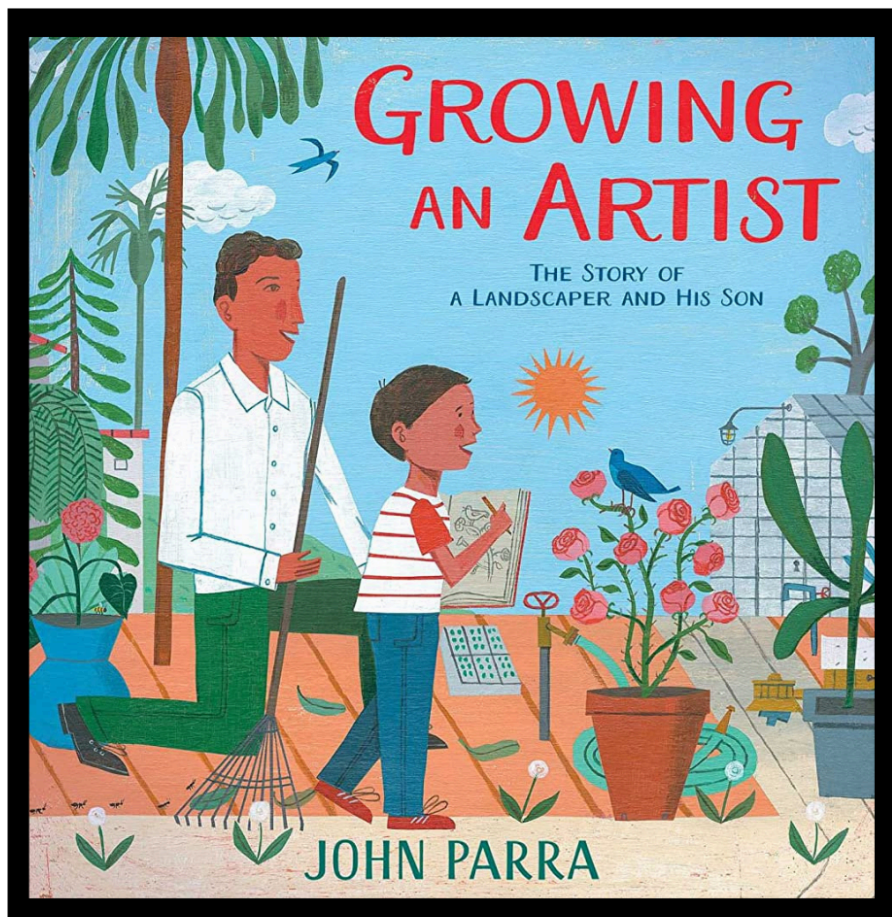


Americas Book Award

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



PRODUCED BY THE CONSORTIUM FOR LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES
PROGRAMS
WRITTEN BY KRISTINE WITKO



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This educator's guide was written to support using *Growing an Artist* in elementary, middle, and high school classrooms. Produced by the Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS) at the University of Arizona on behalf of the Consortium of Latin American Studies Programs (CLASP) and the Américas Award, it was written in 2025 by Kristine Witko, MA student in Latin American Studies at the University of Arizona, with research and writing support from Katrina Dillon, Assistant Director of Outreach at CLAS.

ABOUT THE AMÉRICAS AWARD

CLASP founded the Américas Award in 1993 to encourage and commend authors, illustrators, and publishers who produce quality children's and young adult books that portray Latin America, the Caribbean, or Latinx communities in the United States, and to provide teachers with recommendations for classroom use. CLASP offers up to two annual book awards, together with a list of honor books and commended titles. For more information concerning the Américas Award, including additional classroom resources, please visit the [CLASP website](#).

The awards are administered by the Consortium of Latin American Studies Programs (CLASP) and coordinated by both Tulane University's Stone Center for Latin American Studies and the University of Arizona's Center for Latin American Studies. Generous support is also provided by Florida International University, Michigan State University, Stanford University, University of California, Berkeley, University of California, Los Angeles, UNC-Duke Consortium in Latin American and Caribbean Studies, University of Florida, University of Michigan, University of New Mexico, University of Texas at Austin, University of Utah, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and Vanderbilt University.

ABOUT CLASP

CLASP's mission is to promote all facets of Latin American studies throughout the world. Its broad range of activities include the encouragement of research activities, funding of professional workshops, advancement of citizen outreach activities, and development of teaching aids for the classroom.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

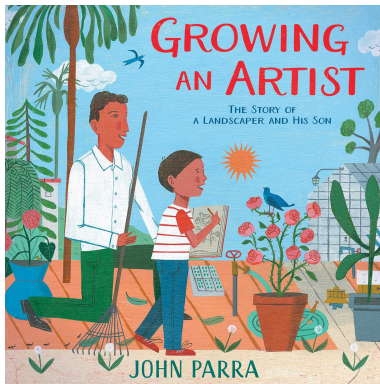
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	2
ABOUT THIS GUIDE	2
ABOUT CLASP	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS	3
OVERVIEW	5
THEMES	5
SYNOPSIS	5
READING LEVEL	5
Reviews	6
Awards	6
Applicable Common Core Standards	7
K-12 Reading	7
Key Ideas and Details	7
Craft and Structure	7
Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity	7
Integration of Knowledge and Ideas	7
K-12 Writing	8
Text Types and Purposes	8
Production and Distribution of Writing	8
Research to Build and Present Knowledge	8
About the Author: John Parra	9
In His Words: The Author's Note	10
Classroom Relevance and Applications	11
Lesson Plans and Activities	12
Pre-Reading Activities	12
VOCABULARY	12
ACTIVITY 2: OBSERVATION CHARTS	13
ACTIVITY 3: NATURE WALK	14
ACTIVITY 4: REVIEW OF GENRE	14
Guided Reading Questions	15
Post-Reading Activities	16
Approach 1: Literacy Connections	17



“Churro Stand”	17
Process:	17
“Alma and How She Got Her Name”	18
Process:	18
“Seventh Grade”	18
Process:	19
Approach 2: Contributions of Latinos to the United States	19
Process:	20
Approach 3: Family Interview	20
Process:	20
Approach 4: Write a Memoir	20
Process:	21
Multimedia Resources	22
INTERVIEWS WITH JOHN PARRA	22
Complementary Literature	23
Children’s Literature	23
Appendix: Q & A with John Parra	29



OVERVIEW



Growing an Artist: The Story of a Landscaper and His Son

Written and illustrated by John Parra

Published 2022 by Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers

ISBN: 1534469273

THEMES

Family, Identity, Bond Between Father and Son, Art, Creativity, Nature, Gardening, Hard Work, Pride

SYNOPSIS

From award-winning artist John Parra comes a “heartwarming family story that underscores the value of creativity, passion, and hard work” (*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review) that is “a love letter to sons and their fathers” (*BookPage*, starred review) based on his childhood experience.

