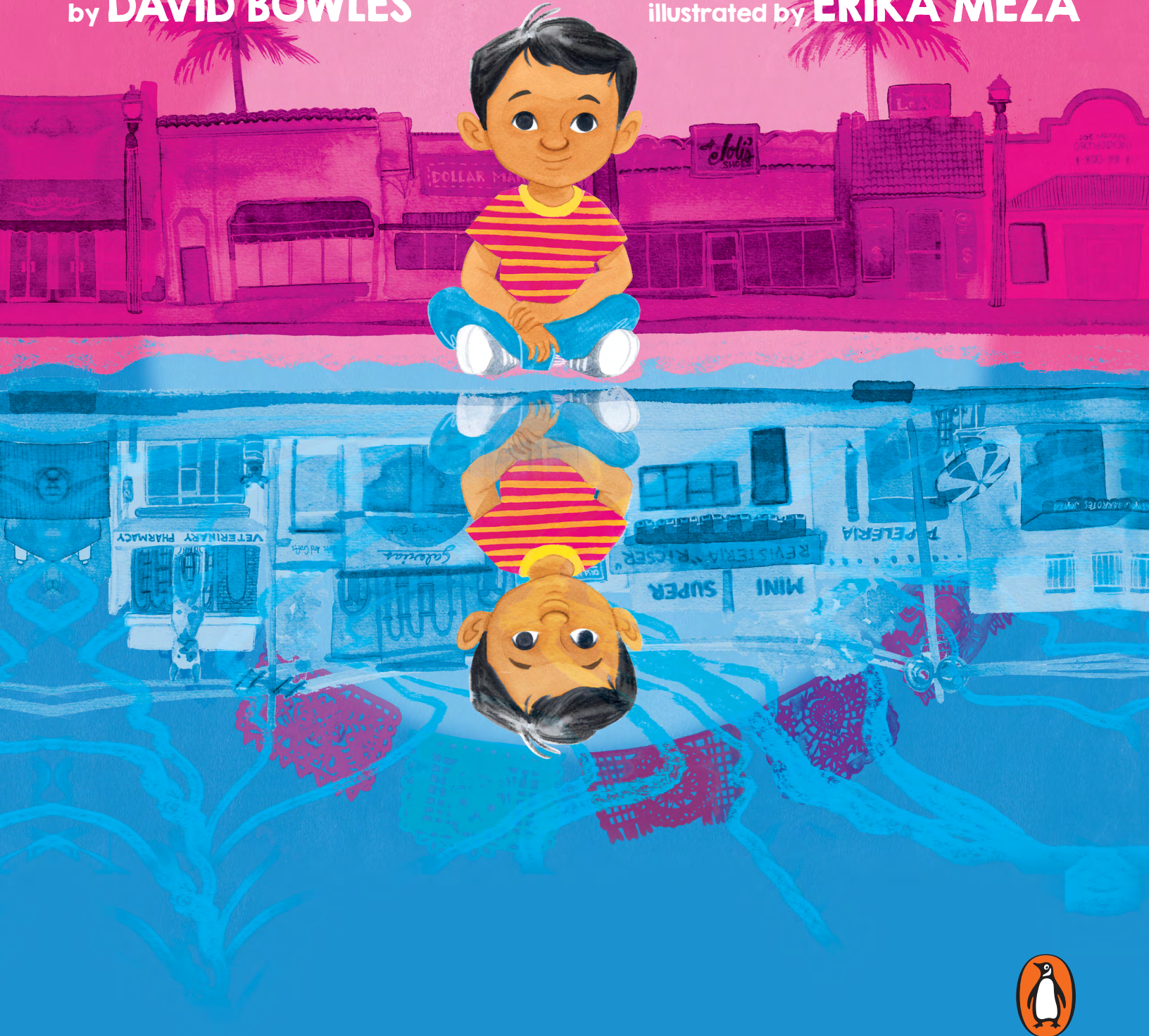


A TEACHING GUIDE FOR

MY TWO BORDER TOWNS

by DAVID BOWLES

illustrated by ERIKA MEZA



Background

Early one Saturday morning, a boy prepares for a trip to The Other Side/El Otro Lado. It's close—just down the street from his school—and it's a twin of the town where he lives. To get there, his father drives their truck along the Rio Grande and over a bridge, where they're greeted by a giant statue of an eagle. Their outings always include a meal at their favorite restaurant, a visit with Tío Mateo at his jewelry store, a cold treat from the paletero, and a pharmacy pickup. On their final and most important stop, they check in with friends seeking asylum and drop off much-needed supplies. *My Two Border Towns* by David Bowles, with illustrations by Erika Meza, is the loving story of a father and son's weekend ritual, a demonstration of community care, and a tribute to the fluidity, complexity, and vibrancy of life on the U.S.–Mexico border.

