

**The Case of the Pen Gone Missing: A Mickey Rangel Mystery**  
*El caso de la pluma perdidata, colección Mickey Rangel, detective privado*

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**Summary:**

A valuable pen that the United States President used to sign a bill into law was taken to school by Eddy for show and tell, but it has gone missing. Toots Rodriguez, the prettiest girl in fifth grade, asks sleuth Mickey Rangel to prove her innocent of taking the pen. Protagonist Mickey, who has a crush on Toots, ignores his instincts that make him doubt this case and begins the investigation. Mickey gets help from a secret note written by an unknown “angel” who provides him tips on solving each of his cases. Mickey investigates possible culprits, especially Toots’s ex-boyfriend Bucho. Meanwhile, everyone in the classroom is stressed because of the disappearance of the heirloom item. The mystery gets solved, but is justice served?

**Teaching Overview / Background Knowledge:**

Each of the mysteries in the Mickey Rangel series is narrated by Mickey, a smart fifth grader living in Peñitas, located in Hidalgo County in the Rio Grande Valley of deep South Texas. Mickey took online courses to get a detective license and now is relied on to solve mysteries in school and the neighborhood. Mickey refers to having solved crimes “for several years,” but this is the first book in the series. Mickey typically gets an anonymous tip from “Mickey’s Angel” for each case he solves (page 21). All of the books in the series include communication from this unknown person who gives Mickey clever notes with riddles to help Mickey solve cases. None of the books reveals directly who this helper is.

Saldaña has mentioned that one of the influences for writing Mickey Rangel’s character was his enjoyment of detective and mystery stories, including the hard-boiled detective fiction and classic *film noir* of the 1940s. Mickey’s style sometimes seems to reference these old-fashioned styles, and he acts like a budding lawyer or real detective, while Toots seems a little like a classic *femme fatale* and is very mature for her age. The result is a clever mystery with an original storyline that leaves even some adult readers unsure of who took the pen and why. Ambiguity and doubt about what really happened are part of each book of this series.

This bilingual flip book presents the illustrated story in English on one side and in Spanish on the reverse (inverted) side. *The Case of the Pen Gone Missing* was named to the Texas Library Association’s 2010-2011 Tejas Star Reading List.

**Texas State Standards:**

This curriculum guide includes activities that can help students gain knowledge and skills expected for their grade level. One grade level that could study this book is third grade. Relevant TEKS for ELAR in Grade Three include: §110.14(b)(2)(A)—on using ideas, including foreshadowing, to make predictions; (2)(B)—on asking questions and using supporting answers with evidence from text; (4)(D)—on playful uses of language; (5)(A)—on themes and supporting details in literary text; (8)(A)—on plot and sequencing in fiction; (8)(B)—on characters’ interactions and changes in fiction; (8)(C)—on narrative perspective in fiction; (17)—on the writing process; (19)—on writing about personal experiences; (22)(A)(v)—on the conventions of prepositions and prepositional phrases; and (30)—on listening and speaking. Potentially relevant

TEKS for Social Studies in Grade Three include: §113.14.(a)(7)(A) and (B)—on Celebrate Freedom Week and the process of government and §113.14.(b)(9)(B)—on government officials and how they are chosen.

Relevant TEKS for ELAR in Grade Four include: §110.15(b)(2)(B)—on using context to determine vocabulary meaning; (2)(D)—on common idioms; (6)(A, B, and C)—on the reading and comprehension of fictional literary text; (8) on sensory language and imagery; (15)—on the writing process; (20)(A)(v)—on the conventions of prepositions and prepositional phrases; and (28)—on listening and speaking to express an opinion based on information. Potentially relevant TEKS for Social Studies in Grade Four include: §113.15.(a)(7)(A) and (B)—on Celebrate Freedom Week and the process of government; and §113.15.(b)(17)(E)—on citizenships and contacting local and state officials.

### **Reading Comprehension Strategies:**

#### *Before reading:*

- Look at the illustrations, particularly the full-page drawings on pages 10, 20, and 30. Predict what is happening or could be happening in that picture. Imagine you are detectives who must make inferences about what is happening based on observation.
- Talk about how the point of view from which a story is told affects what information readers get. This first-person narration by Mickey is affected by his sympathy toward Toots, so he does not see everything clearly. Reading aloud the first page of the book can help readers to hear the narrative perspective.
- Ask students what it means to be a detective. What skills and habits do you need? Why is it important to have each skill? How does a detective compare to other roles that use some of the same traits, such as being a police officer, or a spy, or even a scientist?
- Discuss the process of a bill becoming law or why elections and the legislative process are important. Identify who represents your students in local, state, and national government; if appropriate for grade level, write a letter to an elected or appointed official. It is significant that Eddy and his father went to the White House where the U.S. President signed a bill written by Eddy's father into law. The pen from this signing is the one that Eddy brings to school and that goes missing in this story. The pen is a symbol of influence and access to power, as well as the importance of family heritage and stories.

