

A Good Long Way

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Curriculum Guide by Myra Infante, University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley

Synopsis

When Beto Sr. tells his son that he needs to either follow the rules or leave, the boy—a senior in high school and a man as far as he’s concerned—decides to leave, right then, in the middle of the night. But once he walks away, Beto realizes he has nowhere to go. Maybe his best friend Jessy—a hard-as-nails girl who has run away before—can help him.

The story of Beto’s decision to run away and drop out of school is told from shifting perspectives that reveal—in short, poignant scenes—the conflicted lives of Roel, Beto and Jessy.

Each one has a good long way to go before growing up. Roel fights against the teachers’ assumptions that he’s like his brother Beto. Jessy is smart, but most of her teachers can’t see beyond her tough-girl façade. And Beto ... somewhere along the way quit caring about school.

Teaching Overview

A Good Long Way is set in South Texas, near the border of Mexico. The setting is important to the plot and theme of the book because of two major aspects: 1) cultural norms and 2) physical challenges two main characters face when trying to run away. The author weaves several literary elements into this story. Students will see many examples of imagery and figurative language, which describe the setting and enhance the characterization of the main characters. Another unique aspect of this novel is that each chapter is narrated from a different point of view reflecting the experiences of the three main characters. Beto’s story is told in third-person, limited point of view; Roel’s is told in first person; and Jessy’s in second-person point of view. The author has been very intentional in his use of all of these elements to bring a profound story that students will not easily forget.

Texas State Standards

For 7th – 8th grade:

(6) Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Fiction. Students understand, make inferences and draw conclusions about the structure and elements of fiction and provide evidence from text to support their understanding. Students are expected to:

(A) summarize the elements of plot development (e.g., rising action, turning point, climax, falling action, and denouement) in various works of fiction;

(B) recognize dialect and conversational voice and explain how authors use dialect to convey character.

(8) Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Sensory Language. Students understand, make inferences and draw conclusions about how an author's sensory language creates imagery in literary text and provide evidence from text to support their understanding. Students are expected to explain how authors create meaning through stylistic elements and figurative language emphasizing the use of personification, hyperbole, and refrains.

(18) Writing/Persuasive Texts. Students write persuasive texts to influence the attitudes or actions of a specific audience on specific issues. Students are expected to write persuasive essays for appropriate audiences that establish a position and include sound reasoning, detailed and relevant evidence, and consideration of alternatives.

For 9th – 10th grade:

5) Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Fiction. Students understand, make inferences and draw conclusions about the structure and elements of fiction and provide evidence from text to support their understanding. Students are expected to:

(A) analyze non-linear plot development (e.g., flashbacks, foreshadowing, sub-plots, parallel plot structures) and compare it to linear plot development;

(B) analyze how authors develop complex yet believable characters in works of fiction through a range of literary devices, including character foils;

(C) analyze the way in which a work of fiction is shaped by the narrator's point of view;

(D) demonstrate familiarity with works by authors from non-English-speaking literary traditions with emphasis on classical literature.

(7) Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Sensory Language. Students understand, make inferences and draw conclusions about how an author's sensory language creates imagery in literary text and provide evidence from text to support their understanding. Students are expected to explain the role of irony, sarcasm, and paradox in literary works.

(16) Writing/Persuasive Texts. Students write persuasive texts to influence the attitudes or actions of a specific audience on specific issues. Students are expected to write an argumentative essay to the appropriate audience that includes:

(A) a clear thesis or position based on logical reasons supported by precise and relevant evidence;

(B) consideration of the whole range of information and views on the topic and accurate and honest representation of these views;

- (C) counter-arguments based on evidence to anticipate and address objections;
- (D) an organizing structure appropriate to the purpose, audience, and context;
- (E) an analysis of the relative value of specific data, facts, and ideas.

Reading comprehension strategies

Before Reading

Search for pictures on the internet of teens arguing with parents and pictures of teen runaways. Show the pictures to students and ask them to write down what they think is happening in the photographs. Have students share their ideas with at least one other person. After everyone is done sharing with a partner, ask students to predict what the novel will be about based on the pictures you have showed them.

During Reading: Visualizing

Have students visualize and then verbalize some descriptive passages in the novel. Some sentence starters for this would be:

1. The author gives me a picture in my mind when he or she describes...
2. I can really see what the author talks about when he or she...

After Reading

Have students create a Venn diagram comparing the actions of the adults in the story. One circle can be titled "Helpful Actions" and the other circle can be titled "Unhelpful Actions." Students will evaluate which actions were beneficial, detrimental, or both towards the well-being of Roel, Beto and Jessy.

Writing Prompts

1. Personal Narrative: In the novel *A Good Long Way*, Roel gets in a fight with his friend Howie, who insinuates that Beto isn't good enough to date Howie's sister. Later while talking to a teacher, Roel thinks, "I'm nothing like Beto, but the man's talking about my brother, my family." Individuals often feel loyalty towards family members or friends whether they deserves it or not. Write a personal narrative about a time you defended a family member or friend regardless of how much they deserved your loyalty or not. Be sure to write about your experience in detail and describe why it was memorable.
2. Expository: Write an essay comparing Beto and Beto Sr.
3. Persuasive: In the novel *A Good Long Way*, Beto and his father fight over Beto breaking his curfew. Beto's father says, "You wanna stay in this house—my house—there's rules you gotta follow." Beto says, "Just a little respect is what I'm after, or I'm out of here..." Beto Sr. thinks Beto should follow the house rules at any age and Beto thinks that he's old enough to make his own rules. At what age should children who live with their parents be allowed to follow their own rules? Write an essay stating your position

whether young adults living with their parents should follow house rules or whether parents should allow children more freedom depending on their age and level of maturity.

