

*The Lemon Tree Caper: A Mickey Rangel Mystery /  
La intriga del limonero: Colección Mickey Rangel, detective privado*

René Saldaña, Jr.

Spanish translation by Natalia Rosales-Yeomans

Curriculum Guide by Amy Cummins, University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley

**Summary:**

Mickey Rangel’s detective skills are needed in his home neighborhood when he must help his neighbor Señorita Andrade solve two mysteries. After Mickey gets home from school one hot day, he is thirsty for lemonade at the stand run by Tina, the younger sister of Bucho, a classmate who is not a friend to Mickey. But Mickey gets called to help Señorita Andrade solve the question of why her aquarium fish went missing. After that mystery gets solved, another alarm is sounded by Señorita Andrade. All the lemons growing on her tree have disappeared. A tree full of fruit that morning is now empty. Mickey investigates clues and converses with Tina while enjoying her lemonade. Mickey also gets tips from an “Angel” who leaves him secret notes in riddle form to help him solve cases. This is a tricky case. Señorita Andrade’s lemons have helped her win first prize at the Lemon Festival year after year. Several of her neighbors seem quite jealous of her victory. Mickey has to puzzle out who is responsible. But will he find more mysteries than he can solve?

**Teaching Overview / Background Knowledge:**

Each of the three 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. The Rio Grande Valley has long been associated with citrus crops such as lemons, limes, grapefruit, oranges, and tangerines, and an annual citrus festival in Mission began in 1932.

Mickey Rangel, a successful sleuth, took online courses to get a detective license. He now gets relied on to solve mysteries in school and the neighborhood. Mickey receives one or more anonymous tips from “Mickey’s Angel” for each case. All of the books in Saldaña’s series include communication in riddle format from this unidentified person. None of the books ever directly reveals who this helper is, but the implication is that a named character is the Angel. While *The Lemon Tree Caper* is set in the home neighborhood of twin brothers Mickey and Ricky Rangel, the books are set in his school.

This bilingual flip book presents the illustrated story in English on one side and in Spanish on the reverse (inverted) side. *The Lemon Tree Caper* was named to the Texas Library Association’s 2012-2013 Tejas Star Reading List. This book has a different translator than the other books in the Mickey Rangel series. Dr. Natalia Rosales-Yeomans, a native of Mexico, holds a PhD in Hispanic Linguistics from the University of Houston and has edited and translated several books for Arte Público Press.

**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)(B)—on using context to determine meaning of unfamiliar words; (4)(C)—on antonyms; (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; (10)—on sensory language in fiction; (17)—on the writing process; (19)—on writing about personal experiences; (20)(C)—written response to literary text; and (30)—on listening and speaking.

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; (3)(A)—on theme in fiction; (3)(B)—on comparing characters in traditional and classical literature; (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; (16)—on writing literary texts; (28)—on listening and speaking to express an opinion based on information.

### **Reading Comprehension Strategies:**

#### *Before reading:*

- Look at some of the illustrations created by artists Giovanni Mora and Alexio Mora, such as the full-page drawings on pages 4, 13, 20, 27, or 34 (but not the last illustrations that reveal too much!). Predict what could be happening in that picture. Imagine you are detectives who must make inferences about what is happening based on observation.
- 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 skills, such as being a police officer, or a spy, or even a scientist?
- Discuss the life of the author, René Saldaña, in order to show how he is a relatable person. He also grew up in the same town where the Mickey Rangel books take place.
- If students have read the first book in the Mickey Rangel series, they can discuss what they know about Mickey and his detective skills. You can also talk about how the point of view from which a story is told affects the book.

#### *During reading:*

- Notice how the author has a small mystery (the missing aquarium fish) before the main mystery, the Lemon Tree Caper after which the book is titled. Did you guess the solution to the missing fish before Mickey did?
- Write down clues to the mystery of where the lemons went. Why are the wheelchair tire tracks and the marks from a walker both good and bad clues (21-22)? Did you have ideas for the solution to the mystery of the missing lemons before Mickey realized it?
- Consider how each character that enters the story could or could not be responsible for the missing lemons. When you meet a new character, write the name down. And when you learn something about that person, add the information to your list. This helps keep a list of characters as well as helping you to solve the mystery of the disappearing lemons.
- Make a list of possible “angels.” Write down characters who might be doing this.

