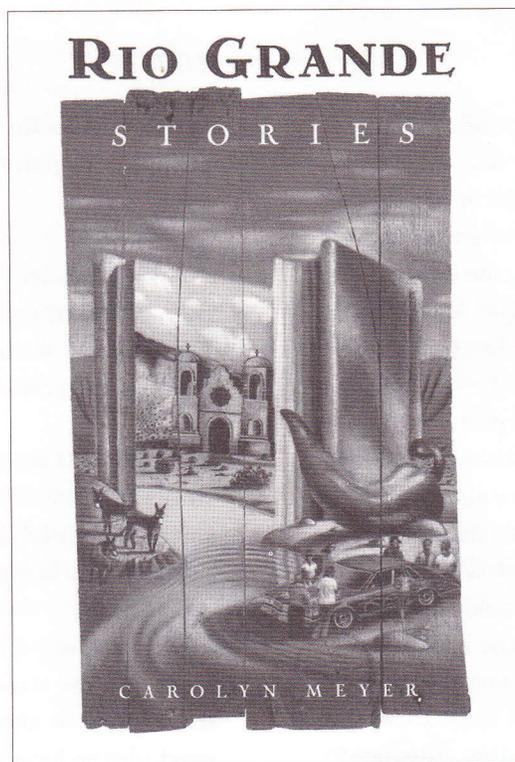


CREATIVE CURRICULUM

# Connections



## Rio Grande Stories

*by Carolyn Meyer*

When the principal at Rio Grande Middle School in Albuquerque asks the students to raise money for their school, the kids in the Heritage Project program decide to write and sell a book. Ricky Begay interviews his grandfather, who was a Navajo code talker in World War II. Tomás Jaramillo explains how his cousin outfitted his beautiful low rider with the painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe on the hood. And Pauline Romero describes how her relatives at Santa Clara Pueblo make their famous pottery.

Alternating with the students' book entries are stories about the students themselves—and of their shared quest to understand their cultural backgrounds. Readers of this creative collection will come to love these characters, as well as the colorful history and cultures of New Mexico.

Educators and parents throughout the country recognize the value of enriching the teaching of traditional subjects such as reading, writing, math, and science through the use of trade books. This literature-based approach to teaching acknowledges that trade books enliven the learning process through rich language and quality artwork not often found in basal textbooks.

The activities that follow offer challenging and enjoyable ways to use *Rio Grande Stories* by Carolyn Meyer with upper-elementary- through middle-school-age children. Parents and teachers are invited to follow any or all of the guidelines to introduce the children in their lives to the wonderful world of reading and books.

# Rio Grande Stories

## *Before Reading*

- Obtain some stories written and published by young people. Such stories can be found in several commercial magazines, literary magazines published by schools, in the Foxfire books, or by entering the words *young authors* into a search engine on the Internet. Read some stories or passages aloud and have the students guess the ages of the authors.
- Hold a discussion about potential problems with self-publishing. Some possible questions include: How would you decide what to write about? How much would it cost to publish a magazine or book? Who would do the editing? Who would create graphics and layouts? Who would supply illustrations? Who would purchase the book once it's published?
- Ask each student to identify his or her culture of origin. If some students don't know their cultural heritage, have them ask parents or grandparents for details. Be sensitive that adopted children may lack such information and accept their best guesses. Make a graphic representation of this information. Have each child prepare a paper square that includes his or her name and a picture (or pictures) illustrating some aspect of the culture. These paper squares can be taped or sewn together to make a wall quilt. Another option is to have each student write his or her name on a small piece of paper attached to a pushpin; have students place the pins on a world map.
- Ask the students to describe the most memorable project, event, or lesson from their school years. Discuss what these activities have in common and what characteristics make them memorable.
- Discuss the structure of your school district. If a student lives in the same house from kindergarten through high school, how many times will he or she change schools?
- Are there any magnet schools in your district? If yes, ask the students what they are and what the students know about them. If not, would it be a good idea to have such schools? Why or why not?
- Have the students imagine that they have enrolled in a magnet school or a newly built school for youths from many neighborhoods. What activities could help the students get to know one another?
- Ask if anyone has ever been the "new kid" in class. Discuss how this situation is different from a class in which all the students are "new."

## *While Reading*

If you are reading the book aloud, read just one or two chapters each day so that students do not confuse the segments. You may wish to select one or two activities from *Across the Curriculum* to complete each day after the reading. As the students read each project, have them write a short descriptive heading for each segment, such as *A How-to Article* or *A Character Sketch*.

