**Dancing With the Devil: and Other Tales From Beyond**

Author René Saldaña, Jr.

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**Synopsis/Summary:**

In this collection of stories based on Mexican-American lore, author and educator René Saldaña, Jr. spins age-old tales with a contemporary twist. In “La Llorona Sings a Happy Song,” Lauro and Miguel run for their lives with La Llorona’s cold breath on their necks after being caught smoking cigarettes down by the river. There’s Felipe in “Have I Got a Marble for You,” who is so determined to win back the Peñitas Grand Master Marble Champion title that he’s willing to make a deal for a shooter with a supernatural edge. And in “Louie Spills His Guts,” when Louie’s leg swells up after he cuts his toe playing with a knife, he can’t help but wonder if his mom’s warning could be true. Are his guts really going to spill out of his wound because he cut himself doing something stupid?

In “Dancing with the Devil,” Joey is excited and nervous about the school dance because Marlen has agreed to be his date. But Joey has heard rumors that she might be meeting someone else, and as he waits for her to show up he can’t help but worry the gossip may be true. Sure enough, a suave, well-dressed stranger asks Marlen to dance before Joey can even get to her. Joey may have lost his chance, but Marlen is the one who will pay dearly with her life! Set in the author’s native South Texas, these are the stories parents have told their children for generations to discourage bad behavior and encourage kids to stay close to home. But Saldaña breathes new life into these traditional tales with contemporary settings, issues and conflicts that are sure to resonate with today’s youth.

**Teaching overview/background knowledge:**

Before students read this book, you might have an introduction of the Rio Grande Valley to get the students familiar with the culture and area that influences the author’s book. Several current authors for children or adolescents grew up here, including René Saldaña, Xavier Garza, Viola Canales, David Rice, David Bowles, Myra Infante-Sheridan, and more. For more examples of modernized folktales and creepy stories, read a book by Xavier Garza or David Bowles. In the story “All Choked Up,” the author is alluding to Xavier Garza, the author and artist who grew up in Rio Grande City, when the protagonist thinks about the severed hand tale, “I’d only heard such stories from my uncle Xavier from Rio Grande City in deep south Texas” (78).

Not only is the Rio Grande Valley the area where the author’s home town of Peñitas, near Mission, is located, but also the stories told in this collection are timeless legendary favorites of many youth who reside here. The Rio Grande Valley is an area located in the southernmost tip of Texas. It lies along the northern bank of the Rio Grande, which separates Mexico from the United States. The Rio Grande Valley is not a valley, but a delta or floodplain. Early settlers from Mexico felt that the term “Valley” sounded more inviting to tourists and northern investors than did “Delta.” The Rio Grande Valley is also called “El Valle.” This region is made up of four counties: Starr County, Hidalgo County, Willacy County, and Cameron County. Large cities include Brownsville, McAllen, Harlingen, Mission, Edinburg, and Pharr. Most of the residents of *El Valle* are bilingual.

**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 from TEKS from ELAR Grade Six §110.18.(b) include the following:

(3) Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Theme and Genre. Students analyze, make inferences and draw conclusions about theme and genre in different cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding. Students are expected to:

(A) infer the implicit theme of a work of fiction, distinguishing theme from the topic;

(B) analyze the function of stylistic elements (e.g., magic helper, rule of three) in traditional and classical literature from various cultures; and

(C) compare and contrast the historical and cultural settings of two literary works.

(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, denouement) in various works of fiction;

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

(C) describe different forms of point-of-view, including first- and third-person.

(15) Writing/Literary Texts. Students write literary texts to express their ideas and feelings about real or imagined people, events, and ideas.

(16) Writing. Students write about their own experiences. Students are expected to write a personal narrative that has a clearly defined focus and communicates the importance of or reasons for actions and/or consequences.

(17) Writing/Expository and Procedural Texts. Students write expository and procedural or work- related texts to communicate ideas and information to specific audiences for specific purposes. Students are expected to:

(A) Create multi-paragraph essays to convey information about a topic that:

(C) write responses to literary or expository texts and provide evidence from the text to demonstrate understanding; and

(D) Produce a multimedia presentation involving text and graphics using available technology.

**Reading comprehension strategies (before, during, and after reading):**

**Before:** Relating the premise of a story, folktale, or local legend, ask whether students have heard of it before. Elicit conversation about stories that circulate and get specific details attached to them to make them seem even more realistic. Ask what the think it means that the title says “tales from beyond.”

**During:** Direct the students to take a minute to write down what happens in each story and also their impressions of what life lessons are expressed in each story. This will offer the students a chance to express their interpretations and remember what they read.

**After:** Have the students discuss which stories they prefer, and why. Have the students tell about a strange, supernatural, or inexplicable thing that happened to them or to someone they know.

**Writing/composition prompts:**

1) Consider how one of the stories that you liked demonstrates that actions have consequences. Pull out details from the story to show clearly what the actions are, what the reasons for those actions are, what the consequences are, and whether the reasons could have been better.

2) Write a literary analysis of one story in which you express a theme and analyze the details leading you to see the message or lesson from the book. Remember that a theme is different from a topic.

3) Write an alternate ending to one of the stories. Use the same narrative perspective (point of view), but end it differently.