Today is a big day—the first time Juanito gets to help his papi on the job as a landscape architect! Throughout the day, Juanito sketches anything that catches his eye: a nest full of baby birds, a nursery with row upon row of plants and flowers, and more. Father and son travel from house to house, pruning, weeding, mowing, and turning overgrown and chaotic yards into beautiful spaces.

A few of the clients don't appreciate Papi's hard work, like Juanito's classmate who pretends not to see him. But Papi always feels pride in owning his own business and in a job well done. And at the end of the day, Juanito may get the chance to turn his artistic eye toward landscape design—just like his papi.

READING LEVEL

Grades P-3 / Ages 4-8



REVIEWS

★ “Sincere and lively with illustrative detail, Parra’s story reveals how his personal sense of creativity and esteem for hard work grew during his childhood experiences with his papi’s landscape company. . .As he readily sketches and helps Papi with landscape work, readers meet the role models in Juanito’s childhood world—not just Papi but also long-time employee, Javier, from Mexico. This story offers teachable moments about the different but equally important roles that create a thriving community. . .In an author’s note, Parra delves deeper into his father’s life story. VERDICT: In a reflective nod to his youthful days spent with his father, Parra presents a balanced, intricate illustrative style to convey his earnest appreciation for hard work, lessons, and creative influence.” – starred, *School Library Journal*

★ “Parra’s autobiographical picture book reflects on how working in his father’s landscaping business nurtured his identity as an artist. . .Juanito’s sketch pad is close by throughout, and he learns that everything he experiences feeds his imagination: his proudly entrepreneurial father, an overgrown yard, a nest of baby birds, and even a classmate’s dismissal all become driving forces “to tell the stories of hardworking, passionate people who make the world more beautiful.” – starred, *Publisher’s Weekly*

AWARDS

- Américas Award Winner, 2023
- The Christopher Award, 2023
- Bank Street, Best Spanish Language Picture Book List & Award, Silver Medal
- The Boston Globe, Best Books of 2022
- Chicago Public Library's Best of the Best Books of 2022
- Golden Kite Award for Picture Book Text Finalist, SCBWI
- Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award Nominee
- CBC/NCSS Notable Social Studies Trade Book, 2023
- Center for the Study of Multicultural Children's Literature, Best Books of 2022
- Bank Street Children's Book Committee's 5th Mejor Libro Infantil/Best Spanish Language Picture Book List, 2023
- Rhode Island Children's Book Award 2024 List
- Kirkus, Best Books of 2022, Best Picture Books of the Year
- Tejas Star Reading List 2023-24, Texas Library Association
- SCBWI, Top 10 Latine Picture Books of 2022
- Barnes & Noble Reads Most Anticipated New Kids' Book Releases Selection
- Kids' Indie Next List, Booksellers Recommend, May/June 2022
- NEA, Read Across America, Book of the Month: Foster Belonging, October 2022



APPLICABLE COMMON CORE STANDARDS

K-12 READING

Key Ideas and Details

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure

- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
- Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.



K-12 WRITING

Text Types and Purposes

- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Production and Distribution of Writing

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: JOHN PARRA



John Parra is an award-winning illustrator, fine artist, designer, author, and educator best known for his art illustrated, Latino themed, children's picture books. For his work, he has received many awards and accolades including: three American Library Association's Pura Belpré Honors, two Golden Kite Awards from The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, two Christopher Awards and a 2023 Américas Award. Parra's original artwork has also been showcased and displayed in numerous gallery and museum exhibitions throughout the United States and abroad, with many paintings now residing in private collections. He has taught art at the Carnegie Art Museum in Oxnard, CA and regularly speaks as a visiting artist at schools and literary conferences across the country, advocating art and reading education.

Parra's artistic path began growing up in Southern California. He spent his days exploring and drawing. His Hispanic roots and heritage provided a rich cultural palette of inspiring imagery and customs. Mexican art and murals, papier-mâché piñatas, Día de Muertos and Baile folklórico dance costumes, folk art, science and museum nature dioramas, landscape designs, pop art and surrealism, regional cuisines, music, family characters and memories, are all visual influences seen in his work.

Parra's picture book, *Frida Kablo and Her Animalitos*, written by Monica Brown, was named a New York Times Best Illustrated Children's Book of the Year, and received the Pura Belpré Honor Award for Illustration, as well as named a Smithsonian Best Book of the Year. His other recent books include: *The Power of Her Pen: The Story of Groundbreaking Journalist Ethel L. Payne*, written by Lesa Cline-Ransome, *Little Libraries, Big Heroes*, written by Miranda Paul, and *One Is a Piñata: A Book of Numbers*, written by Roseanne G. Thong. His book, *Growing an Artist: The Story of a Landscaper and His Son*, was his debut as both author and illustrator. In addition, he has illustrated the book cover for Ruth Behar's *Letters from Cuba and Across So Many Seas*. Parra's illustrations for commercial clients include: Target, United Airlines, Hitachi, PBS, National Geographic, and many others. His designs were featured on six U.S. Forever Postage Stamps, titled *Delicioso*, and his MTA artcard poster, *Birdhouse Subways*, was displayed throughout NYC subways. Parra was additionally invited by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NY to present a special event about his career and illustrations. His most recent picture book is titled *Spanish is the Language of My Family* with author Michael Genhart. Parra is a graduate of Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, and currently lives with his wife, Maria, in Queens, New York.



IN HIS WORDS: THE AUTHOR'S NOTE

Taken from "Author's Note" in *Growing an Artist*:

"The story of the little landscaper is the story of my childhood.

When I was growing up, I worked for my father, who ran his own landscape and construction company in Southern California. My father's parents had come from Chihuahua, Mexico, to El Paso, Texas, where my dad was born. When he was nine years old, his family moved to California's hot Central Valley. There, he labored throughout his youth (ages nine to about seventeen) alongside his siblings as a migrant farm worker. As he got older, he began working at a nursery in Bakersfield caring for plants. After serving in the United States Army he settled in Santa Barbara to begin learning the landscape business. It didn't take long for him to receive his contractor's license. Over time his business grew, and within a few years he became president of the regional tri-county chapter of the California Landscape Contractors Association.

Often my father's employees were migrants from Mexico who rented rooms in our own home and became part of our extended family. My parents encouraged them to take English classes, and many did. My father sponsored his laborers for citizenship. Eventually, a number of them went on to buy homes, begin families, and start successful businesses of their own.

I began accompanying my father to work when I was seven, at first helping with small tasks. By the time I was thirteen it was my part-time job. As a young artist, I loved to work on my father's landscape blueprints. For twelve years I learned from my father and even considered studying landscape architecture and design when I got older. Ultimately, I found my path studying illustration and fine art at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California.

