

My Father, the Angel of Death

Author Ray Villareal

Cover design by Giovanni Mora and Gianni Mora

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Summary:

Jesse Baron has started seventh grade at another new school in San Antonio. He has lived in many cities because of who his dad is, the Angel of Death, the American Championship Wrestling Heavyweight Champion! Jesse has trouble making friends around the many schools he has attended as he never really knows if someone wants to truly be his friend or get close to his famous father. In dealing with his insecurities of who his father is, Jesse finds himself in the perils of bullying, potential friendships and a first love. Now, he must deal with the troubles regarding his parents' marriage. His parents have had marital trouble before, but this time seems different for Jesse. He feels things have gotten worse and will not be getting better any time soon. He begins to wonder what life would be like if his father wasn't a famous wrestler. Would things be different? Would they be better?

About the Author:

Ray Villareal grew up around Dallas, Texas in the former neighborhood known as Little Mexico. Villareal took on a penchant for writing due to his father's way with words when he created poetry. Being bilingual, Villareal includes Spanish throughout his novels along with Mexican American culture. With his blend of Mexican culture and how he hoped to get Latino/a young students reading he has the capability in acquiring readers to become excited about his storylines. Villareal has also written *On the Other Side of The Bridge* (2014), *Body Slammed!* (2012), *Don't Call Me Hero* (2011), *Who's Buried in the Garden?* (2009), and *Alamo Wars* (2008). He graduated from Southern Methodist University with a Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education with an emphasis on Bilingual Education and a Master of Liberal Arts. He worked for 30 years as a teacher and instructional reading coach in the Dallas Independent School District.

Teacher Information:

Author Ray Villareal's style of writing gets young students interested in reading. In Philip Morales' article "Writing What He Wants to Read: Local Author Ray Villareal" states, "I write my books in what is called a high low style," says Ray (2012). "High level interest, low level reading – to make it more accessible to low level readers. Just like reading comic books was for me. They weren't great literature but they did have thought provoking questions."

*"My father wanted people to read his poems, just like any writer. You don't write for yourself, you want to share your writing with someone else."

*"I wanted to write books about Latinos without putting them in barrios or without putting them in the remote villages in Central and South America. You know the typical stuff we see or that we used to see – times are changing."

* "I teach how to start a story with conflict. If you have no conflict you have no story."

Texas State Standards:

This curriculum guide includes activities that can help students gain knowledge and skills expected for their grade level in Texas.

Relevant standards for ELAR Grade 6 include: TEKS §110.18(b)(2)(D and E)—explain the meaning of foreign words and phrases commonly used in English; use a dictionary, a glossary, or a thesaurus (printed or electronic) to determine the meanings; §110.18(b)(3)(A)—infer the implicit theme of a work of fiction, distinguishing theme from the topic; §110.18(b)(6)(A)—summarize the elements of plot development; §110.18(b)(16)—Writing. Students write about their own experiences; and §110.18(b)(26)(A)—listen to and interpret a speaker’s message.

Relevant standards for ELAR Grade 7 include: TEKS §110.19(b)(2)(E)— use a dictionary, a glossary, or a thesaurus (printed or electronic) to determine the meanings; §110.19(b)(3)(A and C)—describe multiple themes in a work of fiction; analyze how place and time influence the theme or message of a literary work; §110.19(b)(9)—reading/comprehension of informational text/culture and history; §110.19(b)(16)—writing. Students write about their own experiences; and §110.19(b)(26)(A, B, and C)—students will use comprehension skills to listen attentively to others in formal and informal settings.

Relevant standards for ELAR Grade 8 include: TEKS §110.20(b)(2)(E)— use a dictionary, a glossary, or a thesaurus (printed or electronic) to determine the meanings; §110.20(b)(3)(C)—explain how the values and beliefs of particular characters are affected by the historical and cultural setting of the literary work; §110.20(b)(9)—comprehension of informational text/culture and history; and §110.20(b)(16)—writing. Students write about their own experiences.