#### *During reading:*

- Write down clues that could relate to answering the question of where the pen went and showing who took it.
- Summarize what happens in each of the six chapters as you go.
- Think about how the small picture at the start of each chapter might be important.

#### *After reading:*

- Re-read the last chapter of the book (chapter six) in order to retrace the answer to the mystery. Why is Mickey upset with himself? How would you feel if you were Mickey?
- Return to the Angel's letter (in chapter four) to see how it foreshadows the outcome. Discuss who the Angel could be, and use the process of elimination to figure out who it could not be.
- Reread page one to remember how Mickey got fooled due to his liking or crush on Toots.

**Writing / Composition Prompts:**

- 1) Write an explanation about who is responsible for the missing pen. Was it one person or two people? Who were they? How do you know?
- 2) Write an extra chapter or epilogue in which Mickey confronts the person who took the pen and has an honest conversation to learn why it all happened.
- 3) Write a paragraph about who you think Mickey's Angel is, and why.
- 4) Write an entry in Toots' journal, using her perspective to tell how she felt at the end of the school day. Does she have mixed feelings? Why or why not?
- 5) Imagine that you are Mickey's Angel and you write a note to him after the story ends.
- 6) Write about a time that you or someone in your family lost or misplaced something and found it again. How did you find it? Why is the lost item very important to you?
- 7) Brainstorm that if you wrote a detective story, what could the central problems or mysteries be? What might go missing and need to be found? Would the detective be like you or like someone else you know? After students write, have them share aloud in groups or the class.

**Vocabulary / Word Study:**

archnemesis (1)	conspiring (22)
quivered (2)	stylus (24)
gumshoe (3)	tread (26)
a sap (4)	menacing (28)
read between the lines (7)	abscond with (29)
dispute (8)	opportunity (31)
her knight in shining armor (9)	crevice (31)
felt squeamish (11)	on the brink (32)
like Pavlov's dog (12)	quivered (32)
gawking (12)	six of one or half dozen of the other (32)
in the affirmative (15)	overjoyed (32)
missives (21)	duped (32)
in cahoots (22 and 28)	

**Discussion Questions:**

- 1) Discuss some of the important clues for solving the case.
- 2) How does this quotation from the first few pages of the book provide foreshadowing for what Mickey has learned by the end of the story? "If I'd learned anything in the past few years I'd been solving crimes, it was that if a person says again and again she didn't do it, chances are she did. Trying too hard to prove her innocence. Dead giveaway" (4).
- 3) Why did Saldaña put the "Angel" in the story and not tell readers who it is? Who do you think the Angel is, and why? Mickey reflects: "This letter 'angel' was getting to me. Always sneaky. Always invisible. The one and only mystery that I'd never come close to solving" (19).
- 4) Why does Mickey's Angel use so many prepositions in his letter? (On page 21, the letter says "To find the missing pen, think out of the box (over it, under it, beside it, behind it.>") What is the Angel really hinting at about the solution to the mystery?
- 5) How would this story be different if someone besides Mickey were telling it? From which other characters would you like to get a perspective?

6) How does Miss Garza respond during the crisis of a valuable, lost item in her classroom? What does she do to help find the pen? What punishments are in place until the pen gets found?

7) On the last page, do you think justice was done in solving this case? Why or why not?

8) Mickey realizes that his judgment was clouded, and he was not being objective, when investigating this case. What lessons can readers draw from this situation? Going into the future, how do you think Mickey may be affected by this experience?

9) Before Mickey solves most of the case, he goes to the library for “some alone time to think clearly.” Ten minutes in the library help him realize most of what happened. Where do you go when you need quiet time to think and figure something out?

### **Extensions:**

1) Draw a picture of the solution to the mystery of where the pen is. Include some of the characters such as Mickey, Toots, Bucho, Eddy, Ricky, or Miss Garza.

2) Draw an illustration of one of the creative expressions used by Saldaña, such as “read between the lines” (7), “her knight in shining armor” (9), “like Pavlov’s dog” (12), or “six of one or half dozen of the other” (32).

3) Toots has a charm bracelet with metal charms on it. All of her charms are hearts of different sizes (see page 6 and the illustration on 25), although charm bracelets often have different objects. Design a charm for a bracelet, something that could be created to symbolize or show an interest or idea important to the person who wears it.

4) To help visualize how the pen disappeared and was found, act out the possible ways the pen got into its hiding place, and also act out the scene in which Mickey is demonstrating the answer to the mystery. (The part where a cup of water falls on Bucho might be played by an empty cup.)