Landscape work was not easy. It was a physically demanding job done outdoors in all kinds of weather. I had to balance school, friends, life, art, and helping my dad. But working with him was rewarding. It was a creative outlet that nurtured my imagination, and my dad's eye for design and beauty inspired me as a young artist. It provided me with a strong work ethic and taught me responsibility and business. I am grateful for those days spent with my dad and proud that I could contribute to my family's business."



CLASSROOM RELEVANCE AND APPLICATIONS

John Parra's *Growing an Artist* is a heartwarming story in which students of all ages can find meaning. The book tells the story of Juanito, the author, and his time as a young boy going to work with his father, a landscape architect. During his first day, Juanito's excitement is cut short when a classmate ignores him and appears to cast judgment on their work. His father acknowledges that while sometimes they may be treated as if they are invisible, there is great pride that comes with being one's own boss. Juanito's enthusiasm blooms again when his father shows him the beauty that can be found in nature. His experiences fuel his creativity and inspire him to sketch not just beautiful landscape designs but also illustrations of hardworking people who strive to make the world a beautiful place.

Growing an Artist highlights a job that does not often receive recognition and demonstrates the value of taking pride in one's work. The author's note at the end of the book discusses how Parra's father began working at a nursery tending plants, learned the landscape business, obtained his contractor's license, and became president of the California Landscape Contractors Association. In addition to mentoring other laborers who were interested in entering the field, Parra's father sponsored some of these workers for citizenship, rented them rooms in his home, and encouraged them to take classes. As a result, many were able to buy homes and open their own successful businesses. His father had a lasting impact on others while beautifying the California landscape and inspiring Parra's creativity. After reading this book, students can discuss other community helpers in our society who may not receive recognition but nevertheless make important contributions.

The book connects with a range of themes, including family, prejudice, identity, creativity, and pride. As a result, students may be able to connect to this story on multiple levels. The father-son relationship at the core of this story has the potential to align with many classroom activities. Students can discuss the importance of family, conduct family interviews, and share their insights with the class. The example of prejudice seen in the book can spark a discussion about the ways that prejudice manifests and the harm that it inflicts.

Moreover, the book lends itself well to an analysis of genre. In addition to comparing and contrasting autobiography and memoir, *Growing an Artist* can be used as a model text for writing classes in which students write their own memoirs. They can conduct an analysis of the author's craft and consider the ways he made his memoir feel so compelling, including his use of dialogue, inner thoughts, and sensory details.

Finally, students can reflect on Juanito's ability to find beauty in nature and use their creativity to create their own artwork inspired by their surroundings. If teachers are able, they can take their students on nature walks, allowing them to paint what they see or, like Juanito, envision ways to make it even more beautiful. Just like Juanito and his father, they can take pride in their work and feel accomplished about a job well done.



LESSON PLANS AND ACTIVITIES

In addition to this guide, there are a number of other high-quality resources available to support educators in using *Growing an Artist*. These have been linked below.

- [Lesson plan for *Growing an Artist*](#) from [Simon & Schuster](#)
- [Lesson ideas and discussion questions](#) from [National Education Association's Read Across America](#)
- [Activity list for *Growing an Artist*](#) from [Washington Children's Choice Picture Book Award](#)

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

Before reading the book with students, you may want to introduce some of the important themes, activate any prior knowledge, and generate interest and anticipation through the following activities and/or discussion questions.

VOCABULARY

mijo

landscaper

contractor

awkward

creative

nursery

sketchbook

design

layout

sketch

ACTIVITY 1: PICTURE WALK

Pique students' interest, activate prior knowledge, and introduce the book through a picture walk.

PROCESS:

1. Show students the front and back cover of the book. Ask them to predict what they think the book will be about. Then, slowly flip through the pages of the book without reading any of the words. As students ask questions about each picture they see, guide them to make inferences based upon their observations. Focus on who, what, when, where, why and how questions such as: "What is happening



here?” “What will happen next?” Who do you think this is?” “How does he feel? What makes you say that?”

2. Once students have read the book, return to their thoughts and predictions, comparing them to the actual events of the book.

ACTIVITY 2: OBSERVATION CHARTS

Observation charts offer one way for students to pique their interest about a book they will begin to read. As students will be analyzing illustrations from the book, it is helpful to select pages in advance that may spark some interesting conversations. Examples include the following:

- page 5 (a classmate ignores John)
- page 7 (John draws a nest of baby birds)
- page 13 (John and his father bring a special rosebush to their friend)
- page 25 (John, his father, and Javier prepare to plant the shrubs)
- page 21 (John draws at a table)
- page 27 (John stands in front of a wall of his drawings)

PROCESS:

1. Explain to students that they are going to be working in small groups. Each group will rotate around the room to view and discuss each image. One person will be the recorder at each table. When looking at an image, students will spend at least one minute silently reflecting on what they see and thinking about the questions “What do you see?” “What do you think is happening?” “How does this illustration make you feel?” Then, students will discuss their thoughts in the small group. The recorder will write down their reflections and answers to the questions on the observation chart. Sticky notes can also be used to record the group’s thoughts. Explain to students that they will have a set amount of time at each image. When time is up, the teacher will give a signal and each group will move to the next image.
2. Divide students into small groups. Place an image and marker at various tables or stations in the classroom. Direct each group to the table or station where they will begin. Begin the activity. Continue rotating groups through the images until each group has seen each image.
3. Hang up all of the observation charts with comments. As a whole group, discuss each illustration, giving students time to share and respond to what they posted. Keep the charts posted throughout the reading and discussion of *Growing an Artist*. Allow students to revisit them and discuss them as they think more about what the images represent.



ACTIVITY 3: NATURE WALK

This activity allows students to see the beauty of nature, just like John observed during his days landscaping with his father.

PROCESS:

1. Explain to students that soon they will begin reading a book about a boy named John who observes the beauty of nature and sees things that others may not see. Before they start reading, they can practice getting into the same mindset as the boy which will allow them to better understand him.
2. Say to students that to better understand the boy's perspective, they will be going on a nature walk. They will draw what they see. If they choose, they can draw exactly how it appears, or they can use their imagination and draw what they would like to see.
3. Pass out paper, pencils, and a firm drawing surface, such as a clipboard. Bring additional supplies that students can share, such as colored pencils, crayons, or markers.
4. Take students on a nature walk around the school. Walk slowly. Ask them what they notice and what stands out to them. Use sensory details; for example, what do they see, hear, or smell?
5. Find a comfortable place to sit down. This can be a picnic area with tables and chairs, or it can be a plot of grass. Give students two options: 1) They can choose to draw what they see, or 2) they can draw their vision of what the outdoor area would look like if they could redesign it.
6. Give students ample time to draw. At the end, ask them to share with a partner. Choose volunteers to share with the class.
7. Explain that this activity will enable them to better understand the author, John Parra, who felt inspired by nature as a child, leading to his career as an artist.