Relevant standards for ELAR Grade 9 include: TEKS §110.31(b)(1)(E)— use a dictionary, a glossary, or a thesaurus (printed or electronic) to determine the meanings; §110.31(b)(5)(C)—analyze the way in which a work of fiction is shaped by narrator’s point of view; and §110.31(b)(14)(A)—write an engaging story with a well-developed conflict and resolution.

Reading Comprehension Strategies:

- The novel is called *My Father, the Angel of Death*. Ask students what they think about the title. What do they think the story will be about from the title alone?
- They can infer further about the novel topic from the cover photo. The cover photo presents a gloomy situation and can provide questions from students.
- Have students look up wrestling and what it entails. There are stories that go along with wrestlers. There are popular wrestlers in popular culture and they have a character title. Such as, the Rock. Have students look up some of the scenarios that are popular among wrestlers.
- Jesse moves around a lot. Is that something students can relate to? If so, how does that make them feel? If they have lived in the same place all of their lives, how would they feel having to move around a lot?
- Have students pick/or assign a wrestler. Storyline is an important part of wrestling as it is what gains more followers. Have students look up the chosen/assigned wrestler and explain what storyline they follow. With their chosen/assigned wrestler they can present their thoughts on wrestling and can be led into a short discussion. It can be a contemporary wrestler or retired.

- A question that is asked in the summary is how Jesse questions if his father would be happy if he left behind his wrestling career. Have the students write their thoughts on this. How would they handle this situation? Do they think things would be better for Jesse if his dad left behind wrestling?
- Since friendship is a thematic element throughout the novel, have students write about what friendships means to them. It is difficult for Jesse to make friends because he moves around a lot. How would the students handle this if they were Jesse Baron?
- Ask the students why they think Ray Villareal decided to choose untranslated Spanish throughout his novel. Students could have questions about certain Spanish phrases and they could present this as a way of leading them into discussion.

Writing /composition prompts:

- 1) Jesse moves around a lot. It is difficult for him to get used to his environment and make new friends. What advice would you give Jesse to ease his transition into a new place and school?
- 2) In chapter three, Jesse encounters bullies picking on a girl. Did it surprise you reading about male bullies picking on a girl? Do you see bullying as something that should not be happening to neither males nor females?
- 3) In chapter nine, Jesse and his father have a conversation about bullying and what it means.

Please explain:

“He laughed. “Jesse, those men didn’t want to fight. Not really. They were more interested in trying to scare me.” He placed the action figure back on the shelf. “That’s usually the case with bullies. They’re the control freaks. They try to intimidate you into thinking they’re tough. But once they see you’re not afraid of them, once they lose control of the situation, they generally back off” (67).

Do you think this is true? Have you ever had to deal with bullying? How did you deal with it?

Vocabulary:

- “excruciating” (1) — intensely painful
- “speculated” (7) —form a theory or conjecture about a subject without firm evidence
- “gruffly” (14) —low and harsh; hoarse
- “vicious” (16) —spiteful; malicious
- “maneuver” (24) —movement or series of moves requiring skill and care
- “congregated” (27) —gather into a crowd or mass
- “disdain” (29) —the feeling that someone or something is unworthy of one's consideration or respect; contempt
- “definite” (34) —clearly stated or decided; not vague or doubtful

“gimmick” (39) —a trick or device intended to attract attention, publicity, or business
“emphasize” (43) —give special importance or prominence to (something) in speaking or writing
“unseemly” (45) —(of behavior or actions) not proper or appropriate
“disposable” (48) —(of an article) intended to be used once, or until no longer useful, and then thrown away
“exasperation” (50) —a feeling of intense irritation or annoyance
“guffawed” (59) —laugh in a loud or boisterous way
“strenuous” (68) —requiring or using great exertion
“disparaging” (70) —expressing the opinion that something is of little worth; derogatory
“retaliated” (71) —make an attack or assault in return for a similar attack
“incomprehensible” (78) —not able to be understood; not intelligible
“spectacle” (100) —a visually striking performance or display
“minimal” (112) —of a minimum amount, quantity, or degree; negligible
“pummeling” (136) —strike repeatedly, typically with the fists

