*On the Other Side of the Bridge*

Ray Villarreal

Curriculum Guide by Myra Infante, University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley

Synopsis

Lon Chaney Rodriguez is a typical thirteen-year-old boy. He loves horror movies. His bedroom is a mess. He doesn’t like to read boring books. And he likes to skip church to hang out at Catfish Creek during services.

But his life changes completely when his mother is shot and killed at the apartment complex where she worked as a security guard. Life without her is unimaginable, and Lon is haunted by the feeling that he let his mom down. He didn’t prioritize his schoolwork, so he’s on the brink of failing. And worse, he lied to her.

Lonnie’s life is turned upside down, both at school and home. His unemployed father turns to drinking and struggles to pay the bills. It doesn’t seem possible, but…will they really end up on the street like the homeless guy that panhandles at the freeway underpass?

Teaching Overview

*On the Other Side of the Bridge* offers teachers the opportunity to introduce students to literary elements (imagery, figurative language, characterization, plot analysis, etc.) within a meaningful and touching story of loss and redemption. The story includes aspects of both American and Mexican cultures, which will resonate with students today. Lonnie, the main character in the book, will appeal to students as he questions several important aspects of life such as the importance of education, parental roles, and overcoming adversity. Some knowledge of the Mexican-American culture, grief counseling, and homelessness would be beneficial; however, the book offers enough explanation of each topic for the reader to connect to the characters and circumstances. At the end of this study guide, teachers will find several websites that will help them get more information about topics related to the book.

Texas State Standards – (6th -9th)

*For 6th – 8th grade:*

(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.

(8)  Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Sensory Language. Students understand, make inferences and draw conclusions about how an author's sensory language creates imagery in literary text and provide evidence from text to support their understanding. Students are expected to explain how authors create meaning through stylistic elements and figurative language emphasizing the use of personification, hyperbole and refrains

(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.

(18)  Writing/Persuasive Texts. Students write persuasive texts to influence the attitudes or actions of a specific audience on specific issues. Students are expected to write persuasive essays for appropriate audiences that establish a position and include sound reasoning, detailed and relevant evidence, and consideration of alternatives.

*For 9th grade:*

5)  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)  analyze non-linear plot development (e.g., flashbacks, foreshadowing, sub-plots, parallel plot structures) and compare it to linear plot development;

(B)  analyze how authors develop complex yet believable characters in works of fiction through a range of literary devices, including character foils;

(C)  analyze the way in which a work of fiction is shaped by the narrator's point of view;

(D)  demonstrate familiarity with works by authors from non-English-speaking literary traditions with emphasis on classical literature.

(7)  Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Sensory Language. Students understand, make inferences and draw conclusions about how an author's sensory language creates imagery in literary text and provide evidence from text to support their understanding. Students are expected to explain the role of irony, sarcasm and paradox in literary works.

(16)  Writing/Persuasive Texts. Students write persuasive texts to influence the attitudes or actions of a specific audience on specific issues. Students are expected to write an argumentative essay to the appropriate audience that includes:

(A)  a clear thesis or position based on logical reasons supported by precise and relevant evidence;

(B)  consideration of the whole range of information and views on the topic and accurate and honest representation of these views;

(C)  counter-arguments based on evidence to anticipate and address objections;

(D)  an organizing structure appropriate to the purpose, audience and context;

(E)  an analysis of the relative value of specific data, facts and ideas.

Reading comprehension strategies

*Before Reading*

Ask students whether they agree or disagree with the following statements:

1. All homeless people are uneducated.

2. Only unemployed people become homeless.

3. Most homeless are adults.

4. The homeless are at fault for their situation.

5. Most homeless are drug users.

6. Most homeless are crazy.

7. Homeless people sleep on the street.

8. The homeless want to be homeless.

9. Homelessness is only a problem in big cities.

10. The majority of homeless are men.

11. The problem of homelessness can be solved.

12. We are responsible for helping the homeless.

*During Reading: Story Map*

1. Discuss the main components of the novel (e.g., Characters, setting, plot and theme OR beginning, middle and end).

2. Provide each student with a blank story map organizer and model how to complete it.

3. As students read, have them complete the story map. After reading, they should fill in any missing parts.

*After Reading: Socratic Seminar*

Ask students to write the following types of questions to discuss in a small group.

1. Write a question connecting the text to the real world.

Example: If you were given only 24 hours to pack your most precious belongings in a back pack and get ready to leave your home town, what might you pack?

1. Write a question about the text that will help everyone in the group come to an agreement about events or characters in the text. This question usually has a "correct" answer.

Example: What happened when Lonnie and his father got assaulted outside their motel?

1. Write an insightful question about the text that will require proof and group discussion and "construction of logic" to discover or explore the answer to the question.

Example: Is Jo Marie a true friend to Lonnie?

1. Write a question dealing with a theme(s) of the text that will encourage group discussion about the universality of the text.

Example: What challenges does Lonnie face that would be the same for anyone in the world?