ACTIVITY 4: REVIEW OF GENRE

Prepare students to read *Growing an Artist* by introducing or reviewing the genre of memoir. It is important to note that the genre of this book has been described differently across a range of sources; some examples include autobiography, autobiographical fiction, and autobiographical picture book. We have categorized this book as a memoir because it contains a focused look at one period of time in the author's life; the book does not span the author's entire life like an autobiography or biography would.

PROCESS:

1. After reviewing the difference between fiction and nonfiction, tell students that these are broad terms that actually contain different genres within them.
2. Ask the class: "What are some genres of nonfiction that teach us about real people?" After hearing student responses, write *autobiography* and *biography* on a piece of chart paper and ask students to



- define each one. (An autobiography teaches us about the life of an important person and is written by that same person; a biography teaches us about an important person but is written by someone else.)
3. Ask students to name some of the characteristics of autobiographies and biographies (they describe an individual's life from beginning to end, share challenges they endured, outline important accomplishments, etc.).
 - a. As a visual aid, you could draw a timeline on the chart paper to indicate an individual's lifespan. For autobiography and biography, you can draw a long circle above the timeline, illustrating that the book spans from beginning to end of an individual's life.
 4. Tell students that these aren't the only genres that describe an individual's life. Another genre of nonfiction is called a *memoir*. A memoir is a type of nonfiction book that describes an important time in the life of a real person. Memoirs convey the author's feelings about this experience and what they learned in the end. These are lessons that we, as readers, can learn as well.
 5. On a piece of chart paper, write "memoir" and a definition.
 - a. As a visual aid, you may choose to draw another timeline indicating the life of the author. You can draw an X on one part of the timeline, indicating one particular moment in time.
 6. Ask students: "Can you think of any memoirs you may have read by real people? What experiences did these books share? What lessons did you learn at the end?"
 7. Hold up *Growing an Artist* and explain that the author wrote this memoir to share an important moment from his childhood. As you read the book today, you can identify some of the elements of a memoir. For example, how does the author feel? What does he learn?

GUIDED READING QUESTIONS

BEFORE READING

1. Do you think this is a fiction or nonfiction text? What makes you think that?
2. This is a type of nonfiction text called a memoir, where the author zooms in on an important moment in his or her life. Memoirs convey the author's feelings about this experience and what they learned in the end. Based on the title and the illustration, what do you think this memoir will be about?
3. Read the blurb on the front cover. What is this book about? Who will it be about? What do you still wonder?

DURING READING

Transferable Questions

1. (Every few pages) What is happening?
2. Who are the people in the book? What do we know about them?
3. Do you notice a problem emerging?



4. How does the author feel? How do you know?
5. How is the problem solved?
6. How would you describe the people in the book? What characteristics do they have? How do you know?
7. What lessons can we learn from this book?

Text-Based Questions

1. At the beginning of the book, why does Juanito say that today will be a BIG day?
2. What does Juanito's father do for work? What does that mean?
3. Who is Javier? What do we know about him?
4. What language do Juanito and Javier speak together?
5. What happens when Juanito sees Alex, his classmate from school, while he is working with his father? How does this make Juanito feel?
6. Why do you think Alex pretends not to see Juanito? What do you think about Alex's actions?
7. What does Juanito's father show him in the bougainvillea bush? How does this make him feel? What does Juanito do?
8. When Juanito asks his father if he likes his work, how does his father respond? For instance, how do some other people feel about his father's work? How does his father feel?
9. Juanito's father says, "...when you do something you love and get to be creative, you feel proud." In what way is Juanito's father creative at his work? How is Juanito creative?
10. Why do Juanito, his father, and Javier go to Mr. and Mrs. Carroll's house? What do the Carrolls want to do?
11. How does Juanito help his father with the Carrolls' project?
12. What does Juanito decide to do with his art in the end?

AFTER READING

1. Have you read any other memoirs? How were they similar or different?
2. Have you read other books by the same author or illustrator? What were those books about and was this one similar or different?

POST-READING ACTIVITIES

There are so many different ways one can approach a unit on the themes discussed in *Growing an Artist*, such as family, art, class, and prejudice. The context in which one is teaching is of paramount importance. Not only do we need to consider the age/grade level of the students, but also students' own personal backgrounds and family



histories. As with any lesson, it's important to consider the needs of your students and plan accordingly. With this in mind, we've provided a variety of extension activity ideas and resources below that can be used in conjunction with *Growing an Artist*.

APPROACH 1: LITERACY CONNECTIONS

To expand the literacy connections made when using *Growing an Artist*, consider including the readings discussed below.

“Churro Stand”

Similar to *Growing an Artist*, this children's book connects with the themes of community helpers, family, and pride in one's work. *Churro Stand*, written by Karina N. González, tells the story about Lucía and her brother, who spend a day with their mother selling churros in New York City. Their mother works hard to prepare and sell delicious churros, but it is not an easy job. Throughout the book, the reader learns the highs and lows of working as a street vendor. When a storm rolls in, the family will have to problem-solve—and collaborate with other community members—to make sure their day at work is a success. Students can make various connections to *Growing an Artist* and can discuss the importance of different roles in the community, including workers whose roles have not always been highlighted. This book is also published in Spanish as *El Carrito de Churros*.

Process:

1. Begin by asking students open-ended questions, such as, “What are some examples of community helpers?” “Who are some community helpers that we do not often hear about?” “Why are they important to our community?”
2. Explain, “Today, we will read a fiction book called *Churro Stand* by Karina N. González. Look at the cover. What do you notice? What do you think this story will be about?”
3. State, “As we read today, we'll meet our characters, Lucía and her family, as they sell churros. While we read, we'll think about the problem in the story and how it is solved. We can notice how the characters solve the problem by paying attention to what they say and do.”
4. Read the book. Occasionally stop to ask comprehension questions: “Who are our characters? What do we know about them?” “Where does the story take place?” “What is happening here?” “What will happen next? Why?” “How does this character feel?” “How do you think the story will end?”
5. Upon finishing the book, ask students to turn to a partner and re-tell the key parts of the story. Then ask them: “What was the problem in the story? How do the characters solve the problem?”
6. Make the connection to *Growing an Artist*: “How are these two books similar? How are they different? What do they teach us about community helpers? What can they teach us about work?”
7. As a post-reading activity, teachers can choose from a range of choices. Students can select a community helper and engage in a webquest to learn more about their role, compiling the information into a brief



presentation that can be shared with their classmates. Students can also design their own food stand, selecting their food of choice, developing a menu with prices, creating a daily budget, and selecting one or more strategic selling locations. They can use their creativity to design their menu and their food stand.