4) Select one of the stories, and record the basic template of the traditional story on which Saldaña based his story. Then consider how the stories are an artistic extension.

5) Analyze the surprise ending of a story, then go back into the story to look for elements of foreshadow that set up the ending. Write about how specific sentences set up the ending to come.

6) While three stories, “La Llorona Sings a Happy Song,” “Have I Got a Marble For You,” and “All Choked Up,” are told in the first person point of view, the other stories are told in the third person point of view. For any one story, write about how the narrative perspective affects the way the story is told. Consider whether your response to the main characters was affected by the point of view. If you wrote a story, which perspective would you try?

7) Write your own story about a hard-to-explain experience that happened to you or someone in your family.

**Vocabulary:**

Exhaled (1)

Fierceness (2)

Shuddering (2)

Crook (4)

Grimy (4)

Glower (5)

Venom (5)

Gall (5)

Brute (5)

Bared (5)

Bristly (5)

Ingrate (6)

Eternally (7)

Verge (8)

Murky (9)

Lethargic (11)

Psychosomatic (11)

Bizarre (12)

Welt (16)

Gargantuan (17)

Inlaid (18)

Tripas (22)

Tyrant (25)

Debonair (33)

Flailing (39)

Magnificent (39)

Spectacle (39)

Dismay (41)

Audacity (43)

Sacrilegious (44)

Flitted (45)

Privy (47)

Slated (47)

Cauldron (48)

Detour (49)

Serene (50)

Insufferable (50)

Irreparably (50)

Prodding (51)

Ominous (54)

Nonchalantly (55)

Trudge (59)

Quiver (66)

**Discussion questions:**

1) Are the supernatural elements essential to each story? In any story, could there be an everyday explanation for what happened?

2) Do you like to read or hear scary stories? Why or why not? What about scary movies?

3) In “Dancing with the Devil,” what could the protagonist, Joey, have done differently in order to bring about a different ending to the story?

4) In “Have I Got a Marble for You,” the main character names a marble TCB for “Taking Care of Business” (57). Have you ever named an object? Why did you choose that name? Why do people like to name objects as well as living creatures?

5) On pages 41 and 58, specific towns in the author’s home area of the Rio Grande Valley are mentioned. Why are particular towns mentioned by name? How does it affect the story or your response? Have you read a work of literature that takes place in or near your town? What is a place where you would like to see a story take place?

6) Considering the first and last lines of “God’s Will Be Done,” what might you suggest as a theme of the story, and can you explain whether and how the girls’ lives have changed?

7) How is each story a cautionary tale? What lesson or warning about life is given?

**Extensions/Activities:**

\* “I’ve Got a Marble For You” is a whole brand new twist on the tale of La Llorona. Look online for images related to these stories, such as illustrations of La Llorona, the weeping woman or wailing woman who laments for her children.. Make a poster board presentation or slideshow to show to class. Remember to write down the source of each picture in the caption. You could also create your own illustrations of a story. In order to be different, you might try comparing alternate stories of La Llorona and try to show how stories reflect the different areas or cultures from which they come. For example, here in Latin@ communities we often associate La Llorona with rivers as a place of her haunting. Also, in Ireland the similar legend there is of a woman known as the banshee.

**About the author:**

René Saldaña is a professor of education at Texas Tech University in Lubbock. He taught middle school and high school English in La Joya ISD and Mission CISD for six years during the 1990s. His books 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 co-edited story collection *Juventud! Growing Up on the Border* (2013). His Mickey Rangel bilingual flip book series for early elementary readers has three books: *The Case of the Pen Gone Missing* (2009), *The Lemon Tree Caper* (2011), *The Mystery of the Mischievous Maker* (2013).

**Related Media:**

René Saldaña, Jr. reading from a suggested book *A Good Long Way*. This video is a part of the LatinoStories.Com Latino Author Reading Series. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76HzZoHROhw

Author’s blog with photos of his other additional novels for young adults can be found at

renesaldanajr.blogspot.com

Rene Saldana visits his hometown library in Peñitas, Texas

https://youtu.be/NiZCWQtSdUo

Dr. René Saldaña, Jr. reading and presentation at McHi Library # 1

www.ustream.tv/recorded/62257836

Dr. René Saldaña, Jr. discusses reading and great skills to be a free writer at McHi Library # 8 www.ustream.tv/recorded/62257836

**Further reading:**

* *A Good Long Way* by René Saldaña
* *Juventud! Growing Up on the Border*, edited by René Saldaña and Erika Garza-Johnson
* *Stories That Must Not Die,* by Juan Sauvageau
* *Creature Feature: Thirteen Frightening Folktales of the Rio Grande Valley*, by David Bowles
* *Border Lore: Folktales and Legends of South Texas*, by David Bowles
* *Heart Shaped Cookies* *and Other Stories*, by David Rice
* *Creepy Creatures and Other Cucuys*, by Xavier Garza
* *Kid Cyclone Fights the Devil and Other Stories / Kid Ciclón se enfrenta a El Diablo y otras historias,* by Xavier Garza
* *The Monster in the Mattress / El monstruo en el colchón y otros cuentos*, by Diane De Anda