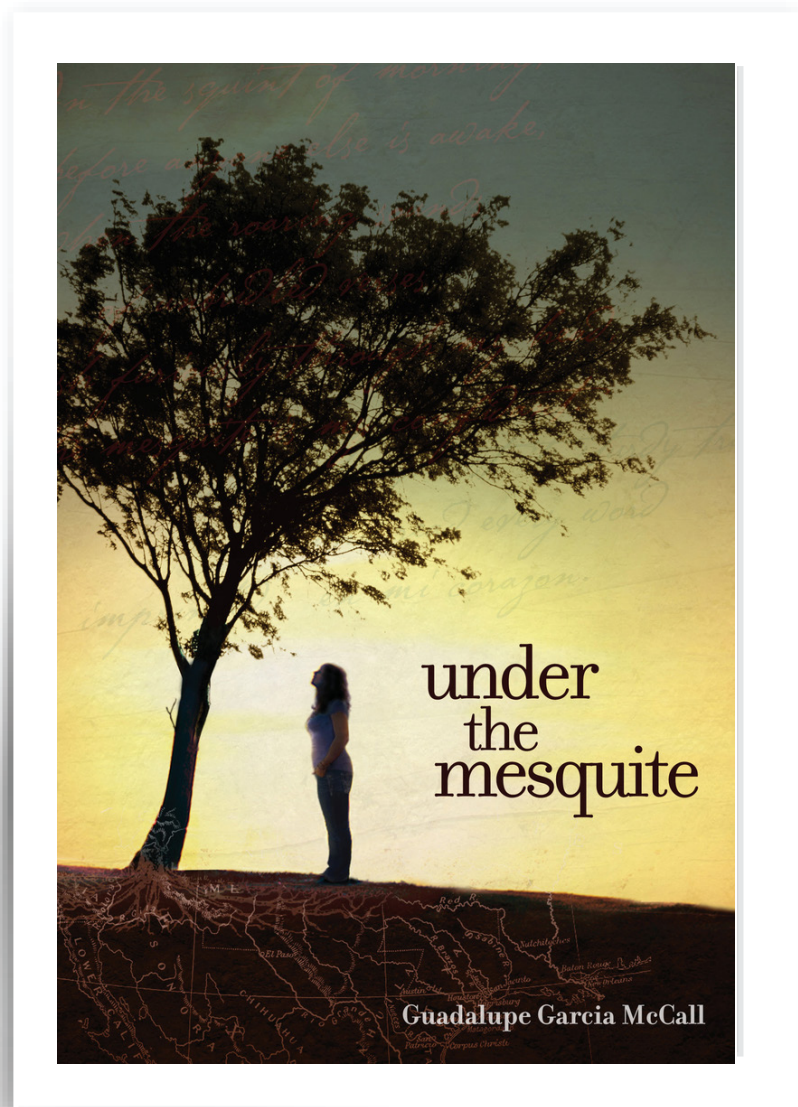


# VAMOS A LEER

teaching latin america through literacy



# VAMOS A LEER

## Educator's Guide

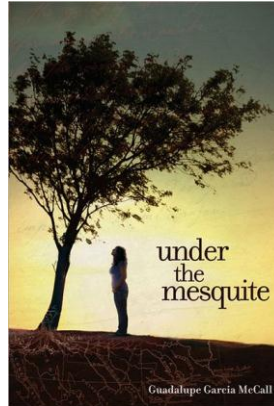
### **Under the Mesquite**

Written by Guadalupe Garcia McCall

Published by Lee & Low Books, 2011

ISBN: 9781600604294

Age Level: Grades 4 and Up



### **BOOK SUMMARY**

Lupita, the oldest of eight siblings, is used to taking the lead—and staying busy behind the scenes to help keep everyone together. But when she discovers Mami has been diagnosed with cancer, Lupita is terrified by the possibility of losing her mother, the anchor of their close-knit Mexican American family. Suddenly Lupita must face a whole new set of challenges, with new roles to play, and no one is handing her the script.

