



Buried Onions

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On the mean streets of southeast Fresno, nineteen-year-old Eddie is just trying to get by. All he wants is to forget his violent past, hold down a job, and walk a straight line. But after his cousins murder, Eddie finds himself slowly but inexorably drawn back into the cycle of violence. . . . Set against the backdrop of a city sweltering in the grip of poverty, crime, and unfulfilled dreams, this is the unforgettable story of a young man struggling to survive in a world spiraling out of control. Unrelenting ... unsparing ... A valuable tale, its one that makes no concessions. Kirkus Reviews Sotos clear, finely honed poets voice shines in this tale of barrio life in Fresno, California ... wholly believable. ALA Booklist

Buried Onions Details

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Blake Evans says

I think that this book provided a serious look on the struggles of some minorities in a crime-infested city. It was very realistic and everything seems to flow in the story. The only thing that seems odd or missing was a happy ending, but that's what gives this book a realistic feeling because sometimes life doesn't give you a happily ever after ending. The setting took place in Fresno, California in the 21st century. This was a good setting because this is where most Hispanic cultures migrate to and live. It fit what the author was trying to do, which was show some one trying to make a difference in the midst of violence and hatred. The characters were relateable because, again, they were realistic. You had the antagonist that everyone hates and the protagonist that everyone cheers for. The characters were like able because they were "real". It's not a little kid book where everyone holds hands and sing. Some characters hated each other. This hate makes them more human than just a name printed in a book. THE author's attitude in this book was very negative and depressing. At every corner there was death, violence, drugs, and other negative influences that Eddie had to face. I think this book is suited for someone who might need some inspiration or guidance in life. This book sets a good example of how a person should react to all of this negativity. You should rise above it and make your way in a good life. I would recommend this book because it is inspiring and a good read. This book may be full of negativity, but it shines a light at the end of the tunnel leading to a life of positivity, happiness, and friends and family that are positive.

Amanda says

Snapshot: Buried Onions is a story about Eddie, a nineteen-year-old Latino man living in Fresno, CA. He has no direction in life and feels trapped in a city of sorrow, poverty, and loneliness. He thinks everyone in Fresno is so sad because there are onions buried underground, providing a constant source of tears.

Hook: I think students would be interested in this book for the street action inside: Eddie is involved in situations that include robbery, gunshots, blood, drugs, and both running from and confronting dangerous people. This is a short book, and I think urban Hispanic students would identify with Eddie's story. Gary Soto is a gripping writer, so students who have read his other works might be interested in following up with this more adult novel.

Challenges: The language would be difficult for students learning English because there is a lot of regional and cultural slang. Furthermore, the book is overwhelmingly sad. I struggled to push on, waiting for Eddie to finally find some kind of solution or salvation, but it never comes. As I read, I could feel and smell the onion fumes mixed with heat and concrete and dust that come through every page of the book; the book's oppressive atmosphere weighed down on me. Without a sense of hope or closure for this character, the novel is both realistic and depressing.

Students in mind: I think older male students, especially from Hispanic backgrounds, would be drawn to this book. I would recommend it for more mature students who are advanced or persistent readers. I think it would be a good choice for a differentiated literature circle, providing comprehension and reader-response questions for deeper consideration along the way.

Conference notes: What do you think of the onions metaphor in the book? How does the idea of "buried

onions" contribute to the theme and voice of the novel? Do you know anyone like Eddie? What advice would you give him? Do you think Eddie makes the right choices? Do you think Eddie is a victim of circumstances, or do you think he made choices that brought him to this place in life?

Level: High school, Advanced English-language readers

Kris says

I enjoyed this as an eAudiobook. It really grabbed me and helped me see another side of life, and how one can not only survive it, but get beyond it. It is a coming of age story.

Gary Soto's stories take me down unexpected paths, and I'm never disappointed with where I end up. I highly recommend this story.

