

# Viva Chicano Short Guide

## Viva Chicano by Frank Bonham

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## Overview

The growing concern over the resurgence of street gang violence in the Los Angeles area makes *Viva Chicano* even more significant today than it was at its publication in 1970. Current press coverage of California's gang violence reveals the same problems portrayed in *Viva Chicano*.

Because he bases his works of fiction on firsthand experience with young people and the adult professionals who deal with them on a daily basis, Bonham's stories ring true. Keeny Duran, the protagonist of *Viva Chicano*, is clearly a composite of many troubled youths trying to maintain their pride and individuality in a hostile environment.

Keeny's dilemma transcends both time and place, demonstrating that the understanding needed to make headway against gang mentality has not changed over the years.

Other writers have proposed a variety of theories about and solutions to the gang problem. Bonham's unique approach maintains that only when society puts aside ethnic analyses and examines each individual gang member as a potentially valuable member of society will a gradual resolution be achieved.

## About the Author

Born in Los Angeles on February 25, 1914, Frank Bonham attended Glendale College and served in the army during World War II before devoting himself to a writing career. A prolific writer, Bonham has published hundreds of short stories for magazines such as McCall's and the Saturday Evening Post, dozens of western novels, and numerous television scripts, particularly for popular western shows of the 1950s and 1960s.

Bonham's early books for young adults were adventure tales, but in the 1960s he became interested in the problems of juvenile delinquents and the life of minorities in American cities.

He visited juvenile offenders in jail and began to write novels for young people about minority youths growing up in urban environments. These books, which include Viva Chicano, are known as Bonham's Dogtown novels.

## Setting

Viva Chicano is set in the 1960s in a sprawling ghetto, known as "Dogtown," of an unnamed California city modeled after Los Angeles. Ironically, the "Mexican-American district" of Dogtown, where Keeny lives, is called Happy Valley. Even the most energetic attempts toward beautification fail in the climate of despair and decay that pervades Happy Valley.

## Social Sensitivity

Bonham offers a sensitive portrait of the forces that can contribute to juvenile delinquency. Some readers may object to the novel's premise that there is no such thing as a "bad boy." Keeny is in many ways exonerated at the end of the novel, and Bonham clearly discounts the belief that more stringent punishments are the proper cure for current juvenile crime problems in large cities. But, without oversimplifying the matter, Bonham shows that Keeny has a strong desire and potential to lead a constructive life if given a chance. Viva Chicano seeks not to excuse juvenile offenders but to understand the causes of a problem that affects all of society, for understanding paves the way toward a viable solution.



## Literary Qualities

Because the theme of Bonham's Dogtown novels is that a socially valuable youth lies inside each of his troubled and often violent protagonists, his literary method depends heavily upon internal monologues. These monologues ensure that the reader is constantly aware of the struggle within the protagonist. Bonham's technique is particularly evident in *Viva Chicano*, where the doubts, fears and emerging values of Keeny Duran shape the narrative. The third-person narrative focuses on Keeny's thoughts and feelings in order to help the reader to withhold snap judgments and to understand the complexity of the protagonist's personality.

Because Keeny's perceptions play such a significant role in the narrative, the cardboard figure of Zapata is more than a fanciful device. Zapata as Keeny's hero is very much a character and perhaps the greatest influence on the protagonist's transformation.

Similarly, Yo-Yo is a true foil in the plot; her initial rejection of her heritage helps Keeny clarify his own values and emotions.

Bonham's detailed portrait of Dogtown shows the impact of environment on human character and suggests metaphors between what grows in a place and the character of that place's residents. Hopelessness, sterility, and constant defeat are elements in both physical and psychological descriptions in the novel.

In a way, *Viva Chicano* hearkens back to the naturalist school of literature that shaped the works of such late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American writers as Theodore Dreiser and Stephen Crane. Like these authors, Bonham presents society as a constant battle between the individual and a hostile environment that all too often crushes the individual's hopes and dreams.



# Themes and Characters

Seventeen-year-old Joaquin Duran, nicknamed "Keeny," is a confused youth who struggles, despite the hopelessness of his environment, to preserve his instinctive hunger for success. The ugliness and neglect prevalent in the landscape have distorted Keeny's view of life. For Keeny, family life consists of a succession of criminal stepfathers, and the educational system reflects the management of cynical bureaucrats.

In such a climate, even the good intentions of Mr. Baker, the perceptive social worker, are unlikely to change the course of a boy's life. Indeed, Keeny's own view of life convinces him that he is trapped like a rat and that there is no point in struggling to overcome his lot and make something of himself. Keeny's efforts to better his environment and himself are quickly squashed by reality.