“Alma and How She Got Her Name”

While this is a children's book and may work well with elementary students, the overall message and activity is one that can be enjoyed by students of many ages. *Alma and How She Got Her Name*, written by Juana Martinez-Neal, is about a little girl who has 6 names: Alma Sofia Esperanza José Pura Candela. One day, she asks her father why she has so many names, and he tells her the rich history of each one and the people that they honor. Alma ultimately feels a sense of pride regarding each of her names. This story connects to *Growing an Artist* because readers can discuss the importance of family. This book also illustrates a close relationship between a child and a father.

Process:

1. Ask students several open-ended questions, such as, “Why are names important?” “Do you have any special names that repeat in your family?” “Are you named after anyone?” Give students time to turn and talk and choose some to share with the class.
2. Explain, “Today, we are going to read a fiction book about a girl with many names. As we read, pay attention to how Alma feels about her name by noticing what she says.”
3. Read the book. Occasionally stop to ask comprehension questions: “Who are our characters? What do we know about them?” “Where does the story take place?” “What is happening here?” “What will happen next? Why?” “How does this character feel?” “How do you think the story will end?”
4. Upon finishing the book, ask students to turn to a partner and re-tell the key parts of the story. Then ask them: “What lesson did Alma learn at the end? What lesson can we, as readers, learn from this story?”
5. Make the connection to *Growing an Artist*: “How are these two books similar? How are they different? What do they teach us about family?”
6. Students can engage in a variety of activities related to their names. They can create an acrostic poem, in which they write their name vertically and choose an adjective to describe themselves for each letter. They may conduct an interview with their parents or guardians to learn why their name was chosen. They may also conduct an internet search to look up the meaning of their name, its origins, and where it is commonly used.

“Seventh Grade”

This short story offers a different type of comparison for middle or high school students. Gary Soto's young adult short story, “Seventh Grade,” is told through the point of view of Victor during his first day of seventh grade. Victor has a crush on Teresa. He decides to impress her by lying during French class and telling the



teacher that he already speaks the language. To Victor's surprise, the teacher asks him questions in French in front of the whole class. This light-hearted work is a coming of age story that will make students laugh while still sparking a discussion about the importance of being true to oneself. It can also start a discussion about what the main character can learn from Juanito in *Growing an Artist*. While the text is available in various sites online, it can also be accessed on CommonLit for free by making an account first. The website is a nonprofit that expands access to literacy materials for children. The story can be found here:

<https://www.commonlit.org/en/texts/seventh-grade>.

Process:

1. Ask students, "Have you ever tried to impress someone? What did you do? Why?" After students have shared their responses, ask, "What do you think about people who try to impress others by pretending to be something that they're not?"
2. Explain, "Today we're going to read a short story about a seventh grader named Victor, who wants to impress someone. Let's learn about our character by noticing what he says, thinks, and does."
3. Depending on the grade level of students, the teacher may choose to read out loud, have students take turns reading, or ask students to read silently. The teacher can stop students for comprehension checks. Sample questions include: What's happening? What do we know about our character so far? Who did we meet? What do you predict will happen next?
4. After reading the story, ask students to make connections to *Growing An Artist*. Some questions include: "Why does Victor lie to the French teacher? What does he hope to achieve?" "How are Victor and Juanito different?" "What can Victor learn from Juanito?"
5. Students can write a compare and contrast response analyzing the actions of the two characters.

APPROACH 2: CONTRIBUTIONS OF LATINOS TO THE UNITED STATES

In the author's note of *Growing an Artist*, Parra describes how his father created his own landscaping business, received his contractor's license, and became president of the California Landscape Contractors Association. He hired many migrants from Mexico, encouraging them to take English classes and helping to sponsor some of them for citizenship. Afterward, a few of these workers created businesses of their own. Thus, Parra's father created a thriving business, helped others develop the skills needed to make their own businesses, and made a positive impact on the lives of many people. His story is just one example of how Latinos have positively contributed to the United States. In this activity, students can research other Latinos and discuss their long-lasting impacts.

Process:

1. Begin by reading the author's note at the end of *Growing an Artist*. Ask students questions like, "What did you learn about the author's father?" "What were some of his positive impacts on the community?" "How did these impacts help people over time?"



2. Explain that many Latinos have had positive impacts on the United States through their work, art, activism, and more. Consider reading the following article: [“8 Latinos Who Influenced American Life”](#) written by Sevanny Campos. Discuss: “Have you heard of any of these individuals before? What did you learn about them? What were some of their contributions?”
3. Explain that for class today, each student will have the opportunity to research the contributions of Latinos. Students can work in pairs or individually and can choose one Latino who has played a key role in society. They will research important facts about the individual's upbringing, key influences, major contributions, and their long-lasting impacts. Once completed, students can present to the class.

APPROACH 3: FAMILY INTERVIEW

Growing an Artist depicts a beautiful father-son relationship. Through Juanito's time at work, he learns more about his father, and through his father's teachings, Juanito learns more about himself and his capabilities as an artist. A family interview activity would similarly allow students to gain a deeper understanding of their own family members.

Process:

1. Tell students, “In the story, Juanito learns more about his father by working with him. Now, you have a chance to learn more about someone in your family.”
2. Ask students to choose someone in their family who they would like to learn more about.
3. In class, students will take 10-15 minutes to develop interview questions for this family member.
4. Students will go home and record their interviews with family members.
5. Afterward, students can create a visual presentation of their interview. Options include a poster or a PowerPoint presentation. They can share key findings from their interviews with the class.

APPROACH 4: WRITE A MEMOIR

Growing an Artist can serve as an excellent mentor text for writing a memoir. A memoir differs from an autobiography because a memoir tends to focus on one moment in the author's life, while an autobiography will talk about birth until present day. During this activity, students can read *Growing an Artist*, discuss the different components of a memoir, and analyze specific passages as they create their own.

Process:

1. Tell students, “In *Growing an Artist*, the author, John Parra, tells a real story of his childhood. The genre of this story is a memoir. In a memoir, the author zooms in on an important moment in his or her life. Memoirs convey the author's feelings about this experience and what they learned in the end. Let's re-read the story and think about how the author structures this memoir.”
2. Re-read the story again as a class. Pause to talk about the way Parra organized the story. Some questions may include, “When did the author begin the story? Why did the author decide to begin the story at



this point in his life?” “What does the author want us to learn about this time in his life?” “What lesson does the author learn in the end? What lesson can we learn, as readers, in the end?”

3. The teacher may also draw attention to additional techniques that memoir writers use to captivate their readers. Examples include dialogue, inner thoughts, a balance of showing and telling, and sensory details.
4. Once the class has finished reading the book, ask students to turn to a partner and share: What did they learn about memoir writing? What are some strategies they can use for their own memoirs?
5. After choosing a few students to share with the class, students can go back to their seats and begin crafting their own memoirs. They can brainstorm one moment in time they would like to focus on, pinpoint the problem and solution, and consider the lesson they would like their readers to learn at the end.
6. Next, students can draft their memoirs using the writing process. Once they are done, they can share their writing with the class.