#### *After reading:*

- Enjoy a glass of ice cold lemonade or a piece of citrus fruit as you discuss the book.
- Return to the Angel’s communications to see how they foreshadow the outcome.
- Discuss whether you agree with other readers about who Mickey’s Angel is. You may need to go through the full list of all named characters appearing in this book.
- Debate what you think should happen to the people responsible for taking the lemons. How did they respond to being discovered? What happened to the lemons?

### **Writing / Composition Prompts:**

1) Write an explanation of who took the lemons and why you think they did it. Also explain how another character in the book might have been suspected but did not do it.

2) Write an analysis of a life lesson that you learned from reading this book. It might relate to investigating things, being a neighbor, or overcoming jealousy.

3) Write a character description or sketch of Señorita Andrade. Consider all that you learn about her in the course of the book.

4) Draw and color your own, original illustration of an example of figurative language in the book. Examples include “jumping to conclusions” (11), “paint yourself into a corner” (12), “pampered that cat like he was the king of Sweden” (14), and “pulling the wool over our eyes” (31). Depict the image that the sensory language creates in your mind.

5) In the book, a big event for deep South Texas is celebrating the annual Lemon Festival and Lowrider Bicycle Show (p. 18). Imagine a festival or community event that you would like to see happen. What would be the theme, and how would it relate to the city in which you live? What would be there? Why would young people want to go? Draw a picture and write a short description of this festival.

6) Write an exposition of how Mickey solved the mysteries and who helped him. Show that you can analyze the evidence like a detective.

7) What other types of detective or mystery stories would you like to read? What would be the mystery? Would the detective be like you or like someone else you know?

### **Vocabulary / Word Study:**

caper (in the book title)

sweating bullets (1)

pungent (2)

malodorous (2)

make a beeline (3)

meaner than a skunk (3)

loosening the apron strings (5)

as old as the moon (7)

wrinkled like a prune (7)

methodology (9)

responsibility (11)

gaping (11)

uninitiated (11)

insolent (15)

premeditated (18)

abscond with (18)

animosity (19)

decrepit (19)

meticulously (21)

dregs (25)

concoction (30)

deciphering (36)

process of elimination (36)

peeked (39)

confronted (42)

### **Discussion Questions:**

1) Look at how Mickey uses antonyms to help contrast Tina and her big brother Bucho (2). What does this description reveal about Tiny, Bucho, and Mickey too? What does the description of Bucho’s actions (6-7) further suggest about Mickey’s perspective?

2) Mickey has a twin brother Ricky who stayed home sick with the flu that day. Do you think Ricky is still an important character in *The Lemon Tree Caper*? Why or why not?

3) Mickey gets several communications from his Angel. There is a seemingly blank page under a rock by the tree (22), a note from his Angel in his backpack (32), and a message written in tiny letters inside a matchbox (35). What does Mickey learn from each of these messages? What would you think if you got these notes? Go back to the first after reading later ones, and

explain the riddles. Who could possibly be the Angel who gives him these notes? Do you think Mickey could solve the mystery without his Angel's help?

4) Could Señorita Andrade be a *lechuza* (bewitched owl)? Have you heard about the folklore regarding *lechuzas*? (The reference work *Mexican Bestiary* by Noe Vela and David Bowles describes the owl that transforms from a woman and other stories and creatures.) Textual details hinting at this identity include Señorita Andrade's reputation as a person who keeps to herself, the perception that she is "a night owl" who stays up late (7), and the time that Bucho was chased by "a huge white owl" (8). Making neighbors think she is a witch, Señorita Andrade had "some time ago developed a way to keep fruit on her tree year-round, even this far out of season" (17). Then when Mickey hears the "flapping wings" at the end and falls down on his face, makes Mickey think he has encountered *la lechuza*. But did he? So why does the author leave the book unclear about whether Señorita Andrade has special powers, bringing up the idea that she has supernatural powers and never proving or disproving it? Is it fair or unfair that the young people in the neighborhood secretly think of Señorita Andrade as a *bruja* (witch)? When is the word *bruja* appropriate or inappropriate to use?