Melissa says

Snapshot:

A conversation with another BTR resident, who said that this book was completely lacking in hope, got me thinking. Am I just used to books like that, having devoted so much of my life to reading literature by Zainichi Korean (Koreans in Japan)? I recall a conversation about the short story "Crimson Fruit" by Kim Chang-saeng, a second-generation Zainichi Korean, that we had in one of my grad. school classes. Someone made reference to how unrelenting it was, in contrast, to, say, Toni Morrison. The whole setting was darkened by the smoke from the crematorium stacks, there was no natural beauty, no hope in love, no nothing. I'm not sure I agree about that story, but it probably is true of this book, *Buried Onions*. What saves this book for me, and actually Kim Chang-saeng's writing, too, is the beauty of the writing itself, of the images, and, I suppose, the gritty realism of the brutality of life for a young Latino man in Fresno. Finally, the complexity of the main character, Eddie. I do have a real "snapshot," too, a visual one: onions, the overarching image of the book. Buried, yes, "a huge onion buried under the city... (that) made us cry...that remarkable bulb of sadness" (2). But also, the bag of scavenged -- or salvaged? -- onions sold by a Black man trying to support his family.

Hook:

Trying to get out. Trying to avoid gang life. Feeling alone. Being judged by the color of one's skin. Incredibly vivid and remarkably readable writing.

Challenges:

The book doesn't have a traditional plot arc, and there is a lot of Spanish in it. There's a glossary in the back, but for non-Spanish-speaking students, the abundance of foreign words could still be an impediment.

Student(s) in mind:

Oh boy, so many. It would be easy to say the big group of Latino boys in my class who are now reading *Always Running*, but actually I think that this is one that Shaina would really like, and Daquan and Dawntayia, too, because they have a real sensitivity to language use.

Conference notes:

Well... plot. What is happening? Is this a book of character rather than a book of incident, to use the terms we've been discussing for short stories? Or do the series of linked incidents that occur substitute for some sort of climax? What is the essential question or problem of the book? Images -- visual and otherwise. I'd love to ask students to draw responses to the book if so inclined. Or come up with a comparable image to the onion for their own communities. I'd ask also about the main character's choices, the foreclosure of choices, and what they think the author is trying to communicate through depicting the choices that Eddie makes at the end of the book.

Level: High school because of the subject matter, but also, I think, because of reading level. The book will be best appreciated by those who have developed a certain sophistication in reading imagery.

Jeanna says

Eddie lives in a tired barrio, filled with gang violence and poverty. However, he dreams of getting out. He's working to keep himself on the path that will hopefully one day take him out of his situation. Just when he gets a good job with Mr. Stiles, who trusts him, Mr. Stiles' car gets stolen and Eddie fears he'll be blamed. Again Eddie is thrust into hard times. His friend Jose suggests a way to get out—joining the military. While Eddie would not have thought of that himself, because he is also in danger from Angel, a former friend, Eddie eventually decides to join up. He leaves behind the crying world of the barrio for something else...who knows what. This book had beautiful imagery, not only with the onion metaphor, but also just with the way the author paints the pictures of the world around Eddie. Eddie's dream is so simple that it's painful—he dreams of a normal life: kids, a wife, being able to sit and relax in the evening, watch the t.v. It is painful but beautiful.

Willie says

Snapshot: Eddie has a theory about Fresno, CA. He thinks that onions buried under the city are responsible for the pain and suffering that its people live with. It's easy to understand why he thinks so: having dropped out of air conditioning school, he lives life day to day. Stenciling house numbers on sidewalks for spare change, he barely has enough to eat, and cockroaches are slowly taking over his apartment. And if this wasn't enough, the murder of his cousin and the stabbing of one of his best friends threaten to pull him into a world of crime and violence.

“Hook”: The cover. A very interesting vantage point looking down on a young man on a bicycle. This is a very gritty and realistic story that does not gloss over the hardships of life. This story will speak to teens who have been threatened and/or tempted by violence in their communities.

Challenges: The protagonist has lost his cousin to violence, and one of his best friends is stabbed in the story. Descriptions of running through alleyways to escape violence and the feelings of isolation and danger that the protagonist has can be difficult to read and process.

Student in mind: Some of my more struggling and at-risk students. This is a very “real” book that does not gloss over the realities of life. This book also paints violence in a very brutal way and does not glorify it at all.

Notes: “Chicano”, immigration, CA gang culture.

Level: High School. Medium.

Aaron Alexius says

Snapshot: A bildungsroman for a kid in the barrio in So Cal. Eddie is living alone in the treacherous war grounds that the barrio in Southern Fresno. He’s got no job, dropped out of community college, and is in the midst of dealing with his cousin’s death while he tries like hell to get out of the hell of the hood. Continual heartbreak, broken dreams, and betrayed trusts rule Eddie’s life and squeeze the last tears of childhood from his beaten soul as he buries his hurt like so many buried onions.