Discussion Questions:

- 1) In chapter one, students play a cruel joke on Jesse. How would you have dealt with that situation?
- 2) On page fifteen, Jesse’s mom yells at him. Have you ever had an adult family member yell at you? How did it make you feel?
- 3) In chapter six on page forty-five we see an interaction between Jesse and his teacher, Mr. Gillette. It seems some adults do not know how to talk to young adults and it can bring about some unfortunate attitudes from both as they are both dealing with a confusing time. How do you wish to be understood?
- 4) In chapter four, Jesse is amazed by seeing Sara speaking Spanish to the *paletero*, a person who sells ice cream. Why do you think that is?
- 5) Do you think it is important to be bilingual? Are you bilingual? If not, do you wish to be? How can a person become bilingual?
- 6) Adults seem to be a bit dismissive towards Jesse. It is difficult for Jesse to get a word in and is promptly quieted by the adults around him. How would you handle these situations being Jesse without disrespecting an adult?
- 7) In chapter three, Jesse stands up for a classmate. How should we stop bullying from happening? What should you do if you think if you see someone being bullied?
- 8) Throughout *My Father, the Angel of Death*, Jesse deals with negative feedback from teachers. In chapter seven, a teacher is portrayed in an unfortunate manner having been a fan of Jesse’s father. Sometimes, celebrity interest can go too far. What would you have done had you been in that situation?

9) In chapter eleven, Jesse's new friend, Wendell displays a negative body image about himself (88). Wendell thinks his weight is why his father left. If you were Wendell's friend, what kind of advice would you give him?

10) The novel ends with Jesse's father hurting himself and changing his mind about wrestling. Do you think he will retire after this injury? We see Jesse becoming afraid for his father's well-being and not believing his father's injury was a part of the act. Does the ending change the way you see wrestling on television?

Extensions:

Writing:

(A) Jesse Baron is a fictional character and Ray Villareal has created a world for him. If you were Jesse, would you ever write a letter to someone to have them better understand you? Choose a character Jesse has conflict with from *My Father, the Angel of Death* and write a letter to them as if you were Jesse Baron. What would Jesse tell them?

(B) Write a pros and cons list about being a professional wrestler for Mark Baron, the Angel of Death.

Art ideas:

(A) Create your own cover for a chosen/assigned wrestler. Use the front cover art from *My Father, the Angel of Death* as a template.

(B) In the book, Jesse has trouble making friends as he believes they only want to be his friend to get close to his famous father. If you wanted to be Jesse's friend, what would you do? Create a collage of all of your favorite things to show Jesse, so he knows you mean well.

Related media/literary tools:

- http://www.cincopuntos.com/authors_detail.sstg?id=47

Xavier Garza is a prolific writer on wrestling. His books on *luche libre* are recognized for their cultural influence within a sport. This author can be used as a tool to understanding a part of the wrestling world.

- <http://www.wwe.com/shows/smackdown>

World Wrestling Entertainment's website can be used for further information on what Jesse Baron's father does for a living.

- Dwayne Johnson's *The Rock Says...* is written about the man behind the character. The infamous The Rock is a character who has a storyline like other wrestlers around him. Learning about someone who is famous for wrestling, acting and philanthropy can be a great way to understand the job that Mark Baron has as the Angel of Death.

Further reading:

*Ray Villareal's *Body Slammed* is the sequel to *My Father, the Angel of Death* and is for reader's 8th to 10th grade with the inclusion of a wrestling theme as well. It discusses the consequences of making unfortunate choices while growing up and dealing with family and friendship issues.

* Ray Villareal's *Don't Call Me Hero* is another great novel for reader's 6th to 9th grade. The novel deals with Rawly Sanchez understanding heroism and what it means to be a good person while balancing his family issues, school and friends.

* René Saldaña's *The Whole Sky Full of Stars* is a novel for reader's 6th to 9th grade. A coming of age novel about the challenges of friendship and parental relationships while dealing with the responsibility which comes along with dire financial situations.