5) Mickey talks about idioms with Tina, Bucho's little sister. Examples are "Look who the cat's dragged up my way" (24) and "Did the cat get your tongue?" (25). Why are idiomatic expressions important and interesting? What are other examples you know?

6) Mickey seems to know the people who live in his neighborhood well. Do you know the names of the people who live near you? Do you have a friendly relationship with your neighbors? How do you respond if someone living near you does something that you disagree with? How can you be a friend to other people, like how Mickey helps his neighbor solve the mystery of the lemons?

7) When he goes home from school, Mickey has to deal with a hot, smelly bus without air conditioning, then his parents are not home yet when he gets home from school, and his brother is sick with the flu and cannot play. But he has a positive attitude toward helping solve his neighbor's mysteries. What do you do when you get home from school? What do you wish you could do after school? Is there a way to change your perspective so you can be happier about your situation or turn "lemons into lemonade"?

8) Who do you think is the best "detective" in this book? Support your answer.

### **Extensions:**

1) Tina describes her "old family recipe" (28) for excellent lemonade. And Señorita Andrade wins prizes for her lemon-based cooking every year. What is a food or recipe you like? Write a list of ingredients and instructions for how to put them together. You can have someone in your family tell you the ingredients and instructions so you can write them down.

2) Mickey's bus driver Mr. Gutiérrez is an army veteran who served in the Vietnam War (3). When did this war take place? How old might a veteran of Vietnam be in the present time? Do you know anyone who is a military veteran or is currently serving? What jobs did or do they do? Which streets in your home town are named after military veterans?

3) Mickey's Angel writes notes in riddles. Create your own riddles. Practice your riddles on another member of your family to see if they understand the riddle.

4) The notes from "Mickey's Angel" are very helpful to Mickey. Can you write a note to someone that is helpful or shows caring? It could be anonymous or signed. Think of someone who would like to get a note or a letter from you, and write a message.

5) René Saldaña includes *brujas* and *lechuzas* in his story. Remember a story that your family or friends tell. Are the details always the same, or can they change? Write your own version of this experience, legend, or folktale. Other contemporary Texas authors who also write down their family stories for other people to read include Xavier Garza and David Bowles.

6) Papuchín is the yellow and white cat Señorita Andrade treats so well and who supposedly likes to watch soap operas with her. Draw and color a picture of an animal, such as a pet or an animal on a farm or ranch that you know and care about. Place the animal in a location where you see him or her.

### **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://kids.mysterynet.com/>

“Kids’ Mysteries” (Website with full text of short mysteries to solve and other tricks and tales)

<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 René Saldaña, published May 5, 2015).

<http://renesaldanajr.blogspot.com/>

“On Writing, On Reading.” (Professional and personal blog maintained by René Saldaña)

<http://texassweethearts.blogspot.com/2011/08/featured-sweetheart-rene-saldana-jr.html>

“Featured Sweetheart Rene Saldana, Jr.” (Interview with René 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.)

<https://artepublicopress.com/?s=rene+saldana>

“Books by Rene Saldana.” (Publisher Arte Público and imprint Piñata Books provide information about each book available from René Saldaña through their press.)

**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 perdidata*, 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. *Lechuza* stories appear in Xavier Garza's *Kid Cyclone Fights the Devil and Other Stories / Kid ciclón se enfrenta a El Diablo y otras historias* (2010) and *The Donkey Lady Fights La Llorona and Other Stories / La señora Asno se enfrenta a la Llorona y otros cuentos* (2015).

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.