

Sweet Fifteen

by Diane Gonzales Bertrand

Themes:

- Rites of passage
- Family
- Accepting and adjusting to change

About the book:

Stefanie Bonilla should be the focus of attention as the celebration of her *quinceañera* approaches. Hispanic families traditionally mark the transition to womanhood with this special “coming-out” party for a girl’s fifteenth birthday. Stefanie, however, never wanted this party, and more so following the death of her father, Estevan.

No one notices Stefanie’s grief, except for her dressmaker, Rita Navarro. Rita was once in a similar situation, and she becomes more and more involved with the Bonilla-Esparza families as she reaches out to Stefanie. Once Stefanie begins to situate herself in her new life, all the characters themselves seek new places that culminate in a beautiful *quinceañera*.

Critic’s Praise:

Named to the Chicago Public Schools Recommended Reading List 2001

“Ethnic values are honestly portrayed in this sincere novel. Many admirable virtues are woven throughout the chapters.”
—*School Library Journal*

Teaching Overview:

Sweet Fifteen is the story of Stefanie’s *quinceañera* amongst very different circumstances of grief and modern family life. A *quinceañera* is a celebration, but Stefanie and those around her must adjust to new lives following the death of her father before they can truly celebrate. The characters and situations lend nicely to discussions of grief, cultural celebrations, family support systems, and the complexities of combining modern life with long-standing traditions. The novel is an ideal read and discussion tool for grades 8-10.

This teacher’s guide offers Language Art activities, which satisfy generalized content standards. They are suggested as initial activities on which the teacher can expand, substitute, and/or incorporate into their instruction.

Comprehension strategies:

The following Before, During, and After Reading strategies contain activities for improving reading and writing skills. Where appropriate, the skill addressed by each of the activities is noted in parenthesis.

BEFORE READING:

Opening Discussion/Writing Activities

Open up a discussion about family rituals and traditions with the definitions for ritual, tradition, and custom. Have students find the definitions using a dictionary and ask the class to find examples from their own life for each term (**Reading:** word identification, using a dictionary). Form partner pairs between students who do not normally interact and ask them to interview one another about a chosen ritual, tradition, or custom using open-ended questions. (Example: What are the origins of these rituals or traditions (Are they imposed by individuals, culture, society, or religion?)). Demonstrate proper interview style, question/ note-taking format, and set expectations. Establish that students should finish the interview with at least a 1-2-minute speech reporting on the information shared by their partner. Allow at least 20 minutes for each pair to share with each other. Depending on time, allow each student to share what he or she learned with the rest of the class. The result should be a realization that there are a variety of rituals, traditions, and customs among class members that all need appreciation and respect. (**Speaking:** purposes/ to gain information, to enjoy and appreciate).

Next, explore the specific tradition of a *quinceañera* for Hispanic cultures. Research the custom of *quinceañera*

and/or share stories (pictures?) about family members, relatives, and friends who have celebrated a fifteenth birthday in this way. Are there other similar practices that students know of? Add this information to the larger discussion of rituals/traditions/ and customs, focusing on this example as the topic of the novel. Have students share any additional information about this tradition as reading progresses. (**Reading:** prior knowledge, connections that cross culture).

Invite students to study the cover of the book. Make predictions about the story using the cover art, the back cover writing, and the opening page in Chapter One. Have students make connections between the title and the cover art. (**Reading:** comprehension, prediction).

AS READING PROGRESSES

The following sample questions enable students to identify main ideas, make predictions, and draw conclusions (**Reading:** drawing inferences and supporting with textual evidence). Have students refer to a dictionary as they encounter unfamiliar words (**Reading:** Vocabulary development).

Chapter One

1. What facts can readers infer about the four main characters: Rita, Stefanie, Brian and Iris?
2. What opinions can readers infer about the main characters? Support your claims with specific passages from the chapter.

Chapter Two

1. This chapter gives readers the first glimpse at Iris Bonilla. What can readers assume about Iris' circumstances?
2. Why does Rita decide to get more involved with Stefanie? Why does Brian decide to get more involved?

Chapter Three

1. What is Rita's approach in handling Stefanie during their first day working together?
2. What does Rita provide for Stefanie that she can't (or won't) accept from her family?
3. Explain different perceptions of the term, "weird," which are presented in this chapter.