MULTIMEDIA RESOURCES

To complement and enhance teaching about *Growing an Artist*, we've compiled the following selective multimedia resources that are available at no cost online.

INTERVIEWS WITH JOHN PARRA

- Read “[Q & A with John Parra](#)”

Parra describes his childhood and goes more into depth about his early inspirations, including his mother and his father. He tells the story of how a chance encounter with an artist changed his life and how he made his way into the world of children's publishing. Note: Because non-subscribers are only allowed limited views for this article, a scanned version has been attached in an appendix at the end of this unit plan.

- Watch “[Award-Winning Author, Illustrator, & Educator John Parra! | TGT Ep.#73](#)”

In this interview, Parra shares his early interest in art, including the people who first influenced him and the individuals who guided him on his journey to become an artist. He also describes the early steps he had to take in his career, including the creation of his first portfolio. Finally, he explains the process of working as an illustrator for children's books.

- Read “[Meet John Parra | Artist/Illustrator/Author](#)”

This interview adds new information about Parra's work, including the inspiration for his freelance illustration business, Mexican influences in his art, and his dedication to hard work and persistence. The article includes images from various books he has illustrated, including *Growing an Artist*.



COMPLEMENTARY LITERATURE

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Titles marked with * are Américas Award recognized titles.

Alma and How She Got Her Name by Juana Martinez-Neal. Candlewick, 2018.

If you ask her, Alma Sofia Esperanza José Pura Candela has way too many names: six! How did such a small person wind up with such a large name? Alma turns to Daddy for an answer and learns of Sofia, the grandmother who loved books and flowers; Esperanza, the great-grandmother who longed to travel; José, the grandfather who was an artist; and other namesakes, too. As she hears the story of her name, Alma starts to think it might be a perfect fit after all—and realizes that she will one day have her own story to tell. In her 2019 Caldecott Honor Book, Juana Martinez-Neal opens a treasure box of discovery for children who may be curious about their own origin stories or names.

**Barrio Rising: The Protest that Built Chicano Park* by María Dolores Águila and illustrated by Magdalena Mora. Dial Books, 2024.

Barrio Logan, one of San Diego's oldest Chicane neighborhoods, once brimmed with families and stretched all the way to the glorious San Diego Bay. But in the decades after WWII, the community lost their beach and bayfront to factories, junkyards, and an interstate that divided the neighborhood and forced around 5,000 people out of their homes. Then on April 22, 1970, residents discovered that the construction crew they believed was building a park—one the city had promised them years ago—was actually breaking ground for a police station. That's when they knew it was time to make their voices heard. *Barrio Rising* invites readers to join a courageous young activist and her neighbors in their successful twelve-day land occupation and beyond, when Barrio Logan banded together and built the colorful park that would become the corazón of San Diego's Chicane community. Also available in Spanish/también disponible en español: *El barrio se levanta*

**Churro Stand* by Karina N. González and illustrated by Krystal Quiles. Abrams, 2024.

On a hot summer's day, Lucía and her brother accompany their mother to sell delicious, sugary churros on the bustling streets of New York City. But when a thunderstorm rolls in, and the customers are chased away, Lucía's mother must improvise with a little bit of magic and lots of amor.

Diego by Jeanette Winter and Jonah Winter. Dragonfly Books, 1994.

This story of Diego Rivera, the greatest muralist of Mexico—and of the world—is told in Spanish and English. Vibrant miniature paintings convey the sense of adventure and magic that marked Rivera's early



years. And the story shows how his passion for painting and love for his country combined to make a powerful art celebrating the Mexican people.

Diego Rivera: His World and Ours by Duncan Tonatiuh. Harry N. Abrams, 2011.

Diego Rivera, one of the most famous painters of the twentieth century, was once just a mischievous little boy who loved to draw. But this little boy would grow up to follow his passion and greatly influence the world of art. After studying in Spain and France as a young man, Diego was excited to return to his home country of Mexico. There, he toured from the coasts to the plains to the mountains. He met the peoples of different regions and explored the cultures, architecture, and history of those who had lived before. Returning to Mexico City, he painted great murals representing all that he had seen. He provided the Mexican people with a visual history of who they were and, most important, who they are.

**Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales. Neal Porter Books, 2018.

Dreamers is a celebration of making your home with the things you always carry: your resilience, your dreams, your hopes and history. It's the story of finding your way in a new place, of navigating an unfamiliar world and finding the best parts of it. In dark times, it's a promise that you can make better tomorrows. This lovingly-illustrated picture book memoir looks at the myriad gifts migrantes bring with them when they leave their homes. It's a story about family. And it's a story to remind us that we are all dreamers, bringing our own strengths wherever we roam. Beautiful and powerful at any time but given particular urgency as the status of our own Dreamers becomes uncertain, this is a story that is both topical and timeless. The lyrical text is complemented by sumptuously detailed illustrations, rich in symbolism. Also included are a brief autobiographical essay about Yuyi's own experience, a list of books that inspired her (and still do), and a description of the beautiful images, textures, and mementos she used to create this book. A parallel Spanish-language edition, *Soñadores*, is also available.

Maybe Something Beautiful: How Art Transformed a Neighborhood by F. Isabel Campoy and Theresa Howell, illustrated by Rafael López. Clarion Books, 2016.

What good can a splash of color do in a community of gray? As Mira and her neighbors discover, more than you might ever imagine! Based on the true story of the Urban Art Trail in San Diego, California, *Maybe Something Beautiful* reveals how art can inspire transformation—and how even the smallest artists can accomplish something big. Pick up a paintbrush and join the celebration!

**My Papi Has a Motorcycle* by Isabel Quintero and illustrated by Zeke Peña. Kokila, 2019.

When Daisy Ramona zooms around her neighborhood with her papi on his motorcycle, she sees the people and places she's always known. She also sees a community that is rapidly changing around her.



But as the sun sets purple-blue-gold behind Daisy Ramona and her papi, she knows that the love she feels will always be there.

**Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale* written and illustrated by Duncan Tonatiuh. Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2013.

Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote opens with festive scenes of the Rabbit family preparing for Papá Rabbit's homecoming. Musicians, family and friends gather to welcome home Papá who had traveled north to work in the carrot and lettuce fields, years before. Plates of mole, rice and beans are prepared in anticipation of his arrival and the house is strung with papel picado. When Papá Rabbit doesn't arrive, his son Pancho decides to sneak away in the dark of the night to find him. The reader follows the young rabbit as he travels north with the aid of a sneaky coyote by train, by river, by tunnel, and by desert. Tonatiuh bravely presents the controversial issue of illegal immigration through the lens of a children's fable. Inspired by 14th century Mixtec codices and traditional folklore, the author / illustrator presents the sometimes startling realities of many modern day immigrants in a form which can be appreciated by both young and old alike. (Grades Kindergarten and up)

Classroom Resources: [Educator's Guide for Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale](#) written by Katrina Dillon on behalf of CLASP.