In the midst of juggling high school classes, finding her voice as an actress, and dealing with friends who don't always understand, Lupita desperately wants to support Mami in whatever way she can. While Papi is preoccupied with caring for Mami, Lupita takes charge of her siblings. As Lupita struggles to keep the family afloat, she escapes the chaos at home by writing in the shade of a mesquite tree. Overwhelmed by change, she seeks refuge in the healing power of words.

### **AWARDS & RECOGNITIONS:**

- 2012 Pura Belpré Award
- 2012 William C. Morris Debut Award Finalist
- 2013 Tomas Rivera Children's Book Award

## **AUTHOR'S CORNER**

### About Guadalupe Garcia McCall:

Guadalupe Garcia McCall was born in Piedras, Negras, Coahuila, Mexico. Her family immigrated to the United States when she was six years old. She grew up in Eagle Pass, a small border town in South Texas, and the setting of *Under the Mesquite*. Trained in theater arts and English, she now teaches English/Language Arts at a junior high school. Her poems for adults have appeared in more than twenty literary journals. *Under the Mesquite*, her first book, is a contemporary novel inspired by the difficult experiences her own family went through during her teen years. McCall lives with her husband and their three sons in the San Antonio, Texas area.

### A little more about the author in her own words:

My name is Guadalupe Garcia McCall, but most people call me Loop. I like to sit on my porch, listen to the sounds of nature, and write stories about the complexities and magic of growing up. When I write, I think about how important and valuable life and all of its experiences are, so I try to write stories that give meaning to those experiences. My debut novel, *Under the Mesquite*, is not just a story about personal loss; it is a story about the blessings of family and the power of memory and love. I hope you enjoy reading it.



Check out [Guadalupe Garcia McCall's website](#) for more information about the author.

## **USING UNDER THE MESQUITE IN THE CLASSROOM**

*Under the Mesquite* is a beautiful book. While it was a quick read, it lingered in my mind. I found myself continuing to think about it days after I'd finished it. It's a book that is certainly worth a second (or even third) read. The first time through I was engrossed in the story, only subconsciously aware of the beauty and simplicity of McCall's verse. When I returned to the novel later, I found myself incredibly moved by the imagery and sentiments conveyed through McCall's words. I think Lyn Miller-Lachmann describes it best in her own review: ". . .one of the most achingly beautiful novels I've read in a long time. It is a story from the heart, not written to fit into a marketing category but to remember, to honor, and to bear witness."

As many of you may already know, one of my favorite reads from the past year was *Sammy & Juliana in Hollywood* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz. To borrow Miller-Lachmann's words, it too, was achingly beautiful. I found myself reminded of *Sammy & Juliana* as I read *Under the Mesquite*. Both are poignant coming of age stories that refuse to sugar-coat the reality of their protagonists who have to grow up too quickly, shouldering responsibilities not meant for teenagers. Like Sammy, Lupita is strong--she struggles, but she is resilient. Often times our students learn too early that

life isn't always fair, much like Lupita. Unfortunately, they're not always given the support or the knowledge to deal with it. *Under the Mesquite* offers an example of how to not only survive, but to eventually thrive. An important symbol throughout the story is the mesquite tree. No matter how hard Mami tries, she can't seem to get rid of the mesquite growing in her rose garden. Yet, by the end of the story, the mesquite has come to represent Lupita as she writes,

I agree, but it isn't its beauty  
that strikes me. I envy the mesquite  
its undaunted spirit, its ability to turn  
even a disabling pruning  
into an unexpected opportunity  
to veer in a different direction,  
flourishing more profusely than before (p. 141).

Lupita's strength doesn't just show in how she deals with the death of her mother, but also in how she navigates the difficult waters of identity. Lupita must struggle to determine for herself what it means to be a Mexican and a woman. When Lupita becomes involved in drama, her teacher Mr. Cortés, suggests that they must work on getting rid of her Spanish accent. Yet, when Lupita does this, her identity as a Mexican is questioned by her closest friends:

"You talk like you're one of them."  
She spits out the word in disgust  
and looks down at her lunch tray,  
like she can't stand the sight of me.  
"One of them?" I ask.  
"Let me translate for you,"  
Sarita sneers. "You talk like  
you wanna be white" . . .  
"What," Sarita asks, "you think you're  
Anglo now 'cause you're in Drama?  
You think you're better than us?"  
"No---"  
"Then stop trying to act like  
them," Mireya says accusingly.  
"You're Mexican, just like the rest of us. . . ." (p. 80-81).