Hook: Eddie’s been in the barrio all his life and doesn’t want to die there like his cousin: stabbed in a bathroom in a bar. Desperation. That’s what real life is like for people tied up inside of gang-life in Southern California. How can Eddie survive in this place and simultaneously get revenge for the death of his primo? Is there a way out of the hood?

Challenges: Gary Soto uses Spanish in his writing, not much a word or phrase heard there. Soto keeps a glossary of Spanish terms in the back with one-to-one correlations for word synonyms. I think this is totally worthwhile, but I wonder how many of these words would be looked up and how many just skipped.

Student in Mind: José comes to mind because of his recommendation of *Down These Mean Streets*. I think that this represents a version of that story that Piri Thomas related in his memoirs, which may have been more accessible to José who seemed to have weak reading stamina. It satisfies the interest area, but does so in a more PG, less linguistically demanding way.

Conference Notes: Eddie’s relationship with Mr. Stiles changes over time. How does it develop? What specific events take place in the history of their interaction? Make a time line or a comic of each major event, remember to include important dialogue and clear pictures.

Eddie’s interaction with Mr. Stiles includes a discussion of several vehicles which Eddie uses to get around: a bus, his bike, and Mr. Stiles’ truck. How does the author use these vehicles to tell the story of Eddie? What do the vehicles symbolize?

What does the military symbolize to the residents in South Fresno? What role does the armed forces play? If you were in Eddie’s shoes, would you have joined the Navy?

Level: Definitely readable for a 6th grade reading level (the number of Tier II and III words is very low). The interest is high enough to maintain a 12 graders’ attention.

Other: A number of things in the text don’t make sense and are not explained. For example, why is Eddie living alone? Is it because he was attending community college? Why does Solomon suddenly want to beat up Eddie?

In addition, female characters play only a superficial role in this text as a one night love interest, nagging aunt, or a cash strapped mom in another city. There is no strong female character.

Jasmin Pena says

This book follows the life of Eddie after his cousin is killed. We see the struggles Eddie faces living in Fresno, a city full of gangs and violence. He wants justice for his cousin but not in the way his tia wants. Eddie is faced with many obstacles that he sometimes doesn't know how to face.

Carly says

2/12/05

Buried Onions by Gary Soto

The three strongest elements of this book are voice, setting, and character interactions. The book is written in the first person. The narrator/protagonist narrates with an amazingly poetic voice which is almost incredulous considering his upbringing, but somehow works in beautiful contrast to the subject matter and setting. His mind is filled to the brim with similes, metaphors, analogies and parallels. He's a young man living in a world of malevolent ignorance, with the mind of a poet. You can tell from the first page that Eddie is reflective and thoughtful. He has an excellent imagination which he puts to use most noticeably in his idea about onions that people bury to make themselves cry.

He begins by saying how many people he cared for are dead. People he knows are in prison. Everyone he knows is stuck in some way or another, in their mundane life of boredom and squalor, and none more so than he. The book is full of reminders for him that he is imprisoned by his poverty and ignorance, and the poverty, ignorance, and malevolence of those around him. All he can do is keep himself from becoming completely like the people around him. He's submitted to the lifestyle he can't escape, even to some extent the mindset that pervades his surroundings. But there's some kind of light in him that sets him apart from the rest: his lack of hatred. His life depresses him, at times even enrages him. He has no outlet for his feelings, but he is strong enough not to take them out on other people. He only does so twice, but they were acts of desperation, and he holds no real malevolence.

This is most obvious by his lack of the desire for revenge. He doesn't care who killed his cousin. He never even finds out. His society and what he has been taught both tell him he should care, and should do something about it, but in his heart it's all the same. It's a tragedy which nothing will repair. The poor man who killed his cousin will be full of pain anyway, (isn't everyone?) and will die soon enough.

His lack of malevolence shows in many other places, for example the way he avoids Samuel and his miniature gang rather than beating them and showing them their place. He just doesn't find all this violence worth it. It just hurts people who are already hurting, and will just die anyway, same as everyone else. Eddie has the aura of a defeated man. He's a passive protagonist, which I usually find rather annoying, but it worked for this book. He has little willpower, and things happen to him, rather than him going out and making things happen. He's just another guy trying to get by, and another soul wanting to get out.

