably because most people in their social class only get what they want by hard, manual labor.

Styles

Point of View

The story is written in first person from the perspective of Manuel Hernandez. He is a young boy who lives with his parents, a brother, and two sisters. Manny is the third child of the family. He doesn't always fully understand what's going on with the other members of the family. An example of this is seen when Nardo and Magda tease him about his invitation to a party. The older siblings know that Manny will not actually be welcome at the party, probably because they have experienced similar situations. Manny doesn't fully realize what they are saying to him because he hasn't experienced this for himself.

Manny's limited perspective is also seen in his attitude about the lives of his parents. He relates what he sees and what he believes to be true, but he doesn't really know what they are thinking and feeling. He seems to be a reliable and he gives information as honestly as his limited perspective allows.

The fact that Manny is young and somewhat naïve colors his perspective, but he has a firm grasp on the attitudes of his family members. For example, Manny knows that his mother will expect the worst if he arrives home in a car driven by a well-dressed white man. His mother will immediately assume that he's been in trouble and that a police officer is bringing him home. He also knows that his father will not be pleased that Manny's teacher has taken an interest in him, even though that interest is a genuine concern for Manny. He correctly predicts his father's reaction, which indicates that Manny has a good grasp on his father's attitudes.

Manny's perspective is completely limited, which means the reader doesn't know anything unless Manny knows it. For example, he relates what his parents say to each other after his father's arrest, but he doesn't know what they really feel about each other. The perspective seems to be appropriate to the story.

Language and Meaning

The language is sometimes flowery with many literary devices, including exaggeration, metaphors, and similes. For example, in Chapter 2, Manny talks about his parents arguments. He says his mother's voice "chased away the panicked air" and his father's voice "was coarse paper shredding to pieces." The literary devices make the reader realize that Manny is an intelligent person with dreams and ideas. His discussion about his grandmother is one example of this. Once Grandmother Rosa dies, Manny thinks about his grandmother's memories of a time when the garden and neighborhood were filled with beautiful flowers. He hopes that she will literally become that in the afterlife.

The story is presented in modern-day English though there are some words and phrases in Spanish. The first example of this is seen in the title, "Parrot in the Oven: Mi



Vida.” The Spanish words translate to “my life.” In most cases, the English reader will understand the basic meaning of the Spanish words by their context. The Spanish words occur infrequently and should not pose a problem for the English-speaking reader.

The title of the story is explained early in the book. Manny says that his father uses the phrase “Parrot in the Oven” to describe a person who is complaining about how hot it is in the shade when he is actually standing in an oven. The phrase would usually be derogatory because it is intended to be about a person who isn't very intelligent. Manny believes that his father doesn't mean that when he's talking about Manny. His father uses the phrase because Manny is overly-trusting of other people.

Structure

The book is divided into eleven chapters. Each chapter's title provides a clue about the events that will take place in each chapter. The first chapter is “The Baseball Glove” and Manny's desire for a baseball glove is a focus of this chapter. “Rico's Pool Hall” is the second chapter and Manny talks about the pool hall where his father spends a great deal of time. The third chapter is “Charity” and Manny talks about his father's attitude on this subject. The fourth chapter is “The Bullet.” Manny's parents have a violent encounter in this chapter and his father is arrested.

Chapter 5 is “The Garden.” Manny and Nardo clean their grandmother's garden and get a look into her past. “The Rifle” is the sixth chapter. Manny accidentally discharges a gun and almost shoots his younger sister. “The Boxing Match” is chapter 7. A young man believes he can win at a boxing match and his supporters are devastated when he doesn't. Chapter 8 is “Family Affair.” Manny's older sister Magda miscarries and almost dies. Chapter 9 is “Dying of Love” and Manny gets a personal taste of a crush and discrimination. Chapter 10 is “A Test of Courage.” A neighborhood gang recruits Manny and he's faced with a difficult decision. The final chapter is “Coming Home.” This chapter wraps up the story with Manny's epiphany that his sisters are the most important people in his life.

The book is presented in chronological order though there is some historical information presented through conversations and memories.

The digital version of the book includes a reader's guide and a section of information about the author. “Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida” is Victor Martinez's first book. The author won a National Book Award for the work. Martinez says he drew from his own experiences for the book, though it wasn't an autobiography.



Quotes

I suppose years of not know what, besides work, was expected from a Mexican convinced me that I wouldn't pass from this earth without putting in a lot of days.

-- Manny (Chapter 1, The Baseball Glove paragraph 16)

Importance: Manny talks a great deal about his father's attitude that they should just take menial jobs and work as long and as much as possible. Immediately after this quote, he talks about his grandfather's "useful blood" and that he feels the need to stay busy.

All day he talked to his buddies about Mexico, and about schemes for making money and escaping back to Mexico – although some of the men there were born in the United States."

