

*The Mystery of the Mysterious Marker, a Mickey Rangel Mystery*  
*El misterio del malvado marcador, colección Mickey Rangel, detective privado*

René Saldaña, Jr.

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Summary:

Mrs. Abrego, the school principal, calls fifth grader Mickey Rangel out of class to her office. But Mickey's not in trouble; she needs him to help her solve the case of who has been defacing school property with graffiti. Mickey took online training to be a Private Detective, and he has helped people solve many problems. The latest vandalism message says "Our Principle's no 'pal' of nobody's!" The guilty person is revealed through Mickey's asking Bucho and his former friend Fito about writing and spelling issues. Mickey learns that the person who looked guilty, Bucho, was not the real perpetrator. Because Bucho is a school bully, Mickey struggles with whether to declare Bucho innocent. Mickey does the right thing by pointing out who is in fact guilty of the vandalism.

About the Author:

Born in McAllen, Texas, and raised in Peñitas, Texas, René Saldaña currently works as a professor of Language and Literacy at Texas Tech University in Lubbock. Getting a scholarship to attend college at Bob Jones University in South Carolina, he earned a Bachelor of Arts in English in 1990. René Saldaña taught middle school and high school English in South Texas (at LaJoya ISD and Mission CISD) for six years during the 1990s. He earned a Master of Arts degree in English at Clemson University and a Doctor of Philosophy degree in English at Georgia State University. 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 / Bailando con el diablo y otros cuentos del más allá* (2012) and a co-edited story collection *Juventud! Growing Up on the Border* (2013). His Mickey Rangel Mystery series of bilingual flip books for intermediate readers has three volumes: *The Case of the Pen Gone Missing / El caso de la pluma perdida* (2009), *The Lemon Tree Caper / La intriga del limonero* (2011) and *The Mystery of the Mischievous Marker / El misterio del malvado marcador* (2013). Professor Saldaña is married and has three sons and a one daughter.

FUN FACTS

**His favorite food** is a Swedish dish that is similar to *migas con huevo*. It's called Pytt i Panna. It includes potatoes, onions and beets topped with a fried egg.

**His favorite color changes!** If the Pittsburg Steelers are doing well, it's black and yellow. If the Clemson Tigers are doing well, it's orange and purple. Saldana went to school at Clemson University.

**His hobbies include:** reading and watching soccer. His sons play soccer and he could spend hours watching them.

**He speaks 2 languages:** Spanish and English. He is also trying to learn Swedish!

**His favorite book** in elementary school was *Wet Albert*.

Teacher Information:

Each of the three mysteries in the Mickey Rangel Mystery series is narrated by Mickey, a smart fifth grader living in Peñitas, Texas. Mickey took online courses to get a non-professional detective license and now is relied on to solve mysteries in school and the neighborhood. The books all include an anonymous "angel" who gives Mickey clever, confusing notes to help him solve cases. The books do not reveal who this

secret helper is. Characters in *The Mystery of the Mischievous Marker*, such as Bucho, Ricky and Toots, were also mentioned earlier in the series. The book’s line drawings help readers relate to what Mickey is doing.

### **Texas State Standards:**

This curriculum guide includes activities that can help students gain knowledge and skills expected for their grade level. Relevant standards for ELAR Grade 3: TEKS §110.14(b)(4)(C)—about homophones; and §110.14(b)(4)(D)—about playful use of language; and §110.14(b)(8)(A, B, and C)—about the reading and comprehension of fictional literary text; and §110.14(b)(23)(C)(i)—about apostrophes in contractions and possessives.

For ELAR Grade 4, TEKS §110.15(b)(2)(B)—about using context to determine vocabulary meaning; and §110.15(b)(6)(A, B, and C)—about the reading and comprehension of fictional literary text; and §110.15(b)(8) on sensory language, similes and imagery; and (b)(22)(C) on homophones.

For ELAR Grade 5, TEKS §110.16(b)(2)(B)—about using context to determine vocabulary meaning; and §110.16(b)(6)(A, B, and C)—about the reading and comprehension of fictional literary text; and §110.16(b)(8) on sensory language, similes, and imagery; and §110.16 (b)(22)(C) on differentiating between commonly confused terms.

### **Background Knowledge:**

A lesson in English language usage will help the reader see events like Mickey does when he solves the mystery. Two grammar issues in the graffiti vandalism—issues which are essential to comprehending this novel—are the spelling of homophones (a type of homonym) and the use of apostrophes with a singular possessive. This material can be taught before, during, and/or after reading of the novel.

Words that sound alike but are spelled differently and mean totally different things, homophones can be tricky. The important homonym, or sound-alike pair in the book is principal (school leader)/principle (value or ethics). We see one in the Angel’s note that says “ex marks the spot” (instead of X), meaning to look at a former friend of Bucho’s (28). Bucho makes a play on words with a homophone when he says to Mickey, “Apology accepted but not excepted” (34). Other common homonyms include to/too/two; sun/son; way/weigh; flower/flour; be/bee.

Using an apostrophe can show either possession or a contraction that combines two words. To show that something is owned, use an apostrophe, like in “*mamá’s rebozo*.” Examples from the novel of using an apostrophe with a singular possessive include “Ricky’s and my younger days” (5) and “Bucho’s existence” (35).

However, apostrophes work differently with contractions to show that a letter has been omitted. An example in the book is when Bucho says, “It’s not him. He’s my friend” (23). The contraction *it’s* is a shortened form of *it is*, and *he’s* means *he is*. Another example is when Mickey thinks, “Here’s what I’d concluded so far” (26). The contraction *Here’s* means *Here is*, and *I’d* means *I had*. Sometimes, we try to avoid using contractions in formal writing, even if we use them a lot in speaking.