**Photographic: The Life of Graciela Iturbide* by Isabel Quintero and illustrated by Zeke Pena. Getty, 2018.

Graciela Iturbide was born in México City in 1942, the oldest of 13 children. When tragedy struck Iturbide as a young mother, she turned to photography for solace and understanding. From then on Iturbide embarked on a photographic journey that has taken her throughout her native México, from the Sonora Desert to Juchitán to Frida Kahlo's bathroom, to the United States, India, and beyond. *Photographic* is a symbolic, poetic, and deeply personal graphic biography of this iconic photographer. Iturbide's journey will excite readers of all ages as well as budding photographers, who will be inspired by her resolve, talent, and curiosity.

The Art Lesson by Tomie dePaola. Puffin Books, 2001.

Tommy knows he wants to be an artist when he grows up. He can't wait to get to school and have real art lessons. When Tommy gets to school and finds out that the art lessons are full of "rules", he is surprised and dismayed. How the wise art teacher finds a way to give Tommy the freedom to create and stay within the "rules" makes a wonderfully perceptive picture book about growing up and keeping one's individuality. Tomie dePaola is the author and illustrator of many beloved books for children, including the Caldecott Honor Book *Strega Nona*. Fans of all ages will be pleased to hear that *The Art Lesson* is, in fact, based on the artist's own experiences growing up, and offers a welcome glimpse into his past. This bright picture book is as covered with drawings as the walls of Tommy's parents' and



grandparents' houses, and sends an inspirational message to budding artists and individualists. Break out the crayons!

The Girl from Chimel by Rigoberta Menchú with Dante Liano, illustrated by Domi. Groundwood Books, 2005.

Nobel Peace Prize winner and Mayan activist Rigoberta Menchú brings the world of her earliest childhood vividly to life in this colorful book. Before the war in Guatemala and despite the hardships that the Mayan people endured, life in the Mayan villages of the highlands had a beauty and integrity. This was forever changed by the conflict and brutal genocide that was to come. Menchú's stories of her grandparents and parents, of the natural world that surrounded her, and her retelling of the stories that she was told present a rich, humorous, and engaging portrait of that lost world. Domi draws on the Mayan landscape and rich craftwork to create the stunning illustrations that complement this engaging story.

The Youngest Sister by Suniyay Moreno and illustrated by Mariana Chiesa. Greystone Kids, 2022.

In the Andean foothills, a five-year-old Quechua girl is entrusted with a big job: to collect a marrow bone from the neighbor for the family soup. A stunning debut from Indigenous author Suniyay Moreno. Picu's family is very poor. In the dry Andean foothills, her mother must feed fourteen people—her kids, her relatives' kids, and the hired hand's kids—every day. One morning, Picu, the youngest sister, is sent to get a marrow bone from a neighbor. The bone will add flavor and nutrition to the lunchtime soup. Her mother warns her not to dawdle on the two-hour walk, each way, through the wild landscape. But Picu can't help it! She marvels at the butterflies, samples the cactus fruit, and daydreams about using the marrow bone as a football. Will the neighbor let her family keep the bone after the soup is made? Will her mother let her play with it? And will she be punished for being so late?

* *Xochitl and the Flowers / Xóchitl, la Niña de las Flores* by Jorge Argueta and illustrated by Carl Angel. Children's Book Press, 2008.

Miles away from their home in El Salvador, Xochitl (SOH-cheel) and her family make a new home in the United States, but nothing is the same. Xochitl mourns a lovely garden and her family's small flower business, all left behind. Selling flowers on the street soon provides more than income for the Flores family: they begin to make friends with local storeowners and neighbors. But it is not until the family decides to start a nursery in its backyard that Xochitl begins to learn the true value of community in their adopted country. Basing his narrative on real-life events, prize-winning poet Jorge Argueta has crafted a tender, poetic, and moving story about a family's determination to set down roots and about their child's blooming among friends and neighbors. Artist Carl Angel's authentic and brilliant artwork splendidly documents this quintessentially American immigration story. (Grades Kindergarten and up)



Classroom Resources: [Teacher's Guide to Xochitl and the Flowers](#) produced by Children's Book Press and Lee & Low Books.

Young Adult Literature

**A Second Chance on Earth* by Juan Vidal. Holiday House, 2024.

Have you ever encountered a book that KO'd you, Iron Mike Tyson style? One that hit you square in the face and heart like some abracadabra casting a hex from an unknown planet? For sixteen-year-old poet and b-baller Marcos Cadena, that book is the beat-up copy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* he finds among his late father's possessions after Papi is killed in an accident. Marcos' papi has always loomed large in his eyes. So, when Marcos travels to his parents' childhood home of Cartagena, Colombia to spread Papi's ashes, he brings his father's book with him, convinced that Gabriel García Márquez's masterpiece holds the key to understanding Papi's life and accepting his death. In Cartagena, Marcos befriends eighteen-year-old Camilo, a taxi driver and fellow García Márquez fan who appoints himself Marcos' unofficial tour guide. Together, the two boys explore the landscape of Cartagena, from the picturesque streets of Old Town to the poor neighborhood where Camilo grew up. But when Camilo reveals a troubling secret from his past, Marcos must ask himself whether everyone deserves a second chance. Woven through with themes of friendship, family, and forgiveness, this poignant novel in verse is also a love letter to Colombia and to the books of Gabriel García Márquez.

**Brownstone* by Samuel Teer and illustrated by Mar Julia. Versify, 2024.

Almudena has always wondered about the dad she never met. Now, with her white mother headed on a once-in-a-lifetime trip without her, she's left alone with her Guatemalan father for an entire summer. Xavier seems happy to see her, but he expects her to live in (and help fix up) his old, broken-down brownstone. And all along, she must navigate the language barrier of his rapid-fire Spanish—which she doesn't speak. As Almudena tries to adjust to this new reality, she gets to know the residents of Xavier's Latin American neighborhood. Each member of the community has their own joys and heartbreaks as well as their own strong opinions on how this young Latina should talk, dress, and behave. Some can't understand why she doesn't know where she comes from. Others think she's "not brown enough" to fit in. But time is running out for Almudena and Xavier to get to know each other, and the key to their connection may ultimately lie in bringing all these different elements together. Fixing a broken building is one thing, but turning these stubborn individuals into a found family might take more than this one summer.