Pre-reading Preparation for Educators

As you prepare to read this book to students, there is some context that needs to be explored. The book touches on concepts such as the crossing of the border and displacement due to harmful immigration policies. Students will likely have questions about these topics, and you should be familiar with some of the policies that cause people to be “stuck” at the border and unable to enter the United States. You should gain enough basic language to explain the issues at an age-appropriate level. There is harmful language, not people-focused, that you should avoid (listed here). Make sure to center the human aspect of these issues by focusing on the way Bowles highlights families and communities at the border, leading us to empathize. That's a great starting point for this conversation.

Harmful language to avoid when discussing immigration & the border

Illegals: “Illegal” is not a noun. It is an adjective best used to describe objects or actions. It is a pejorative way to describe whole groups of people, seeing as how a human being cannot be illegal. “Undocumented” is a more accurate word to refer to people who lack immigration paperwork.

Aliens: While the dictionary and current governmental language use this word to describe immigrants, it is offensive, since immigrants are humans. They are not a separate species or coming from another planet. More accurate terms that can be used to describe people from other countries are “immigrants,” “migrants,” and “foreigners,” and based on some people's circumstances, “refugees.”

Key terms and ideas to be ready to explain

- The difference between immigrant and refugee
- The definitions of asylum and asylum-seeker
- What a border is and means
- What type of documentation is needed to live in the U.S. (You could focus on passports, since they are mentioned in the story.)



Ideas to Explore

Many teachers use picture books to launch a study on a thematic idea or to build lessons around larger concepts. *My Two Border Towns* explores many overarching ideas that you can use for your book study focus.



Family

The book tells the story of a father and son as they embody being family to others who are not their immediate family. There are many family types, and that can offer a starting point into conversations about what makes a family.

Help

In the book, many people help each other. There are all types of moments where help is narrated or illustrated. The scenery depicts people serving one another and offering what they are able to, humbly and beautifully. Use this as an opportunity to engage students in what it means to serve others.

Border Town

The illustrations depict two towns next to each other, separated by a border. Invite students to explore what it might mean to spend time in two countries separated by a fence or a gate. Help them understand how border towns are culturally mixed because they often feature elements of both countries.

Anti-Bias Learning

There are many stereotypes and ideas about what it means to cross the border, be near the border, what a border town is like, and what Mexico is like. Invite students to fill out a Know/Want to Learn/Learned (KWL) chart on their understanding about the border. The first line across is an example of a possible set of answers.



KNOW	WANT TO LEARN	LEARN
I have heard the word 'border' before.	I want to learn what it's like to cross the border. Is it scary?	I learned that crossing the border is easy to do in a car if you have the necessary paperwork.

Understanding Craft

David Bowles employs well-developed techniques in his writing to bring this story to life. Some key literary concepts that students can build a foundation for are setting, characterization, and symbolism. All three elements are present throughout the story.