Chapter Four

1. Discuss the variety of obvious and subtle changes which occur in Rita and Brian's relationship in this chapter.
2. What new information about the families is provided in this chapter?

Chapter Five

1. After the gentleness of chapter four, this chapter begins with an argument. Speculate about the apparent and true causes of this argument. Use examples from the text to support your claim.
2. How do the events of chapter five affect the characters? Be specific.

Chapter Six

1. Evaluate the pace of the Rita's and Brian's relationship. Is the relationship based on a solid foundation, is it merely a physical attraction, or is it other factors at work? Use examples from the first six chapters to support your evaluation.
2. Discuss the optimism prevalent in chapter six and explain its causes and effects. Be specific.

Chapter Seven

1. Discuss the subtle and obvious changes that occur in all the characters with Iris Bonilla's return to San Antonio.

2. Why is the appearance of Cecilia Diaz and her son, Nicky, in Rita's shop a source of conflict for Stefanie and Iris?
3. Why does Rita tell Brian about the Diaz's invitation? What are her motives?

Chapter Eight

1. Based on the first eight chapters, evaluate Brian and Iris' relationship as brother and sister.
2. How does Brian's protective nature influence his behavior with Rita?
3. Discuss Brian's motives and Rita's reaction to the plant and flowers he bought from her shop.

Chapter Nine

1. Why is Abuelita's decision to move to Brownsville so distressing for Rita?
2. Why is Iris' visit to Rita's shop such a surprise?
3. What family tensions are beginning to affect Rita and Brian's personal relationship?

Chapter Ten

1. Why does Iris return to Rita's shop?
2. What do readers learn about Iris in this chapter?
3. What does Abuelita reveal that helps Rita make some key decisions?
4. What insights does Rita gain about herself in this chapter? How do these insights help Rita set goals and make plans? What is Brian's role in Rita's discovery?

Chapter Eleven

1. What are some of the developments in Rita and Iris' relationship?
2. What are some of the developments in Iris and Stefanie's relationship?
3. Predict some of the events that might occur in future chapters because of the women's relationships with each other. Base your predictions on information from previous chapters as well as chapter eleven.

Chapter Twelve

1. Discuss the nature of the relationship between Abuelita and Rita. Beyond family ties, what binds these two women together?
2. Review the scenes with Mr. Arredondo in chapter one and chapter eleven. What are your estimations of this businessman?
3. What proposal does Rita make to Iris? What is Iris' reaction?
4. Based on the conversation that concludes Chapter Twelve, speculate what purpose the character of Tía Minerva serves.
5. Generate a debate over the advantages and disadvantages of Rita and Iris' acting as business partners in a new dress shop.

Chapter Thirteen

1. Discuss the various events that occur in chapter thirteen and the indications for future conflict.
2. Contrast the relationships among the Diaz family against Stefanie and her mother.

Chapter Fourteen

1. Using both chapter thirteen and fourteen, outline the arguments that Rita, Iris, and Brian present about the business partnership. Where do you agree or disagree with individual decisions or motives? Be specific. Use lines from the dialogue and narrative to support your argument.
2. Rita is very insistent that Brian and Iris spend time alone and talk to each other. Why is it so important to Rita?

What arguments does she present to Brian and to Iris to convince them?

3. Although there is no scene between Brian and Iris discussing the partnership, what do you think will happen? Based on your reading of earlier chapters, write out the dialogue and narrative of such a scene.

Chapter Fifteen

1. What is your opinion of Bea as a business partner? How do Bea's actions help readers understand Rita's determination not to repeat her mistakes?
2. What indications do readers have that Brian and Iris have thought more rationally about the business partnership? Is there anything to indicate that there will be further problems and points of disagreement?
3. How do Brian and Rita reach a settlement about the partnership?
4. What seems to be working well between Rita and Iris' relationship? Can you predict any future conflicts between these two women?

Chapter Sixteen

1. How is Rita handling her sad feelings about Abuelita's departure?
2. What is the cause and the effect of Rita and Iris' disagreement in this chapter?