But Lupita doesn't let others define her identity. Instead, she responds,

Being Mexican  
means more than that.  
It means being there for each other.  
It's togetherness, like a familia.  
We should be helping one another,  
not trying to bring them down.  
. . . I'm not acting white! I want to shout  
after my so-called friends.

I couldn't be more Mexican  
if you stamped a cactus on my forehead (p. 83).

One of my favorite poetry sections is "señorita" where Lupita describes the various ways her family members and friends define the significance of señorita. Lupita must grapple with what it means for her, and the conclusions she arrives at reveal the ways in which Lupita has realized she must grown up. For Lupita, a señorita

. . .is the end of wild laughter.  
The end of chewing bubble gum  
and giggling over nothing  
with my friends at the movies, our feet up  
on the backs of the theater seats.  
. . .I'm trying my best  
to be a good daughter and accept  
the clipping of my wings,  
the taming of my heart.  
. . .Señorita is a niña,  
the girl I used to be,  
who has lost her voice (p. 77).

By the end of the story, the reader has experienced all four years of high school with Lupita. We see Lupita struggle to define herself as she deals the harsh realities of life, and we get to see her begin to heal and move on a stronger person. This is one of the reasons I think Lupita is such a powerful protagonist for our students. Lupita doesn't let the struggle defeat her:

. . .at last I feel something unfurl within me.  
Like a shoot growing from what remains--a tiny piece  
of buried mesquite root--  
determination flourishes (p. 194).

I'm not alone in thinking *Under the Mesquite* is an amazing book--it is the winner of the 2012 Pura Belpré Author Medal, the 2012 William C. Morris Debut Award Finalist, and the 2013 Tomás Rivera Children's Book Award. I hope you'll consider adding it to your classroom library.

If you'd like to read what others have thought about the book check out the links to other reviews below:

- [Lyn Miller-Lachmann's review from De Colores: The Raza Experience in Books for Children](#)
- [Sarah's review on Slatebreakers](#)

## **LESSON PLANS & ACTIVITIES**

The following lesson plans are comprised of guided reading questions organized by section and extended response writing prompts.

In addition to the lesson plans and activities included here, check out the excellent writing prompts and discussion questions provided by Lee & Low Books [here](#).

( [http://www.leeandlow.com/p/under\\_the\\_mesquite\\_dq.mhtml](http://www.leeandlow.com/p/under_the_mesquite_dq.mhtml)).

They also have some great supplementary materials like photos of the real Lupita and poetry podcasts with the author [here](#).

([http://www.leeandlow.com/books/391/hc/under\\_the\\_mesquite](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/391/hc/under_the_mesquite))

### **Common Core Standards Addressed:**

**K-12**

#### **Reading**

##### Key Ideas and Details

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

##### Craft and Structure

- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
- Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

##### Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

#### **Writing**

##### Text Types and Purposes

- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

**Literary  
Interpretation:  
Guided Reading  
Questions and  
Reflective  
Writing  
Questions**

Production and Distribution of Writing

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach

**Part One: the weight of words | pages 1-26**

1. What is an umbilical cord? Why would Mami say that it connects her with Lupita? (p. 6-7)
2. How old was Lupita when her family left Mexico? (p. 10)
3. Why call Eagle Pass El Águila? What does aguila mean in Spanish? (p. 11)
4. Read the section at the very beginning of the book. What is a mesquite? How does Lupita describe it the first time the mesquite is mentioned in the book? (p. 11)
5. What hints does the author give that something is wrong with Mami? (p. 13-14) Make a prediction: What do you think is wrong with Mami?
6. What does Mami have? How do we find out? (p. 20)
7. What do you think of how Lupita's friend Mireya responds? How would you have responded if you were Lupita's friend? (p. 20-21)
8. How does Lupita respond to Mireya? Why do you think she reacts this way? Imagine you are Lupita, how would you respond? (p. 20-21)
9. What bargain does Lupita make if God will save her mother? (p. 25)
10. Why do you think Mami won't let Lupita leave to become a nun? Do you think Mami understands why Lupita wants to become a nun? (p. 25-26)