Setting

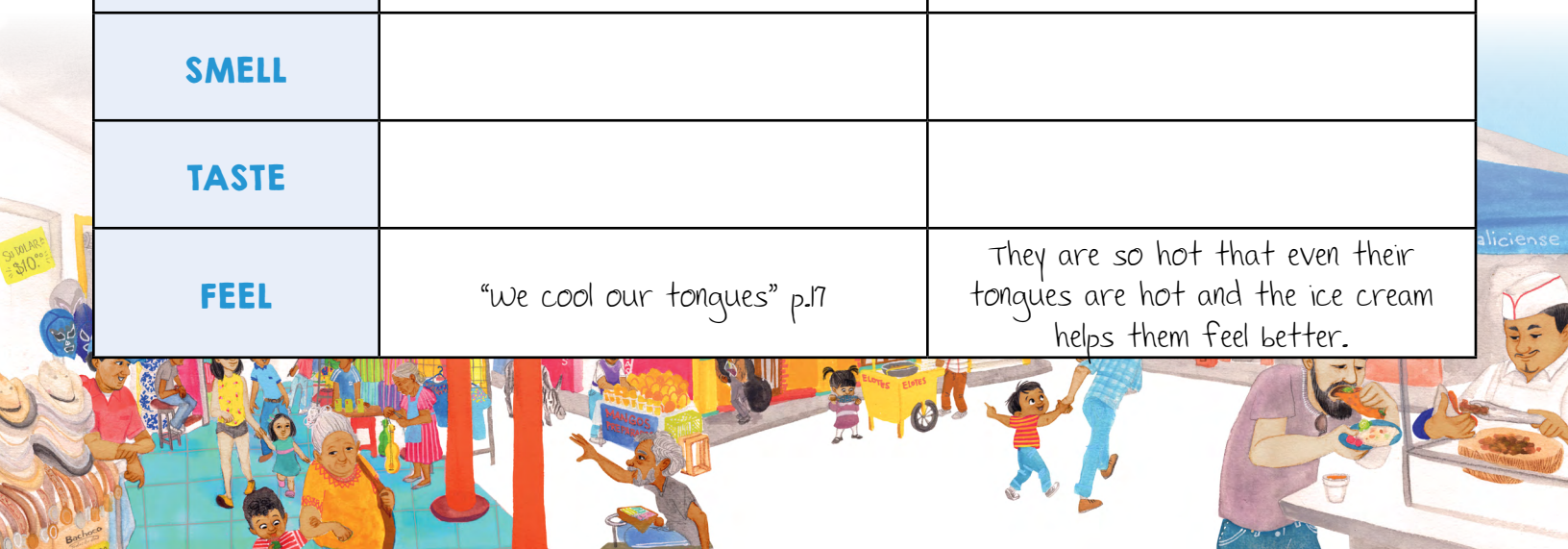
In *My Two Border Towns*, we journey from one town in the U.S. to another town in Mexico, right across the border. After teaching what setting means and building knowledge around that narrative trait, invite students to notice how the illustrations paint towns for us. Notice all the details the illustrator, Erika Meza, creates for us in watercolor and what the setting indicates about life, the people, and the mood.

Additionally, the author and illustrator use all of the senses to describe and bring the story to life. Invite students to identify all the descriptive details of the words and the images to describe the setting. The text in the chart is a sample of possible student answers.

Questions to ask students as they explore setting

- What do you notice about the people in the marketplace?
- Crossing the border requires meeting a guard and driving through a gate-like structure. What details do you notice in the drawing? Was it what you thought it would be?
- What do the pictures of the families "stuck" at the border tell us about how they live?

FIVE SENSES	DETAIL & PAGE NUMBER	WHAT IT MEANS
SIGHT		
SOUND	"Spanish spoken everywhere" p.10	There are many people speaking Spanish in this town.
SMELL		
TASTE		
FEEL	"we cool our tongues" p.17	They are so hot that even their tongues are hot and the ice cream helps them feel better.



Characterization

While we meet many characters throughout the book, the main character is one of the most important ones. Bowles brilliantly uses direct and indirect characterization to unfold his feelings, thoughts, and actions. Invite students to study this young boy through the following exercise. Have students fill out the boxes surrounding the face by citing details from the text that answer what the main character was feeling/thinking, statements they made, and actions they took. All of the answers should reveal how much students understood.



THOUGHTS & FEELINGS	STATEMENTS
	ACTIONS

Questions to ask as students explore characterization


- What do you learn about the boy at the beginning of the story?
- What are some of the thoughts and feelings he experiences?
- What brings him laughter and joy? What brings him sadness?
- What are some things he does for others? Do you want a friend like that?

Symbolism

While this might be a challenging concept to have young students comprehend, it is possible that elementary students can understand this idea. After teaching students about this concept, invite them to identify objects in the story that represent a larger idea. Consider using a board, large paper, or anchor chart to take notes with students. See below for a sample of possible answers.

Questions to ask as students explore symbolism

- What are some important objects in the story? What makes them important?
- What objects are important to the main character? Why?
- Which of the objects has to do with culture?
- What reactions do some of the characters have to some of the objects?

OBJECT	IDEA IT REPRESENTS
 car	The car symbolizes freedom because, with passports, the boy and his dad can cross over the border more quickly and bring items back.

Discussion Questions & Writing Prompts

The next series of questions can be used for discussion or reflective writing. Students can use these to express their comprehension of the story as well as basic literary analysis.



1. Based on the title and the cover, what do you think will take place in the story?



2. Why do the boy and his dad cross the border with a list?



3. Why are there people on a bridge, and what do you think, based on the pictures, their life is like?



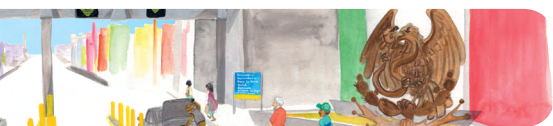
4. Have you ever been on a trip that required a passport? If so, where did you go and what was it like to travel? If not, where would you like to go?



