

Study Guide



The **STORYTELLERS**

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“Elena stood at the street corner, the toes of her sneakers timidly peeking out over the curb.”

The opening line of *The Storytellers* introduces readers to a world that is new and uncertain for the young heroine of the story, Elena. As they continue to read, they will discover just how uncommon a story is.

The Storytellers is a multi-award-winning historical novel set in 1991 California. As readers learn about Elena and her father, they also learn about the prejudices of that time. But *The Storytellers* has a touch of magic as well. Elena’s story also takes her to the 1940s and 50s, allowing readers glimpses of what it was like to be an African American during World War II and the early years of the Civil Rights Movement.

We’ve prepared this guide to enhance your students’ reading and provide you with lessons in literature, reading, social studies, current events, and ethics. The questions are organized into sections that enable you to focus on essential parts of the novel: Character, Plot, Setting, and Theme. The questions are intended to help students notice the details of the story, to think about not only what is happening in the story but what it means and how it applies to them, and to spark discussions among readers.

Character

There are many characters who come into Elena's life. Some are members of her family. Others, she meets at school. She connects to still others through Ang, the older woman who lives in her neighborhood. Encourage each student to make a chart like the one below, outlining the characteristics of each person and how they relate to Elena. Your students should record their initial impressions and then add to the chart as the story unfolds.

Character Name	Characteristics	Relationship to Elena	Who does the character remind you of?



Ang, an older woman who grew up in the south, is the first person Elena meets in *The Storytellers*. Strange things seem to happen when Ang is around. What do your students believe is Ang's role in the story?

When faced with new or unfamiliar situations, kids sometimes feel insecure and scared. This is true for Elena, who has moved from her home on a farm to the city and must make new friends at school. Have your class talk about her sense of feeling like an outsider. Then have them talk about how they sometimes see themselves as not belonging.

Elena has a special relationship with her brother, Tonito. How does she treat him? The way we treat others reveals a lot about ourselves. In contrast, Bunny bullies Elena and her friend, Keri. Ask your students why they think Bunny is mean to people. Talk about the positive aspects of being kind to others.



Plot

Elena and her family have left their Idaho farm for the city so that Papi can get the medical care he needs. How does Elena feel about this change?

The Storytellers uses flashbacks to reveal some of Elena's past. What happened to Elena's family? How does this affect Elena and Tonito?

Many children today must endure the pain of divorce, of moving to new places, or of losing loved ones to accidents or illness. In fiction, problems like these are called conflicts. Some conflicts are minor while others can have a huge impact on us. Discuss conflict with your students. Ask them to identify conflicts in Elena's life.

Ang shares stories about her father that magically transport Ang to other times and places. How do these stories help Elena resolve her conflicts? How do Elena's feelings about Bunny and Papi change?

The ending of *The Storytellers* is both happy and sad. How does the ending reflect real life? In what ways has Elena changed? How have other characters changed?

Ask your students how they feel about the book's ending. Did they feel satisfied? How might they have ended it differently? Consider having your students write a story about what happens next in the story, or choose a character other than Elena and retell a scene from their point of view.



Setting

The Storytellers is set primarily in Pasadena, a suburb of Los Angeles, California. As students read the book, ask them to point out descriptions that identify the urban setting: the apartment building, the park, the school, the street corner, a bus stop, and so forth. What words does the author use to describe these locations?

There are several other settings throughout the book, including a battlefield and a farm.

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“The smell of salt water and gun powder burned her nostrils, and the explosions were broken only by the sound of waves crashing against the shore.”

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“She closed her eyes and imagined running through the tall, stiff stalks, the thin strands of corn silk sticking to her hair, and the smell of fresh husks and earth sifting through the air.”

How do the descriptions of these places differ? What do you see in your mind’s eye when reading these descriptions?

Setting also involves time. While most of Elena’s story takes place in 1991, she is sometimes transported back to older time periods, such as the Battle of Iwo Jima during World War II (1945) and the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School (1957). The author set *The Storytellers* in different time periods to show a parallel between Elena and Ang’s stories. What similarities do they share? How are they different?



Themes

One of the themes of *The Storytellers* is prejudice. In the early 1990s, people with AIDS were often treated like outcasts. There was no cure for the disease, and many were afraid of catching it. A lack of accurate information and knowledge about AIDS fed the fear and bias. Discuss with your class how a fear can lead people to say and do things that are unkind to others.

How does prejudice relate to Ang's story? Where do we see prejudice in our society today?

Another theme in the novel is honesty/dishonesty. How does Elena avoid telling her friends the truth about Papi? What are the consequences of her lies?

Talk to your class about the reasons why some people lie. What can happen because of a lie? Telling the truth can sometimes be difficult, but what are the benefits of being honest?

Elena's school teacher assigns his students a project on Community. What does community mean to your students? How can people who are different from each other still be a community?

Consider giving your class a similar assignment to explore what community means to them. Elena and her friends create a collage of pictures to represent their relationship to each other and to others. Other projects might include interviewing family members, writing a story, creating a video, or performing a skit.



Resources

CIVIL RIGHTS: LITTLE ROCK NINE

https://www.ducksters.com/history/civil_rights/little_rock_nine.php

ALABAMA BUS BOYCOTT OF 1955

http://www.americaslibrary.gov/aa/king/aa_king_bus_1.html

TEACHING TIP SHEET: STIGMA AND PREJUDICE

<http://www.apa.org/pi/aids/resources/education/stigma-prejudice.aspx>

“ABSENT FROM HISTORY: THE BLACK SOLIDERS AT TWO JIMA”

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/oct/20/usa.film>

UNDERSTANDING PREJUDICE

<http://www.understandingprejudice.org/teach/elemact.htm>

HIV AND AIDS: KIDS HEALTH

<https://kidshealth.org/en/kids/hiv.html>

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