Because of Keeny's criminal record, which dates back to when he was seven years old, the authorities are overly suspicious of him. When his little brother Armando falls from a window while Keeny is baby-sitting, the police and the neighbors assume that Keeny pushed him. Even though he is innocent, Keeny becomes a fugitive from the law. Part of the juvenile delinquency problem, according to Bonham, is that once teen-agers are found guilty of a crime, they are treated as criminals forever. Keeny challenges such treatment at the book's conclusion.

The central thrust of Bonham's narrative is that there is another side to Keeny that, to outside observers, is overshadowed by his criminal record.

As Keeny recalls his father, who died when the boy was only six, the memory stirs within him a vague sense of self-worth. Keeny's growing pride in his Mexican heritage, called *fa raza*, eventually emerges through a fantasy provoked by a life-sized cardboard display dummy of Emiliano Zapata, the Mexican revolutionary and folk hero. As Keeny builds his identification with Zapata, another side of himself emerges, an aspect that Bonham compares to the "dark side of the moon": something that has been there all along but has not been seen.

While he is running from the law, Keeny undergoes a 'Significant change through his relationship with Concha, nicknamed "Yo-Yo." As her nickname indicates, Yo-Yo lives "on a string," apparently doomed to be manipulated by her adopted society. As Keeny begins to come to terms with his ethnic background, he discovers that he has a source of strength to fuel his self-worth and that antisocial behavior need not be his permanent lot. When Keeny discourages Yo-Yo from rejecting her Mexican-American heritage, he develops important elements of a mature perspective—responsibility and concern for other people. Keeny begins to construct and use a positive value system of his own as he evokes Yo-Yo's dormant individuality. Thus, as Keeny and the cardboard Zapata merge into one, it becomes evident that the hidden side of Keeny has been the dominant one all along.



Mr. Baker, the social worker who has faith in Keeny's potential all along, is the mouthpiece for Bonham's themes. Mr. Baker insists that every young person has a positive core and that the energy and vitality of every troubled young person can be tapped and channeled into socially and personally constructive purposes.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Keeny wavers between optimism and pessimism concerning his future.

What reasons does he have for being optimistic? For being pessimistic?

2. Why does Keeny deliberately lead the carnival-goers to think that he has drugged the Kool-Aid?

3. What does Keeny learn from Zapata? How? In what way does Keeny reject Zapata's attitude toward society?

Why, in chapter 21, does Keeny destroy the cardboard figure of Zapata?

4. Describe the "vicious circle" that most young people in Dogtown are doomed to follow.

5. Summarize Sergeant Rock's philosophy about juvenile delinquency.

6. What does the red poncho symbolize to Keeny?

7. Describe Rosie's foster home. Does Keeny see it as a positive force, a negative force, or both? Why?

8. What sort of help does Keeny wish he could find in society and authority?

Does he feel that other people need the same sort of assistance?

9. What effect does Keeny have on Yo-Yo?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research and write a report on the life and ideas of Emiliano Zapata.
2. At one point, Keeny recalls reading about "that dude Thoreau." Research this nineteenth-century American writer and thinker's life and explain what parallels you find between Thoreau's actions and attitudes and Keeny's.
3. Using periodicals, research and report on current problems with street gangs in Los Angeles. Compare the accounts you find with those in Viva Chicano. What differences do you find, and how do you account for them?
4. Write an essay on the causes of Keeny's criminal behavior and why you believe Mr. Baker's solution is effective or ineffective.
5. Write an essay on the effects of ethnic prejudice on the lives and characters in the novel.

## For Further Reference

De Montreville, Doris, and Donna Hill, eds. *Third Book of Junior Authors*.

Chicago: H. W. Wilson, 1972. Includes a biographical sketch of Bonham with some remarks on his writing methods.

Kirkpatrick, D. L., ed. *Twentieth Century Children's Writers*. New York: St.

Martin's, 1978. Contains a biographical and bibliographical sketch of Bonham with some critical commentary.

Varless, Jana. *Young Adult Literature in the 1970s*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1978. Discusses Bonham's endorsement of traditional values and his notion that violence breeds more violence.

## Related Titles

Bonham's involvement with youthful offenders in the Los Angeles area resulted in several other Dogtown novels, including *Mystery of the Fat Cat*, *The Nitty Gritty*, *The Vagabundos*, *Cool Cat*, *Chief*, and *Hey, Big Spender!* These novels all argue for more understanding from authorities and more recognition of young people as individuals. Since 1972 Bonham has also written mysteries and other types of young adult fiction.

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