**Part Two: remembering | pages 27-48**

1. Where does the beginning of Part Two take place? Is this different from Part One? (p. 29)
2. What is a nopalera? Use the context clues to help. (p. 29)
3. What does it mean when McCall writes that the nopalera "had been calling to her all morning. Mami. . .was anotjada, a victim of her food cravings? (p. 30) Is there a food that you crave? Have you ever eaten cactus before?
4. What does Papi tell Lupita will make her successful in the United States? What do you think he means by this? (p. 34)
5. Does Lupita want to go to the United States? Why? (p. 34) What does Lupita miss the most about Mexico? (p. 35-36)
6. Re-read pages 38 and 39. How does Lupita compare los Estados Unidos and Mexico? Based on her descriptions, do you think she likes the United States?
7. Is it easy for Lupita's family to return to Mexico to visit? Think

- about all of the immigration debates and issues now. Do you still think that it's easy for families to travel back and forth? (p. 39-41)
8. How many sisters does Lupita have? Do they get along? (p. 42-45)  
Do you have any siblings? How is your relationship with your siblings like or unlike Lupita's?

### **Part Three: crossing borders | pages 49-98**

1. Where does Lupita go every Sunday? Why? (p. 56-57)
2. What class does Lupita start taking her sophomore year? What does Mami tell everyone Lupita is going to be when she's older? (p. 62)
3. How do Mami and Lupita spend time together every afternoon? (p. 63)
4. What does Sr. Cortés give to Lupita to help her lose her accent? Why do you think she would need to lose her accent to become an actress? (p. 65-67)
5. Does Lupita have a quinceañera? What's involved in a quinceañera? Does it sound like Lupita wants to have one? (p. 69-71)
6. What does señorita mean for the different people in Lupita's life: her friends? Mami? Her tías? Her father? Her sisters? Lupita? (p. 73-77) Is turning 15 important in the U.S.? What age do you think is equally important in U.S. culture? Do you think there's an age where everything changes like Lupita describes?
7. What do Sarita and Mireya do in the cafeteria? What do they accuse Lupita of? Why do you think they do this? (p. 78-80)
8. How does Lupita describe what it means to be a Mexican? How is that different from how Sarita and Mireya seem to define it? (p. 83)
9. How does Lupita know that Mireya has read her notebook? (p. 91)
10. What does Lupita win at the District Meet? (p. 92)
11. How does Lupita describe her relationship with Mireya? Do you have anyone like that in your life? (p. 95)

### **Part Four: give us this day | pages 99-136**

1. What news does Lupita get at the beginning of Part Four? (p. 101)
2. What do you think Lupita means when she says "Cancer has more than/invaded our home./ It has closed the doors/ behind itself, drawn the curtains,/ and locked us in for good." (p. 103)
3. How does Mami's philosophy on growing roses seem to contradict her approach to her family? (p. 105-106)
4. How does Mami react to Lupita's performance? Why do you think she is so moved by it even though she can't understand the English? (p. 107-108)
5. What has Lupita used acting to help cope with? She doesn't tell her mother this, why do you think she holds that back? (p. 109)
6. What has happened to all the money in the accounts that Papi opened for each child? (p. 112)
7. What plan do Papi and Lupita make so that Mami can go to the



- cancer clinic in Galveston, TX? (p. 115-116)
8. How do Lupita's siblings respond when she's in charge? Is it easy for her to be the authority figure? (p. 117-119)
  9. What does Lupita realize about Mami when she has to take over for her? (p.117-122) Imagine you were 17 and in charge of 7 younger siblings. What do you think that would be like?
  10. What does the mesquite become for Lupita? (p. 123)
  11. Does Papi return in the fall when the children return to school? (p. 124-125)
  12. What does Paco do that makes life a little more bearable, at least for one night? Is this what you expected when he left earlier in the day? (p. 128)
  13. How have the children survived while Mami and Papi were gone? (p. 131-132)