5. Have you ever been to or crossed a big river like the one the boy and his dad cross at the start of the story when they cross the border? If so, what was it like? If not, what do you think it might be like?



6. Why do you think Élder can't come to the boy's town? Based on the pictures, how do the boys feel about it?



7. What words would you use to describe each town?



8. Do you have family and friends that live far away, in another town or country? What is that like and what do you do if and when you see each other?



9. The boy and his dad visit a restaurant when they first arrive in the town across the border. Do you have a favorite restaurant? What do you eat when you go there?



10. What do you have in common with the boy in the story? What is different about the two of you?



Interdisciplinary Activities



Geography

Use this book to do a study on border towns. Find pictures and show your students what it's like to be at the U.S.–Mexico border as well as the U.S.–Canada border. Show them maps so they see the ways these countries border each other and possibly learn the names of border towns. Invite them to do drawings where they depict border towns.



History

When they cross the border, the father tells the son that Coahuiltecas used to live there, “before all this was Mexico.” Do some research and offer students some learning on early Indigenous names for the very region in which they live. Remind students that Indigenous people still live throughout the country. After they learn those names, have them draw a new map of the town with that original name, or have students decorate name plates featuring this word they are learning. This is an opportunity to learn about local Indigenous history and honor the original name and inhabitants of the land.



Arts

When the father and son cross the border, the river is described as a serpent, and the illustration hints at this imagery. Invite students to think of what else rivers and lakes look like. Create an arts-based activity where they learn about a river or body of water that is local to them, and have them draw it.



World Languages

The book features words in Spanish. Invite students to stop and focus on those words. Practice saying them aloud. Teachers can consider welcoming a guest speaker who speaks Spanish to say some of those words and more for students. The guests can either share a song in Spanish or practice saying common words with them. This book can be an opportunity for students to be introduced to Spanish in a personal and engaging way.



Paired Readings

Other books teachers can read to explore alongside *My Two Border Towns*:

- ***Carmela Full of Wishes***
by Matt de la Peña
and Christian Robinson
- ***Dreamers***
by Yuyi Morales
- ***My Papi Has a Motorcycle***
by Isabel Quintero and Zeke Peña
- ***Mama's Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation***
by Edwidge Danticat and Leslie Staub
- ***La Frontera: My Journey with Papa***
by Deborah Mills, Alfredo Alva,
and Claudia Navarro

Praise for *My Two Border Towns*



Also available in Spanish

★ “Bowles’ picture-book debut weaves weightier realities into a story of ordinary border town life, and does so with a gentle hand.”

-HORN BOOK, STARRED REVIEW

★ “Beautiful, honest, complex.”

-KIRKUS REVIEWS, STARRED REVIEW

★ “Meza (*Balloons for Papa*) pours artistry into mixed-media images of the towns.”

-PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, STARRED REVIEW

About the Creators

David Bowles grew up in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, where he teaches at UTRGV. He’s the author of several award-winning titles, including *The Smoking Mirror*, the 13th Street series, and *Feathered Serpent*, *Dark Heart of Sky: Myths of Mexico*. His picture book debut, *My Two Border Towns*, is available in English and Spanish. In 2020, David co-founded #DignidadLiteraria, a grassroots activist hashtag and movement dedicated to promoting equity for Latinx people in publishing. You can find him online at davidbowles.us and @DavidOBowles on most social media platforms.



Erika Meza was born in Mexico, fell in love with animation on the border with California, and developed a taste for éclairs in Paris before moving to the U.K. An adoptive Tijuanaense, she took her first steps to find her visual voice at the border—forever fueled by tacos de birria. When Erika isn’t drawing, you’ll find her drinking coffee, tweeting, or plotting ways to bring her cat traveling with her. You can follow her on Twitter and Instagram @ErikaDraws and learn more about her work at erikameza.com.

This guide was written by Lorena Germán. Lorena is a Dominican American educator based in Austin, Texas. A two-time nationally awarded educator, she works with middle and high school students, using an anti-bias and antiracist approach to teaching. She’s Co-Founder of Multicultural Classroom, through which she supports teachers and schools, and is Chair of NCTE’s Committee Against Racism & Bias in the Teaching of English, in addition to being a writer (Heinemann 2021), speaker, and professional development provider.