As I mentioned, character interactions are a great strong point in this book. They are very realistic, and still filled with the emotional tension that writers love to glorify. It was done realistically, subtly, and

emotionally, an excellent combination. Furthermore the dialect and voices of the characters matched the speakers and the setting, a problem I sometimes notice in my own writing. Characters have distinct voices. One of my favorite scenes was the one where Eddie finally talks to coach about his problems. It was described and acted out very realistically. Many people in that situation would feel awkward, embarrassed, and rather stupid, particularly if they are out of practice with communicating feelings, as Eddie obviously is. "I rushed my story which in my heart seemed complicated but when told seemed like the stuff you might read on one of those comic strips that come with Bazooka bubble gum." His problems when spoken to another seem trivial and mundane, nothing special, nothing interesting. I like how he compared it to Bazooka bubble gum, which has connotations of being common, cheap, and childish.

Another mark of an excellent writer which is evident throughout this book is the use of strong verbs. Strong verbs are words that convey action and meaning in a poignant manner, often even artistically. They are usually used in place of weaker verbs with less meaning and fewer emotional connotations (i.e. "He sauntered down the street" as opposed to "He walked down the street.") Here's an example from the book: "Fences sagged and paint blistered." This phrase is very artistic and effective solely because of the strong verbs in the active voice. They paint an excellent picture for the reader, and also carry with them connotations that can be applied to the setting in general. Sagging suggests depression, defeat, hopelessness, lack of energy and enthusiasm, all of which are evident in the setting and its inhabitants. Blistered suggests uncomfortable heat and pain, also apparent in the setting.

Eddie's depiction of modern Fresno is a perfect example of the failure of the American dream. Ignorance, poverty, malevolence, hopelessness, violence, drugs, boredom, and a sense of imprisonment all mix together to form the emotional atmosphere that could squeeze the willpower and love out of anyone stuck in it. There's only one way out. It's a subtle irony how the way to escape his hell is to join the military and fight for America, whose decay he has experienced for so long. It's not even like he's fighting for change, he'll be fighting to keep it exactly the same. The saddest thing about Fresno is there's not really a way to change it. Because he's lower-class, with no talent or mental drive he's yet discovered, he will live his life out as another one of the lowliest cogs in the American machine.

Jennifer says

Snapshot: Eddie is a nineteen-year-old Mexican boy living in Fresno, CA. Eddie has lost his father, two uncles, best friend, and most recently his cousin. After what happened to his cousin, he is constantly accosted by his aunt to avenge his death. Eddie believes that there are buried onions underneath the city and that's why people are always sad and can't escape the sorrow.

Hook: I think students will be able to identify with the action in the story, Eddie's background, and where he lives.

Challenges: I don't think length is going to be a problem, but vocabulary will be. For those who don't know Spanish and slang words, some of the vocabulary used might be difficult to understand. Also, the tone of the story is very sad and depressive. And the end doesn't provide a true conclusion.

Student in mind: I think that older students, particularly male would identify with it. I think any student who lives in an urban area can identify with Eddie and his struggles.

Conference Notes: Do you know of someone that has been in Eddie's situation? Have you ever felt that there are things that you can't escape? Why do you think Eddie ignored Tia Dolore's pleas? How does Coach help Eddie? Do you think Eddie ended up in the Army? How do you feel about what Mr. Stiles did to Eddie? Do you think Angel killed Eddie's cousin?

Level: High-school

Duffy Pratt says

I'm not sure why I'm putting this on the children's shelf. If I had discovered the book differently, I doubt it would have occurred to me that this is a YA book.

The book is bleak, unrelenting, and beautifully written. In the first person, the narrator's language at times seems too lofty for his character, but it works. The narrator is a 19 year old fuck-up in Fresno, CA. He was smart enough to get into college, but dropped out. Earlier in life he was more interested in sniffing glue, inhaling spray paint, and hanging out on the fringe of very violent gangs. Now he's too old for any of that, but he doesn't have anything else to look forward to. Instead, he eeks out a living by spray painting house numbers on curbs, and doing odd jobs for people if he can persuade them to let him work for them. He lives in a squalid apartment, and is taking to thinking of the roaches as his "homies"

Violent death has surrounded him. His first cousin was stabbed, and everyone he knows seems to expect him to kill someone in revenge, though no-one knows who did the stabbing. That doesn't seem to matter all that much, so long as someone dies for it. There are a bunch of people who say they know who did it, but it's pretty clear that none of them can be trusted, and even if they could be trusted, their knowledge is suspect.

