



Under the Mesquite

by: **Guadalupe Garcia McCall** (Lee & Low Books, 2011)

Who?

Under the Mesquite begins with **Lupita** introducing her family, which includes her parents and seven siblings: **Analiza, Victoria, Paco, Tita, Juanita, Rosita** and **Benito**; and explaining that she has noticed a worrisome change in **Mami** that has made her very nosy and eager to figure it out. Lupita also explains that her family originally lived in a Mexican city along the border, where she and 3 of her siblings were born, before they relocated to a Texan town that is closer to **Papi's** work. From her descriptions of her parents, it is clear that Lupita admires her mother's strength and resilience, and that Lupita shares a very tightknit and special bond with her. Lupita describes her father as hardworking and alludes to very close and loving relationship that her parents share through her dad's difficulty with being separated from her mom. As the oldest of 8, Lupita feels a responsibility to help her parents around the home when she learns that Mami has been diagnosed with cancer and will have a long treatment.

As a way to cope with her mother's illness, Lupita dedicates herself to theatre and to her journal as ways to express herself and process what's going on in her school and home lives. To "improve" her theatrical performances, **Mr. Cortés**, the theatre teacher, gives Lupita exercises and practices to "Americanize" her accent, which causes tension between Lupita and her best friend **Mireya** who accuses her of betraying her roots and trying to be like one of the white kids. While their fight does cause Lupita to self-reflect about her identity and how she presents herself, Lupita realizes that her Mexican identity and culture runs deep in her veins and that she doesn't need to act or talk any which way to prove her Mexican-ness. Throughout *Under the Mesquite*, Lupita shares her journey and challenges that, in the end, help her grow.

Where? When?

When Lupita was 6, her family moved from their home in Piedra Negras, Coahuila, Mexico, which is a border city, to a Texan border town called Eagle Pass—about 2.5hrs west of San Antonio. *Under the Mesquite* is a contemporary book that readers with familial ties to Latin America and the U.S. will find very relatable.

Key Themes:

Strength and Resilience: The book begins with a description of the mesquite tree, which is known for its strength and resilience to endure harsh climates, droughts and people's attempts to uproot it. This tree embodies the key theme of the text that is shown through the strength and bravery that Lupita's mom has in fighting cancer, and the strength that Lupita has in coping with her mother's illness and the challenges it imposes upon her family.

Identity: In *Under the Mesquite*, Garcia McCall incorporates the struggle that many Latinx youth in the U.S. face, which is the dilemma of how they see themselves, how their peers see them and how society sees them. Lupita experiences this with regards to her accent and how she speaks. As she becomes interested in theatre, her teacher tries to help her "Americanize" her accent, which causes tension between Lupita and her friends that accuse her of trying to become one of *them*.



Other resources to facilitate the use of *Under the Mesquite*:

The strength and fortitude of the mesquite tree is a key symbol in *Under the Mesquite*.

For Lupita, her strength initially comes from her mother whom she deeply admires; however, it also comes from within as she is forced to cope with the challenges imposed upon her family by her mother's recurring disease and triumphantly grows through this experience. To extend this theme of strength and resilience, have students identify their source of strength and celebrate their inner mesquites.



To extend the theme of identity and Lupita's identity struggles, consider adapting these two activities to your classroom:

(1) *Vice* has gathered 10 images of murals along the border between El Paso (U.S.) and Juarez (MX) created by Chicana artists as their way to transcend the border that is supposed to divide the two cities. The beautiful murals range from showing normal, daily habits to representing historic figures that have impacted the two transnational cities. Consider printing and hanging the murals around your classroom in order to lead a **gallery walk**. To guide your students, instruct them to take notes on the images, symbols, and colors used in each mural in addition to analyzing the artist's motive or intention for creating their mural in a border city. Helpful questions to consider: Who is the mural for? How would the significance of the mural change if it was not in a border city? https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/payvxxk/the-chicano-artists-transcending-the-us-mexico-border



(2) Frida Kahlo provides a visual portrayal of the identity struggle that Lupita experiences in the text in her painting titled "Self-portrait on the Borderline Between Mexico and the United States" (1932). This painting is full of details and symbols that refer to key aspects to Mexican culture and U.S. American culture that Kahlo saw and experienced. Use the presentation linked below to help identify all of the details and the meanings behind them for your students, and then have students use this painting as a model for their own paintings (or drawings) that **represent their two sides**: their moms' & dads' sides of the family; their school & home lives; their childhoods & their [almost] adulthoods; etc. <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/self-portrait-on-the-borderline-between-mexico-and-the-united-states-1932/-QLCA772QViFlg>

See the full LAII Educator Guide on *Under the Mesquite* for background on Guadalupe Garcia McCall, guiding questions for each chapter and writing prompts to encourage students to continue engaging with the text: <https://teachinglatinamericathroughliterature.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/vamos-a-leer-under-the-mesquite-educators-guide.pdf>

Use these questions to facilitate group discussions on the text, key themes and the author's style of writing. This guide was put together by the publisher, Lee & Low Books. In addition to engaging questions, this guide also includes a short blurb about Guadalupe Garcia McCall's childhood and multiple links to other resources for this text. https://www.teachingbooks.net/media/pdf/LeeandLow/mesquite_dg.pdf

To encourage students to engage in the text with their families, consider adapting this lesson plan created by Oralia Garza de Cortés, a consultant for Latino Children's Books, which is part of Día, a Chicago-based initiative. In *Under the Mesquite*, Lupita's family is her rock and having a tightknit family is essential to her story; this theme would easily lend itself to students' families and give students the opportunity to apply what they read to their own home lives. http://dia.ala.org/sites/default/files/DiaCurriculum_8-12_Lesson6.pdf

If you liked this text, check out the following titles that explore similar topics of familial hardships that force the main characters to grow to overcome the challenges they face: Erika Sánchez's *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*; Francisco Jiménez's *The Circuit* (available in Spanish!); Gabby Rivera's *Juliet Takes a Breath*; and Julia Alvarez's *Before We Were Free* (available in Spanish!). These titles are available for teachers in the Albuquerque area through book sets loaned up to 1 month from the LAII. Submit your requests and see other titles available here: <https://teachinglatinamericathroughliterature.wordpress.com/request-a-book-set/>