Discussion questions for each chapter:

*Chapter 1:* Jeremy Steinberg's grandfather insisted on a weekly report from Jeremy about school. Do your parents inquire about your school activities? If so, what do you say?

*Chapter 2:* What did you think about Teresa Chávez's standing up for Tony Martinez to Ms. Kelsey? Was she being sassy or helping a friend? Would you get into trouble for talking like that to a teacher at your school? Why or why not?

*Chapter 3:* Pauline Romero's older sisters tease her a lot. Do most older siblings tease their younger ones? Why or why not? Do you ever tease your siblings?

*Chapter 4:* Did Teresa Chávez's evil-eye spell have anything to do with Ms. Kelsey suddenly pronouncing her name correctly? What else could explain the change?

*Chapter 5:* April Ellis and the other members of her family are vegetarians. Are you a vegetarian? Do you know anyone (a relative or friend) who is? What are some of your favorite vegetable dishes?

*Chapter 6:* Johnny Aragón's grandmother chides him for spending a lot of money on his car instead of spending it on his wife and baby or to keep up their home. How do you think Johnny should spend his money?

*Chapter 7:* Franklyn and Jacquelyn Cox are *fraternal*, not *identical*, twins. What would it be like to have a twin, either identical or fraternal? What might be good about being a twin? What might be difficult?

*Chapter 8:* Discuss the behavior of the various tourists at the Plaza. Would these people have acted the same way with everyone, or just with Indians? Why or why not?

*Chapter 9:* Rebecca Rivera and Sara McGinley's neighbors worked together to make Las Posadas successful. Do people in your neighborhood have any cooperative activities?

*Chapter 10:* Rosa Gonzales wants to be a journalist, like her mother and father. Do you want to pursue the same career as one of your parents? Why or why not?

*Chapter 11:* Peter Kingston and Joey Baca walked twenty-eight miles in one day. Have you ever participated in a marathon (26.2 miles)? What is the longest distance you have ever walked or run?

*Chapter 12:* Manuel Medina eventually confesses his lie to Sandra Vargas because he feels guilty. Why did Manuel lie? Have you ever experienced a similar situation?

## After Reading

- Have the students compare the writing of the students at Rio Grande Middle School with the published work of young authors they discovered in their Before Reading research. What are the similarities? The differences? Although the selections in *Rio Grande Stories* were written by an adult author, do the stories sound like something seventh graders might have written? Have the students use specific examples from the book to back up their conclusions.
- Review your discussion about the potential problems with self-publishing. As a class, discuss how the Rio Grande students solved each of these problems.
- Discuss the final shape of the Rio Grande class book. Possible questions to ask include: Who do you think will buy the book? Would people other than members of the students' families be interested in their book? Why or why not? Will the Rio Grande students remember this project in years to come? Why or why not?
- Discuss Mr. Wilder and his teaching methods. Possible questions to ask include: What do you think of Mr. Wilder as a teacher? Describe his teaching style. Have you ever had a teacher like Mr. Wilder? If so, describe him or her. If not, would you like to have such a teacher? Why or why not?

- Discuss the magnet school concept. Point out that the Rio Grande students had to leave their neighborhood schools, pass an interview to attend their new school, and then be bused to a school where they didn't know the other students. In the face of these difficulties, why did parents want their children to attend this school? Why did the students want to attend? Would you consider attending a magnet school? Why or why not?

- What do the students think of the Heritage Project? What goals did they achieve by publishing the class book?

- Compare the headings the students wrote for each segment of the book in the While Reading section. Have them discuss any differences of opinion.

## Across the Curriculum

### Literature

- Jeremy Steinberg wrote his school affiliation starting with the heading Heritage Project and ending with Universe. Have the students visit the public library to find a copy of the play *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder. Look for a similar address in act 1 of the play. Ask the students to write their own "complete" address or school affiliation using one of these two models or making up a new one.

- Tony Martínez was astounded when the substitute teacher said she had read a book that said very bad things about Padre Martínez. Possible questions to ask include: Have you ever read a book that you believed did not tell the whole truth about someone or something? Why is it important to use multiple references when researching a paper?

- Manuel Medina helped his younger brothers and sisters learn to read English by reading Dr. Seuss books to them. Ask the students which books helped them learn to read, and list these titles on the chalkboard. Have your students volunteer to read to first graders in the school, if possible.

### Writing

- Prepare your own class book. Each person or small team of students can research and write about a person, family or cultural event, or custom. The students may also want to incorporate favorite family recipes.