5) Eddy has the pen that was used by the United States President to sign a bill into law. (The book does not say what the law concerned, and a fictional person, Lee Black, is the President.) On page 3 and 7, characters discuss what the pen looks like and how Eddy and his father went into the White House for the signing of the bill. If appropriate to grade level and timing, class members could discuss a recent action by any branch of government of Texas or the United States, or the teacher could link the book’s references to the legislation process Celebrate Freedom Week and honoring founding documents of the U.S.A.

### **About the Author:**

Born in McAllen and raised in the small border town of Peñitas, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley, René Saldaña currently works as a professor of education at Texas Tech University in Lubbock. René Saldaña taught middle school and high school English in LaJoya ISD and Mission CISD for six years during the 1990s. He holds a Master of Arts degree and a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree in English. His books of fiction for secondary school readers include *The Jumping Tree* (2001), *Finding Our Way* (2003), *The Whole Sky Full of Stars* (2007), *A Good Long Way* (2010), the bilingual book *Dancing with the Devil and Other Tales from Beyond* (2012), and *The Heartbeat of the Soul of the World* (2015). He co-edited a collection of stories and poetry *Juventud! Growing Up on the Border* (2013). His book for beginning readers is *Dale, Dale, Dale / Hit It, Hit It, Hit It: Una fiesta de números / A Fiesta of Numbers* (2014), illustrated by Carolyn Dee Flores. Saldaña is married and has children. His Mickey Rangel bilingual book series for elementary readers has four books: *The Case of the Pen Gone Missing / El caso de la*

*pluma perdida* (2009), *The Lemon Tree Caper / La intriga del limonero* (2011) *The Mystery of the Mischievous Marker / El misterio del malvado marcador* (2013), and *A Mystery Bigger than Big/ Un misterio más grande que grandísimo* (2016).

### **Related Media / Literary Tools:**

<http://today.ttu.edu/posts/2015/05/education-professor-finds-passion-in-bilingual-novels>  
 “Education Professor Finds Passion in Bilingual Novels.” (News article about the writing and literary interests of Rene Saldaña, published May 5, 2015).

<http://renesaldanajr.blogspot.com/>  
 “On Writing, On Reading.” (Professional and personal blog maintained by Rene Saldaña)

<http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/62262880>  
 “Dr. Rene Saldana, Jr. at McHi Library #4.” (Video of Rene Saldaña speaking at McAllen High School, posted by the school May 14, 2015. He talks about Latino publishing issues in this section of the video.)

<http://texassweethearts.blogspot.com/2011/08/featured-sweetheart-rene-saldana-jr.html>  
 “Featured Sweetheart Rene Saldaña, Jr.” (Interview with Rene Saldaña by blog site Texas Sweethearts: Writing for Kids and Teens from the Heart, in which he talks about early and current reading interests and his writing, published September 1, 2011.)

<http://www.fyi.legis.state.tx.us/Home.aspx>  
 “Who Represents Me” (Site provides information about current districts and members of the Texas Senate, Texas House of Representatives, the Texas delegation to the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, and the State Board of Education.)

### **Further Reading:**

The four books in Saldaña’s Mickey Rangel series are *The Case of the Pen Gone Missing: A Mickey Rangel Mystery / El caso de la pluma perdida*, colección Mickey Rangel, detective privado (2009), *The Lemon Tree Caper: A Mickey Rangel Mystery / La intriga del limonero: Colección Mickey Rangel, detective privado* (2011), *The Mystery of the Mysterious Marker, a Mickey Rangel Mystery / El misterio del malvado marcador, colección Mickey Rangel, detective privado* (2013), and *A Mystery Bigger than Big/ Un misterio más grande que grandísimo* (2016).

Three recommended books from Piñata Books for this age are *The Monster in the Mattress and Other Stories / El monstruo en el colchón y otros cuentos* (2011) by Diana de Anda, *The Missing Chancleta and Other Top-Secret Cases / La chancleta perdida y otros casos secretos* (2013) by Alidis Vicente and *Letters from Heaven / Cartas del cielo* (2014) by Lydia Gil.

Young readers who like the concepts of detecting or solving mysteries might enjoy non-fiction books such as *How to Be a Detective: Search for Clues, Analyze the Evidence, and Solve the Case* (2012) by Dan Waddell and Jim Smith, *Spy Science* (1996) or *Detective Science* (1993) by Jim Wiese, *Detective’s Handbook* (2009) by Anne Civardi and Colin King, or *Science*

*Detectives: How Scientists Solved Six Real-Life Mysteries* (2006) by the editors of *Yes Mag* and illustrated by Rose Cowles.