-- Manny (Chapter 2, Rico's Pool Hall paragraph 1)

Importance: Manny is talking about his father and the other men who hang out at Rico's Pool Hall. The quote gives an important look at the attitude of Manny's father. He doesn't want a job, but he wants to feel useful. Later, he admits to Rebecca that he spends time there so he doesn't really have to look for a job.

The next day, Mom began thinking about the future. She wanted me to go to a better school across town, where all the white kids got educated.

-- Manny (Chapter 3, Charity paragraph 1)

Importance: Manny's mother thinks the key to a better future is a better education, but his father thinks all the kids should drop out of school and take a menial job as early as possible. This is another look at the different attitudes. The significant point is that one of Manny's teachers indicates that Manny might make it at the other school, which means he also thinks there's a difference.

It was from a Mexican saying about a parrot that complains how hot it is in the shade, while all along he's sitting inside an oven. People usually say this when talking about ignorant people who don't know where they're at in the world."

-- Manny (Chapter 4, The Bullet paragraph 13)

Importance: This refers to a statement Manny's father makes, calling Manny a parrot. Manny says his father doesn't think he's ignorant, but he does believe he's gullible and naïve. The saying is the title of the book.

Deep down, I hoped Mom would wise up and leave Dad for good, or maybe go live with Grandma for awhile, or run off on her own, if that's what she wanted. Either that, or that Dad would finally open his eyes to see how close it was to being his last chance."

-- Manny (Chapter 5, The Garden paragraph 1)

Importance: This scene occurs right as Manny's father is being released from jail after



the incident with the rifle. Manny is critical of his father and later says that his mother spends all her time trying to keep the family together while his father spends all his time trying to tear the family apart. He goes on in this passage to say that he knows nothing is really going to change.

The sound of the gun going off was like a huge mouth swallowing a noise, and Pedi was eaten by that mouth. Thoughts ran together inside my head and blurred, like currents of fast water flowing together.”

-- Manny (Chapter 6, The Rifle paragraph 56)

Importance: This is the moment when Manny accidentally fires the rifle and his first thought is that he might have killed Pedi. This is an example of the flowing writing and some of the literary devices seen throughout the book.

The Berets believed that white people were our worst enemy, and if they had one purpose in mind, it was to keep brown people down. We, on the other hand, were descendants of Indians blessed with a color that was as necessary as dirt to the earth, as important as the sun to all the trees.”

-- Manny (Chapter 7, The Boxing Match paragraph 38)

Importance: This is one of many examples of social distinction, a theme in the book. Manny and his friend Albert become involved in a boxing team by a junior member of the Berets, and Manny sees the Berets drop the boy as soon as he loses his boxing match.

Gossip had a way of spreading around the housing projects quicker than dry burning grass.”

-- Manny (Chapter 8, A Family Affair paragraph 4)

Importance: Magda is in labor and will soon miscarry. The baby is illegitimate, and Manny's mother is trying to keep the neighbors from finding out. It's not clear whether she's trying to save Magda's reputation, keep the family from being talked about, or both.

Nothing surprised my mom. She expected people to treat her mean.”

-- Manny (Chapter 8, A Family Affair paragraph 31)

Importance: Manny, Rebecca, and Magda are at the hospital after Magda's miscarriage and the receptionist has just given them a lecture about how hard the doctors work as a means of explaining their long wait. Manny goes on to say that his mother's attitude sometimes turns to anger. The fact that she expects this kind of treatment is an indication that she's subjected to it regularly.

Something was screwed on wrong. Mr. Giddens inviting me over to introduce me to his daughter wasn't natural.

-- Manny (Chapter 9, Dying of Love paragraph 27)



Importance: Mr. Giddens introduces Manny to his daughter, Dorothy, and he insists that Dorothy allow Manny to attend a party. At this point in the scene, Manny realizes that something isn't right. However, once he has the invitation, he tries to convince himself that she actually wants him to attend.

When chicken feathers choke in your veins, being afraid could be a real knife in the ribs. Then any disgrace is possible.”

-- Manny (Chapter 10, A Test of Courage paragraph 35)

Importance: Manny is about to be subjected to a beating as a means of proving his courage. If he passes, he will be admitted into the Callaway Projects Gang. He fears the test but not because of the pain of the beating. He's afraid that he'll show fear. He knows that would be a disgrace.

She'd made up her mind to leave him alone and hope for the best. I thought at first she was wishing the same for me, but the way she looked at me was different, like she know I'd do the right thing.”

-- Manny (Chapter 11, Going Home paragraph 20)

Importance: Manny is talking about the conversation with his mother when he lies to her about going to a baseball game. He says she's given up trying to talk to Nardo about his activities and that it looks like she might have the same attitude about Manny. Then, he realizes that she has a different idea entirely. She knows that he's lying about where he's going but believes he'll do the right thing and stay out of trouble.