Writing Prompts

1. Personal Narrative: In the novel *On the Other Side of the Bridge*, Lonnie takes on the responsibility of the household duties after his mother’s death (i.e. cleaning the house, laundry, cooking, grocery shopping, etc.) Write a personal narrative about a time you took on some responsibility. Be sure to write about your experience in detail and describe why it was memorable.
2. Expository: Write an essay explaining what caused Lonnie and his father to become homeless.
3. Persuasive: When referring to Moses, the homeless man, Lonnie’s Dad says “…those people are nothing but a bunch of druggies and con artists...” and “The problem with those people is that they don’t wanna work. They’d rather stand on the streets begging for money.” After becoming homeless himself, Lonnie begins a campaign to collect toiletries for the homeless. Should communities refuse to help the homeless as Lonnie’s father did at the beginning of the novel, or should they help the homeless as Lonnie does towards the end of the novel? Write an essay stating your position whether it is better to help the homeless or not.

Vocabulary

Ballistic (8) to become overwrought or irrational

Blasphemous (10) irreverent; profane

Forlorn (20) lonely and sad; forsaken

Undaunted (23) undiminished in courage or valor; not giving way to fear; intrepid:

Stagnant (40) not flowing or running, as water, air, etc

Cavernous (40) like or suggestive of a cavern, especially in being large, dark, deep, and hollow

Gaunt (54) extremely thin and bony in appearance

Glower (54) to look at somebody or something with sullen anger or strong resentment

Curtly (69) rudely or abruptly

Muster (76) to summon up strength or courage that will help in doing something

Surreal (77) weirdly unfamiliar, distorted, or disturbing, like the experiences in a dream

Balk (84) to hesitate over something or be unwilling to do something

Impromptu (88) not prepared or planned in advance

Distraught (96) extremely upset and distressed

Mortified (102) to feel deeply ashamed and humiliated

Decrepit (113) with strength lessened by the effects of age

Recoil (119) to react instinctively with fear, horror, disgust, or distaste

Gawk (135) to stare stupidly or rudely

Nostalgia a mixed feeling of happiness, sadness, and longing when recalling a person, place or event from the past

Derelict (167) somebody without a home or employment

Chortle (181) a noisy gleeful laugh

Reiterate (193) to say or do something again, once or several times

Kindling (218) something used to start a fire because it burns easily

Waft (218) something carried on the air or by a breeze, e.g. a scent

Unruly (226) difficult to control, manage, discipline, or govern

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Lonnie’s parents want him to attend church even though they didn’t practice any religion?
2. Why was Lonnie in a Progressive Reading class? What do you think would have helped him to be in an advanced reading class?
3. How would you describe Lonnie’s mother? How would you describe Lonnie’s father?
4. On page 30, Lonnie wonders about Moses’ (homeless man) background and life. Why do you think he does this?
5. Why doesn’t Lonnie’s dad want to take money from his family?
6. Lonnie likes to watch zombie movies, has nightmares about zombies and compares homeless people to zombies. What do zombies symbolize in different parts of the novel?
7. Where does the author use foreshadowing and why do you think he uses this literary element?
8. Describe Lonnie’s relationship with the Presbyterian Church and its members. How does his attitude towards this community group change?
9. Describe how Lonnie changes throughout the novel. Give examples from the book.

Extensions

1. Have students create a newspaper about the novel that includes such things as classified ads, obituaries, news items, sports articles, cartoons, etc.
2. Find out the location of the nearest shelter to your school. Have students bring in travel size toiletries and quart-size Ziploc bags. Put together care packages and have students write accompanying encouragement letters for the recipients.
3. Have students write a series of letters that two main characters in the novel might have written to one another during the course of the novel.
4. Have students put together a bag that contains at least ten items that would be useful or significant to a character in your novel. Have them include a description of each item and its relevance to the story.

About the author

RAY VILLAREAL is the author of five novels for young adults that capture the angst of adolescent life: *Body Slammed!* (Piñata Books, 2012), *Don’t Call Me Hero* (Piñata Books, 2011), *Who’s Buried in the Garden?* (Piñata Books, 2009), winner of LAUSD’s Westchester Fiction Award, *Alamo Wars* (Piñata Books, 2008), and *My Father, the Angel of Death* (Piñata Books, 2006), which was nominated to the 2008-2009 Lone Star Reading List and named to The New York Public Library’s 2007 Books for the Teen Age. Villareal worked for 30 years as a teacher and an instructional reading coach with the Dallas Independent School District. He graduated in 1981 from Southern Methodist University with a Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education with an emphasis in Bilingual Education. In 1991, he completed his Master of Liberal Arts from the same university. He lives with his family in Dallas, Texas.

Related media

**A Day in the Life of a Homeless Person**

<http://www.learningtogive.org/units/i-can-do/day-life-homeless-person>

**Visions of Homelessness**

<http://www.giveusyourpoor.org/education/documents/unitplan.pdf>

**Gun Control in America: Student Discussion Guide**

<http://www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/gun-control-america-discussion-guide.shtml>

**Discovery School: Gun Control Lesson Plan**

<http://streaming.discoveryeducation.com/teacherCenter/lessonPlans/pdfs/9-12_SocialStudies_GunControl.pdf>

**Alcohol’s Effect on the Mind and Body**

<http://sciencenetlinks.com/lessons/alcohols-effect-on-the-mind-and-body-502/>

**Under the Influence**

<http://www.discoveryeducation.com/teachers/free-lesson-plans/under-the-influence.cfm>

Further Reading

Hopkins, Ellen. *Smoke.*  New York: Margaret K. McElderry Books. 2013.

Mulligan, Andy. *Trash*. New York: Ember. 2011.

Voight, Cynthia. *Homecoming*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers. 2012.

Zusak, Markus. *The Book Thief*. Alfred A. Knopf. 2007.