### **Pre-reading activities:**

- Tell students about the biography of author René Saldaña.
- Ask students where they have read or seen examples of people solving mysteries, like Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson do.
- Show students an illustration in the book (such as the ones on page 10, 19, or 27), and ask them what they think could be happening. Imagine you are like a detective who has to figure out what is happening and what people are saying, based on just a picture.
- Read aloud the first paragraph of the book. Ask whether the story is in first person (“I”) or third person (“he/she/they”). This book is narrated in the first person by Mickey Rangel, whose name is mentioned in the title and on the cover of the book. Ask students what they guess about the narrator based on just the first paragraph. Students will discover whether their guesses are right by reading the whole book.

### **Vocabulary:**

“craving” (1)—a strong want

- “interrogation” (1)—questioning, interview
- “nerve-wracking” (3)—intimidating, stressful
- “surmised” (4)—guessed, deduced
- “sluggish” (6)—slow, lethargic
- “incriminating” (12)—makes someone look guilty
- “arch-nemesis” (13)—worst enemy, opponent
- “confidentiality” (14)—privacy
- “indecision” (15)—wavering, hesitancy
- “scrutinize” (17)—inspect, study closely
- “unraveling” (26)—falling apart
- “homonym” (26)—words that have the same sound or spelling but different meanings
- “retaliation” (28)—revenge
- “unclutter” (28)—to clean up
- “alliteration” (28)—repeated consonant sounds
- “sarcasm” (33)—cutting language, not meaning exactly what you say
- “dumbfounded” (34)—surprised
- “menacing” (37)—threatening, scary

### **Discussion Questions:**

- 1) Mrs. Abrego says about Bucho, “It may be easy to assume his guilt based on these obvious clues and his prior actions, but I’m still a believer in our American justice system” in which a person is innocent until being proven guilty (15). Why is this an important principle of law?
- 2) Why does Mickey want people to be out on the playground when he reveals the truth about who marked on the walls?
- 3) In the end, do you think that things have changed between Mickey and Bucho? Why or why not?
- 4) Discuss what you think Mickey means when he says this. “I’d solved another case, and though I was happy for that, I was happier that in the end, I’d done the right thing. I’d acted on principle, like the Angel wrote in his email” (38).
- 5) If you see someone being mean, like Fito and Bucho are in the book, what could you do?
- 6) Were you ever accused of something you did not do? What happened?
- 7) Why is it wrong to commit vandalism and to write on walls?
- 8) How could we express our feelings when we are upset or feel strongly about something?
- 9) What is something that is a mystery to you—something you want to find out more about?

### **Extensions:**

#### **Art Ideas:**

(A) Draw a picture to illustrate an example of figurative language in the book. Bucho says, “Toots and I are like butter and toast, made for each other” (23). Similes include “like an ice cube on a South Texas summer day” (3) or “I felt like a stuck pig at a barbeque convention” (5) or “cool as a cucumber” (2). An implied metaphor Mickey uses is “sweating bullets” (1).

(B) This book has pictures that tell what is happening. Draw a picture that tells about something that happened in your life this week.

#### **Creative Writing Prompts:**

(A) Look at one of the pictures in the book, but imagine a new story about what is happening in the drawing. Tell what happens in the alternate story.

B) Imagine that you are the person who defaced the wall, and now you have to write an apology letter to Mr. Buttons, the janitor who has had to clean off all the graffiti, and tell him why you did it. What do you write?

C) Imagine that you go to Mickey’s school and have a case you want him to solve like a detective. What mystery could he solve for you?

**Literary Allusion Extension:**

(A) Mickey mentions that his twin brother, Ricky, is learning the poem “Mending Wall” by Robert Frost. Read this poem aloud, and discuss what the speaker of the poem learns about walls or fences. A parallel is that Mickey helps to bring down a wall between Bucho and his school by showing that Bucho was innocent.

**Fun Facts:**

- René Saldaña grew up in Peñitas, Texas, worked as a school teacher and became a famous author. He likes to write books for children and to make stories that take place in the Valley, where he grew up. It’s good to remember things that happen so that you can tell stories about them later, and write down the stories so other people can read them.
- The translator of this book is Carolina Villarroel. Carolina gets paid to write Spanish editions of books originally written in English. Carolina has written the Spanish translations for a lot of great books for young readers, such as René Saldaña’s first book about Mickey Rangel, *The Case of the Pen Gone Missing*. Carolina also wrote the Spanish editions for books such as *Juan and the Chupacabras / Juan y el Chupacabras* by Xavier Garza and *The Runaway Piggy / El cochinito fugitivo* by James Luna. Being able to write in both Spanish and English, and to translate between them, is a very valuable skill.

**Further reading:**

The previous two books in this bilingual series by Rene Saldana are *The Case of the Pen Gone Missing / El caso de la pluma perdida* (2009) and *The Lemon Tree Caper / La intriga del limonero* (2011). In Alidis Vicente’s bilingual flip book, *The Missing Chancleta and Other Top-Secret Cases / La chancleta perdida y otros casos secretos* (2013), an eight-year-old girl named Flaca solves three mysteries. Xavier Garza’s *Maximilian and the Mystery of the Guardian Angel* is a bilingual novel about an eleven year old that takes place in Rio Grande City, Texas. It has a sequel. Some other detective/mystery book series for intermediate readers include *Encyclopedia Brown* by Donald J. Sobol, *Nate the Great* by Marjorie Weinman Sharmat and *Cam Jansen* by David Adler.