- Have each student write a ghost story. The story can be based on a familiar tale, like that of *La Llorona*, or it can be original. For extra chills,

have the students sit in a dark room—lit only by flashlights or candles—when they tell their stories.

### Language

- Form teams of three to six students, and have each team devise its own alphabetic code. Have the members within each team write secret messages to one another. Then have the teams trade messages and attempt to break the various codes.

### Social Studies

- Have the students research and give an oral report about a cultural event mentioned in this book that was unfamiliar to them. Possible subjects include: Bar Mitzvah, Sabbath meal, First Communion, tribal dances, Las Posadas, *quinceañera* birthday celebration, Good Friday pilgrimage, etc.

- Many young men love to decorate their cars in personal ways, just as Johnny Aragón did. Unless they've lived in the southwestern United States, many students probably have never seen a low rider. Have them describe the fancy cars they have seen.

- Every community seems to have homeless people like those who came to the Coxes' Thanksgiving dinner. Have the students research hunger-relief efforts in your area and discuss other services that are available to homeless people.

- Discuss the incident of the *mal ojo*, or "evil eye." What other cultural superstitions have the students heard of?

- Discuss Ms. Kelsey’s attitude about her new surroundings. Possible questions to ask include: Is she a pessimist or an optimist? How does a person feel when his or her name is mispronounced? If a name does not sound “American,” should everyone still be expected to learn to pronounce it correctly? Why?

- Jeremy Steinberg was sometimes embarrassed because his parents were older than those of many of his friends, and so were often mistaken to be his grandparents. Possible questions to ask include: What might adults consider to be the advantages and disadvantages of being older parents? What might children consider to be the advantages and disadvantages of having older parents?

- Ask the students if they’ve ever been to a family reunion like the one the Martínez family had—or if they can recall meeting certain relatives for the first time. Possible questions to ask include: How did you feel? Why do families have reunions?

- Teresa Chávez’s grandmother was a *curandera*, a healer; she used herbal remedies and spells to cure people. Have the students research folk medicine in many cultures. They may want to start with Native Americans, but there are many other cultures that rely on natural remedies not widely used as medicine in the United States.

### Geography

- Ask the students to follow the course of the Rio Grande River (as described on pages 12–13) on a U.S. map. Have them choose an outstanding natural feature in their state (a river, lake, mountain, plain) and write a specific description of it.

- The Romero girls had different ideas about where they wanted to live when they grew up. Ask the

students where they hope to live someday. Then have them research the chosen location and list the advantages and disadvantages of living there.

### Science

- Although the atomic bomb was developed in secrecy, the immediate and lasting effects of the bomb are well documented. Have the students research the scientists involved with this project at Los Alamos. Then have each student select one of the scientists and report on the role that individual played in developing the atomic bomb.

### Art

- Locate pictures of Native American pottery and share them with your students. Supply them with clay and have them make a pot by following the instructions Helen López provides on page 58.

- Like April Ellis, most teenagers want their own room. Have each student design his or her ideal bedroom. Have each of them draw a floor plan to scale, including details such as furniture, floor coverings, and decorations.

- Show the students pictures of paintings by Georgia O’Keeffe. Have them make a large, vividly colored drawing of just one blossom of a local flower.

- In conjunction with Halloween, have the students follow Rebecca Rivera’s directions on pages 183–184 to make a luminaria for their front porch instead of a jack-o’-lantern.

### Nutrition

- Try some Southwestern food. Set up a taco bar or have a tortilla feast, serving as many fillings and sauces as possible.

## *Further Reading*

*Also by Carolyn Meyer:*

*Drummers of Jericho*

*Gideon's People*

*Jubilee Journey*

*A Voice from Japan: An Outsider Looks In*

*Voices of Northern Ireland: Growing Up in a Troubled Land*

*Where the Broken Heart Still Beats*

*White Lilacs*

## *About the Author*

Thomas Judd Photography



**Carolyn Meyer** was born and raised in Lewistown, Pennsylvania. After graduating from Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, she moved to New York and, eventually, to Connecticut to raise her family. Since then she has traveled the world and lived in various cities, where she gathered material for her books. Ms. Meyer has written more than forty books for young people, both fiction and nonfiction, and when she's not busy writing, she enjoys reading, listening to music, and going to the theater. She lives with her husband in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

## *About the Contributor*

The activities in Harcourt Brace Creative Curriculum Connections were written by Mary Lou Meerson. An educational consultant, Ms. Meerson has been a classroom teacher, a language arts coordinator, an elementary school principal, and a university professor. Her current position at San Diego State University enables her to test her ideas with student teachers and their students.

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