**Part Five: cut like a diamond | pages 137-174**

1. When do Mami and Papi return home? What does Mami look like? Has she changed? (p. 139-140)
2. When the family goes back to visit Mexico for the weekend, Lupita realizes how different her life is in the U.S. How is her life different from that of her cousins now? (p. 146-150).
3. What has Mami seen that has her up and crying in the middle of the night? What does Mami believe this means? (p. 153)
4. Who does Lupita finally talk to about everything that is going on? What advice does he give her? Do you think it is good advice? (p. 157-161)
5. How do the children find out that their mother has died? (p. 170)
6. Re-read Lupita's description of her mother on pages 172-174. Which is your favorite stanza describing Mami? Why?

**Part Six: words on the wind | pages 175-210**

1. What happens to Mami's rose garden? What does Lupita compare it to? (p. 177-178)
2. What do you think Mr. Cortes means when he tells Lupita, "Lupita, no matter how much it rains,/ the roads won't stay flooded./ Eventually everything dries out again./ It just takes awhile."? (p.183)
3. Where does Papi want Lupita to go for the summer? Why does he think this will help? (p. 185-186)
4. The scene with the sheets in the wind seems to be symbolic of Lupita—how do you think the sheets represent Lupita? (p. 192) What do you think Abuela Hortencia means when she says, "Sometimes it's best to take things down/ and start all over again/ It's the way of the world, Lupita/ No use fighting it."? (p. 193-194)
5. Why doesn't Papi want Lupita to go away to college? (p. 199-201)
6. What does Lupita decide to do about college? (p. 202-207) What do you think of her decision?

**Reflective  
Writing  
Questions**

1. Compare what Lupita is like at the beginning of the book with who she has become by the end. How has she changed? How would you describe her at the beginning? At the end? What experiences do you think changed her the most?
2. Lupita experiences a number of things during her high school years that impact her life greatly. Have you ever experienced anything like that? What were your experiences? How do you think they changed you?
3. Guadalupe Garcia McCall explores a number of relationships throughout her novel, like Lupita and her siblings, Lupita and her parents, and Lupita and her friends. Think about what these relationships were like and how they changed throughout the book. Which relationship was your favorite? Why? Could you identify with what Lupita experienced?
4. Lupita is able to manage everything that happens to her over these four years because of her writing and acting. Why do you think these things helped her? What is it about the arts that helps us to deal with or process difficult experiences? What would you do to cope with similarly difficult experiences?
5. How does the mesquite tree come to represent Lupita? How are Lupita and the tree alike by the end of the story? If you had to pick something to represent you, what would you pick? Why?

**ABOUT US &  
THIS GUIDE**

The Latin American & Iberian Institute (LAI) receives resources from the U.S. Department of Education to support K-12 teaching about Latin America. Our goal is to provide a supportive environment for teaching across grade levels and subject areas so educators can bring regional and linguistic knowledge of Latin America into their classrooms. For more information and materials that support teaching about Latin America in the classroom, visit our website at <http://laii.unm.edu/outreach>

Written by staff at the LAII, **Vamos a Leer Educator's Guides** provide an excellent way to teach about Latin America through literacy. Each guide is based upon a book featured in the **Vamos a Leer** book group. For more on **Vamos a Leer**, visit our blog at [bit.ly/vamosaleer](http://bit.ly/vamosaleer). This guide was prepared May, 2013 by Adam Flores, LAII Graduate Assistant, and Katrina Dillon, LAII Project Assistant.

To complement this guide, the LAII oversees the **Vamos a Leer blog**, which provides a space for exploring how to use literature to teach about Latin America, the Caribbean, and Latinos in the United States. In addition to promoting discussion, the blog shares relevant resources and curriculum materials. Visit the blog at the following address: <http://bit.ly/vamosaleer>.