The narrator tries to make things better for himself, but it's one step forward and three steps back. He wants to get out of his world, but can't seem to find a way. And at the same time he's afraid to leave the only life he's known. Trapped, it seems like a violent end is the only way out for him.

And yes, in the midst of all this despair, there is some beautiful writing and some good characterization.

Luke says

Buried Onions is about Eddie, a soda drinking, number painting, cholo. Now, Eddie had a pretty rough past, and is struggling even now to recover from his bad habits, like paint-sniffing, but the main plot of the story lies when his cousin, Jesus, gets stabbed and killed by a mysterious man with yellow shoes. Only Jesus's best friend, Angel, knows the guy, but he's pictured as a pretty evil guy and could have been the killer too. Nevertheless, Eddie is a pretty lonely guy, he even reaches a state where he considers the cockroaches that infested his home, to be his "homies". The entire journey brought up surprises and twists but overall was not very interesting, although the writing was beautiful. I rate this a three because of the ending where he pretty much randomly joins the navy, and on the way there, he finds an onion field and starts crying, which was quite strange.

Christina Staton says

Buried Onions is a book about a mexican guy named Eddie, who lives in the run down part of Fresno, California. He had made it through alot of things in his life. He lost his cousin becuase he was into gangs and gang related violence. He "ran" with gangs but never hung out with them all the time. Eddie's aunt is trying to get him to kill the person who killed her *mijo*, her son. Eddie doesn't want to cause anymore violence or get involved with gangs anymore. He is trying to keep his appartment by working little side jobs like painting house numbers on peoples curbs for them, and working to help a man, Mr. Stiles clean and fix up his yard. One day he goes out to take off some trash in Mr. Stiles' truck and drops by his appartment and the truck gets stolen. He runs into his old freind from school who tells him about his time in the navy. He gets in a gang fight with a gang member he knows, Angel. After he gets in that fight he realizes Angel will eventually come looking for him with his aunt's gun. So he decides to enroll in the navy.

My opinion of the book is that it was a kind of moving story, just because of all the struggle Eddie goes through. It was well written and it was very realistic because gang violence really does happen, and anyones life could be taken at any time.

Austin Nauman says

In my opinion I believe that the plot was very realistic. I like how they portrayed a troubled boy (Eddie) in a troubled setting trying to turn things around in his life. For a boy like Eddie that is very hard to do so it is realistic that he couldn't turn it around completely but his life got better. The plot did make sense, it told you why Eddie was you could say "set up" for failure and why failure was not that big of a deal to most people in Fresno, it was expected. I don't believe anything was missing, for me at least it didn't make me have to think extremely hard and have to guess at why something happened. The author did a very good job on explaining things that led up to bigger/important events.

The setting was in a bad part of Fresno, California. I thought it was interesting that the author chose Fresno because I have never heard anything bad about it. I was surprised after reading the story that he didn't choose a more crime rate city. In the book it never gives an exact date, but it seemed very modern and the book was written in 1999 so I come to believe it was around 1999. I do believe that the city fits the plot perfectly. At first I wasn't so sure why he chose Fresno but then as you begin to read further into the story and read the details the author puts in the story about Fresno, the city fits the plot perfectly. The city seems rough, not too successful and also has some discrimination and racism. It helped the events of the book tremendously. The story would've been awkward if it was a bunch of troubled citizens from Hiawatha, he had to choose a city that was more on the sketchy side. The reader is able to see why the kids are unsuccessful and troubled because of the environment they grew up in.

I believe the characters were believable, especially Eddie. I believe Eddie did want to and tried to turn his life around and make a name for himself. He didn't want to be just another child who was mediocre. The characters were almost all relatable. They were relatable because a lot of them were family, went to the same high school, did bad things together, or knew each other somehow through a bad thing and wanted to stay away from each other. Everyone in the story knew what the other was going through. It seemed like nothing really was kept a secret there, it reminded me of a small town. Eddie was very likable, who doesn't like a kid who is trying to live his "American Dream"? Almost any reader would like to read a story about some kid who is trying to turn his life around all on his own when almost everything is against him.