Vocabulary

Taut (3)	emotionally or mentally strained or tense:
Grapple (5)	to engage in a struggle or close encounter
Specter (7)	a visible spirit; apparition
Heaving (7)	causing to rise and fall with or as with a swelling motion
Dole (8)	to deal out or distribute
Fiend (16)	a diabolically cruel or wicked person
Spigot (19)	a peg or plug for stopping the passage of liquid in a faucet
Barrage (26)	an overwhelming quantity or explosion, as of words, blows, or criticisms
Saunter (27)	to walk at an easy unhurried pace
Rebuff (29)	to reject or snub an offer, advance, or approach made by somebody
Revving (30)	to increase a vehicle's engine speed by pressing down on the gas pedal or advancing the throttle, especially while the vehicle is stationary
Trek (32)	to go somewhere slowly or with difficulty
Haphazard (33)	happening or done in a way that has not been planned
Curt (34)	rude or abrupt
Amble (35)	to walk slowly in a relaxed way
Strewn (37)	to scatter something, especially carelessly or untidily
Quaver (40)	to speak in a trembling voice because of nervousness or fear
Emulate (43)	to try to equal or surpass somebody or something that is successful or admired
Fray (45)	to wear away the edge or surface of cloth or rope by friction, causing threads to hang loose, or be worn away in this way
Vying (58)	to strive for superiority or compete with somebody or something
Awning (59)	a plastic, canvas, or metal porch or shade supported by a frame and often foldable, placed over a storefront, doorway, window, or the side of a recreational vehicle
Trudge (59)	to walk, or walk a particular path or distance, with slow/heavy/weary steps

Bide (61)	to stay, remain, or wait
Abridgement (65)	to shorten a text, e.g. by cutting or summarizing it
Bearings (68)	to learn exactly where you are and in which direction you should proceed
Kowtowing (94)	to behave in an extremely submissive way in order to please somebody in a position of authority

Discussion Questions

1. On page 12, what does the author mean by “Nothing worse than a smart chick with a tough-as-nails attitude, staring those teachers down sometimes, zapping them with electric sparks coming out of her eyes”? What does this tell us about Jessy’s character?
2. Why doesn’t Jessy want to speak to a counselor at the school? Do you agree with her decision?
3. In what ways is Roel like Beto? In what ways is he different?
4. Why do you think the author uses second person point of view for Jessy’s story?
5. Why does Roel care and worry about Beto even after realizing Beto’s actions have been selfish?
6. What is the importance of Jessy’s note to Beto?
7. Describe the relationship between Jessy and Beto.
8. If Jessy were your best friend, what advice would you give her? What advice would you give Beto?

Extensions

1. Pick two characters from the novel and draw portraits of them in a setting from the novel. These should be accompanied by written pieces explaining them.
2. Have students draw a map of where the story takes place. Have students label all of the places that were important in the story, and then write one page about how the places were used in the novel.
3. Have students write a continuation of the story, a new adventure for Beto, Roel and Jessy. The tone and format should be the same as the original novel.
4. Have students explain how they would make the book into a movie. Have them write up and tell who would play each one. Where would they film it? What parts might they change/omit? Why? Be sure to have them explain all of their choices.

About the author

RENÉ SALDAÑA, JR. is the author of several acclaimed novels for young people that depict life in Mexican-American communities. He is the author of a bilingual story collection, *Dancing with the Devil and Other Tales from Beyond / Bailando con el Diablo y otros cuentos del más allá* (Piñata Books, 2012), which features supernatural elements rooted in Latino folklore. His other books for teens include *The Whole Sky Full of Stars* (Random House, 2007), *Finding Our Way: Stories* (2003) and *The Jumping Tree* (Delacorte, 2001). He lives in Lubbock, Texas, where he teaches in the College of Education at Texas Tech University.

Related media

Running Away-Not an Option to Die For: A Homeless Awareness Lesson, Grades 6-8

http://www.utdanacenter.org/theo/downloads/kidswithouthomes/6-8_teacher_lesson.pdf

Lessons from a High School Dropout

<http://bigthink.com/60-second-reads/lessons-from-a-high-school-dropout>

ArtSchools.com

<http://artschools.com/states/texas/>

Advocates for Youth

<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/relationships-lessons>

Further Reading

Chbosky, Stephen. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. New York: MTV Books. 2012

Gonzales, Diane Bertrand. *Trino's Choice*. Houston: Arte Publico Press. 1999.

Saldaña, Jr., René. *Finding Our Way: Stories*. New York: Laurel Leaf. 2007.

Torres Sanchez, Jenny. *The Downside of Being Charlie*. Philadelphia: Running Kids Press. 2012.