Chapter Seventeen

1. Why factors indicate that Iris doesn't like to deal with unpleasant things? How does Iris' personality compare with Rita's?
2. Although Rita confides in Brian, what does she also *tell* him about his role in her life?
3. In this chapter, Rita, Iris, and Stefanie make the effort to solve their own problems without Brian's assistance. Why is this effort so important?
4. Describe some of the personal and professional accomplishments for Rita in this chapter.

Chapter Eighteen

1. What positive events occur in this chapter?
2. What information from Abuelita changes Rita's financial situation? How will this effect her business plans?

Chapter Nineteen

1. What are Brian's motives for signing the lease agreement?
2. Describe the different reactions of Iris and Rita to Brian's announcement.
3. What does this chapter reveal about Iris' marriage, her relationship with Brian, and her decision to handle her own problems without Brian's help?
4. What does this chapter reveal about the future of Rita and Brian's relationship?
5. What emotional growth has Stefanie experienced? Use examples from previous chapters to support your claim.

Chapter Twenty

1. What background about the custom of a *quinceañera* is provided for readers?
2. Why is Iris' speech at the party symbolic of her growth as a self-reliant person?
3. List and discuss the various changes in the characters since the first chapter. Use examples to support your claims.

AFTER READING:

Writing Activities:

1. Write a letter to Stefanie as one of her close friends encouraging her to celebrate her *quinceañera*. What are some good reasons why she should still have her celebration despite the death of her father? Include details

from the story. Use persuasive writing techniques and establish a good argument that would convince Stefanie. (**Writing:** purposes; to express, to reflect on ideas).

2. Write an additional chapter for the novel--Chapter 21. What has changed after the *quinceañera*? What would you like to see happen with the other characters such as Iris, Rita, Brian, etc.? Include both narrative and dialogue between the characters. Look at any of the other chapters as a guide and create a new end to the story. (**Writing:** to explore, express).

Discussion Activity:

1. A *quinceañera* commemorates a rite of passage for a girl, which is this story is Stefanie. Discuss how each of the main characters experiences a “rite of passage” in the story. Create a semantic map that follows each main character throughout the novel. Divide up the class so that different groups are tracking different characters that then add to the class chart. Find key points in the novel where a change occurs and note this on the chart. Identify also what factors influenced this change and growth. (**Viewing:** production; producing visual to extend or represent meaning)

OTHER FOLLOW-UP/ EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Research the necessary steps to start a small business such as “Rita’s Dress Shop.” In a group, have students think of a concept for a store and outline what they would have to do to make their business a reality. Make this project as realistic as possible, for example, providing newspapers to look for available properties. Each group then is responsible for creating a visual in which you present your business to the class. (**Writing:** purposes/ to describe/ research).
2. Investigate sources of aid for Stefanie and her mother as they deal with the loss of Estevan Bonilla. Where could Stefanie go? Iris? What resources exist for people who have lost a loved one so that they can sort out their grief in a healthy manner? Make a brochure that would be given to people in this situation. Inside the brochure should be a clear list of the places found and all relevant information (Name of agency, contact person, phone number, address, and a short description of their services). (**Writing:** purposes/ inquiry/ research)
3. Choose one of the other traditions named during the initial class discussion and look into it further. Find out more information about the classmate’s ritual/ tradition/ or custom and then share this with the class. Utilize the student who shared the information and seek out other community members to educate and share the knowledge. (**Reading:** reading/culture/inquiry/research).

From the author:

“My favorite part of writing this book was weaving my research into the story line. My family couldn’t afford a *quinceañera* for myself or my sister, and my friends who had them called them by the American name of “debut.” I enjoyed learning about the custom and its meaning.

This story was inspired by my grandmothers, Isabel Chauvin and Josephine Gonzales, who were both talented seamstresses. About the same time I began the novel, my husband and I bought the family business from my father and were learning about the challenges of being self-employed. Rita’s learning process as a business woman were inspired by my own discoveries.

Iris Bonilla’s discovery of her own worth as a person was a very important sub-plot to me. Often wives and mothers lose their own identity as women, and I wanted to show the difficult process involved when a woman reclaims her right to be herself. I didn’t plan on this sub-plot when I began the novel, but it turned out to be a means of developing Brian’s character as well.

I hope my readers will enjoy getting involved in the lives of the Navarro-Esparza families and will come to appreciate the traditions, rituals, and customs in their own lives.”

Diane Gonzales Bertrand