The tone of the author was very hard to pick up. At times it was very positive when they would talk about Eddie trying to stay out of trouble and to live a better life. To me personally it makes me happy that we live in a world where people are not afraid to be different and who will go against all odds to fulfill their dream. Then I was also able to catch it as a negative approach. I felt this because of all the violence, drugs, and being unsuccessful. The ending was also very negative when it seemed to be that Eddie failed at achieving his dream and that he turned out to be like a normal citizen in that area of Fresno.

I think this book would be beneficial to basically everybody. If I had to choose a specific group it would be teenagers. I think there are a lot of lessons you can learn from this story that applies to kids and young adults. The story shows what not to get involved in (crime, drugs, violence) but then it also teaches you to work hard and to keep striving for your dream no matter what that may be. I would recommend this book because of all the lessons it provides for the reader. To some it shows them that they are very fortunate to not have to live in a city like Eddie does. This book can touch literally anyone in any situation.

Justin says

Snapshot: Like insects caught in fly paper, Eddie is stuck in a life that has few opportunities. Scraping by on Ramen and water, even a can of soda is considered a treat in his world. Yet idle hands are the devil's tools, and Eddie soon finds his hometown of Fresno becomes overwhelmingly oppressive. His seemingly friendly boss calls the police to have him arrested. His mother won't help him out financially. His favorite cousin was recently stabbed to death and his acquaintance is trying to kill him. Through it all, Eddie has no goals, nothing to look ahead to, his only thought being survival. Will Eddie escape the leeches of his hometown? Or will he get sucked in, just as many of his peers have, adding to the violent and deceitful environment that is Fresno? Find these answers and more in *Buried Onions*.

Hook: The first page does an excellent job describing a morose, aimless setting filled with death and despair. Soto's imagery and attention to detail should pull in visual learners, as his prose are the next-best thing to actual illustrations. The length of the text is also manageable, and will not intimidate less-experienced readers. The cover features a teenager on a bicycle, his shadow baked into the brown surface on which he travels. This may pique the interest of students who ride their bikes on a regular basis. Further information on the back cover suggests Eddie is presented with an additional challenge with which he must grapple as he attempts to avenge his cousin's death. I also enjoyed the English translations in the back of the book, which really assisted my understanding since I am not a Spanish speaker.

Challenges: I cannot think of many challenges for this book. The chapters sometimes run a bit long. Also, for all the talk of violence, there is very little in this story, which may disappoint students who were hooked about listening to a story read to them. Also, there are no main female characters, unless you count Eddie's mother and aunts, who are simply created for a supporting role.

Students In Mind: I think Jazmin would truly appreciate this book because she's Latina and recently moved here from Southern California, a place she dearly misses. Any of my male sophomores who think they're tough should also check out this story, as it may convince them that violence is often not the answer, as it only escalates the situation while solving nothing. Anyone living in a neighborhood in which they do not feel safe will also relate to *Buried Onions*. Chris, who is afraid to play basketball in his neighborhood because of gangs, would enjoy this book, as would Robert, who is at a crossroads in life between staying on the right path or continuing dangerous tendencies.

Conference Notes:

- 1) Why do you think Eddie begins to cry on the final page? Use evidence to support your answer.
- 2) If you were Eddie, would you have fought Angel? Or would you have found a way to get money and leave town for good? Explain your answer using at least two pieces of evidence with analysis.
- 3) On page 11, why does Eddie compare himself (and peers) to dinosaurs? What is he implying? Which poetic device is this an example of?
- 4) Soto begins and ends this book with references to morticians and mortuaries. How does this connect to the theme of the story, and what is his purpose for doing so?
- 5) Think of a situation in which you had to decide whether to confront the problem or avoid it. Which did you choose? What was the outcome, and how did you feel about your choice afterward?

Level: This book is accessible to middle-school reading levels, yet the content is geared more toward older students. I believe the morals are relevant to all ages within secondary education, and the vocabulary is understandable for middle-school students. There is a glossary in the back with translations for all the Spanish words Soto inserts in his prose. Referring back to it for each Spanish word will help younger students get into the habit of checking sections of the book for more information on the text.