**Call Me Iggy* by Jorge Aguirre and illustrated by Rafael Rosado. First Second, 2024.

Ignacio "Iggy" Garcia is an Ohio-born Colombian American teen living his best life. After bumping into Marisol (and her coffee) at school, Iggy's world is spun around. But Marisol has too much going on



to be bothered with the likes of Iggy. She has school, work, family, and the uphill battle of getting her legal papers. As Iggy stresses over how to get Marisol to like him, his grandfather comes to the rescue. The thing is, not only is his abuelito dead, but he also gives terrible love advice. The worst. And so, with his ghost abuelito's meddling, Iggy's life begins to unravel as he sets off on a journey of self-discovery. Call me Iggy tells the story of Iggy searching for his place in his family, his school, his community, and ultimately—as the political climate in America changes during the 2016 election—his country. Focusing on familial ties and budding love, *Call me Iggy* challenges our assumptions about Latino-American identity while reaffirming our belief in the hope that all young people represent. Perfect for lovers of multigenerational stories like *Displacement* and *The Magic Fish*.

Clap When You Land by Elizabeth Acevedo. Quill Tree Books, 2022.

Camino Rios lives for the summers when her father visits her in the Dominican Republic. But this time, on the day when his plane is supposed to land, Camino arrives at the airport to see crowds of crying people....In New York City, Yahaira Rios is called to the principal's office, where her mother is waiting to tell her that her father, her hero, has died in a plane crash. Separated by distance—and Papi's secrets—the two girls are forced to face a new reality in which their father is dead and their lives are forever altered. And then, when it seems like they've lost everything of their father, they learn of each other.

I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter by Erika L. Sánchez. Ember, 2019.

Perfect Mexican daughters do not go away to college. And they do not move out of their parents' house after high school graduation. Perfect Mexican daughters never abandon their family. But Julia is not your perfect Mexican daughter. That was Olga's role. Then a tragic accident on the busiest street in Chicago leaves Olga dead and Julia left behind to reassemble the shattered pieces of her family. And no one seems to acknowledge that Julia is broken, too. Instead, her mother seems to channel her grief into pointing out every possible way Julia has failed. But it's not long before Julia discovers that Olga might not have been as perfect as everyone thought. With the help of her best friend Lorena, and her first love, first everything boyfriend Connor, Julia is determined to find out. Was Olga really what she seemed? Or was there more to her sister's story? And either way, how can Julia even attempt to live up to a seemingly impossible ideal?



APPENDIX: Q & A WITH JOHN PARRA

 publishersweekly.com

Q & A with John Parra

By Patricia J. Murphy | Jul 23, 2021



© Maria Parra



*John Parra is an award-winning artist, designer, and illustrator of children's books, such as *Frida Kahlo and Her Animalitos* and *Little Libraries, Big Heroes*. His upcoming titles include *Growing an Artist*, his debut as an author/illustrator, and *A-m-o-r-e Spells L-o-v-e*. His rich, colorful illustrations are traditionally painted and have garnered three Pura Belpré Honors for Illustration, two SCBWI Golden Kite Awards for Illustration, and the Christopher Award, among others. His work has also appeared in books, magazines, exhibits—and even on six U.S. postage stamps. PW spoke with Parra about how his experiences as a student and an instructor have left an imprint on his art and how he hopes it inspires his readers to be creative.*

When did you start loving art and making art? Who were your early influences?

I started at a very early age. My father was an amateur artist and one of my early influences. He would tell us stories, like when we were sitting at a restaurant—with those white paper placemats—and he would start drawing with his pen about the time he was in the army. He'd draw trucks and people camping out. My two brothers and I thought his stories were fascinating. We couldn't get enough! My mother, too, who was an educator for 35 years, was an early influence. She would take us to the



library to get books, to art museums, and other museums. It was all inspiring to me—listening to stories, looking at drawings and fine art. My mom didn't think we were too young to go to museums. And even though we would laugh and goof around sometimes, it all sank in. Looking back, these things really made a difference in my life!

How do you think they specifically made a difference in your early years?

When you are hearing stories, you are already thinking in pictures. So, as a child growing up, I became a very visual learner. To me, visual imagery was—and still is—something that I gravitate towards naturally. Because of all of this, I think it was just natural for me to develop the art side of me and the desire to be good at art from the very start.

To this day, I have a photo of me and my best friend at the time in pre-K creating self-portraits on the first day of school. It appeared in the Santa Barbara, Calif., newspaper. It's funny how that photo turned out to be prophetic.



Five-year-olds Abraham Barraza, (left) and John Parra put the finishing touches on some self-portraits. When asked if his mother had given him any last minute instruction prior to leaving for his first day of school, John Parra said, "No she didn't; I know it all already."

When did you start thinking of yourself as an artist?

All through regular school, art was a part of me. I was always "the artist in the class" and this gave me great confidence. I don't recall if I took many art classes at the time.



But I do remember that if there was a book report that I had to complete, I'd spend more time drawing rather than writing the summary of the book.

Soon after, some teachers encouraged and guided me into taking the next step to becoming an artist. My parents did, too, by buying markers and pens for birthdays and Christmases. I have been very lucky and am grateful to have had wonderfully supportive parents and teachers.



So, how and when did you take the next steps?

I took my “official” first art class in high school as a sophomore to see how it would go. There was a little fear in taking this step because I worried that if I become an artist as my job that I might not love art anymore.

Also, when I was attending Moorpark Community College [in Calif.], I started to doubt myself, and wondered, “What are you going to do with your life?” But, all the while, I kept taking classes. I didn’t know if I could become a professional artist—or if I could become a children’s illustrator vs. a graphic designer or a game designer. All I knew was that I loved to draw. And, in my second year, a fine artist, Larry Carroll, came to our college. I recognized his work, and was so excited to see him. At that moment, it was as if electricity shot through my body. I looked at his work, and I said, “This is it!” I knew what I wanted to do. Like they say, “If you see it, you can be it!”



You have shared in your bio and other interviews that this chance encounter with this artist changed your life. How did he change it?

After Mr. Carroll saw my work, he offered to mentor me and said, “You are going to polish up your portfolio, get a scholarship, and get into art school!” My professor, Frank Sardisco, encouraged me to work with Mr. Carroll, and so, I did. I talk a lot about the importance of mentors in my art classes and school presentations. At the right time, mentors can show you the right things. That’s really what education is: helping kids have the vision. You have to do the work, but they have a vision—and they see it in you. And, they help you see it.



How did you find your way into the world of children's publishing?

After art school, I decided to pack up and head to N.Y.C. to become an illustrator. Once there, I started dropping off my portfolio and I got editorial and illustration work with magazines and corporate clients (including United Airlines, Virgin Records, National Geographic, PBS, etc.) It was hard. I had to push myself.

Then one day, Northland Publishing's Luna Rising imprint was looking for new talent and saw my portfolio. I took the job because I needed the work, but I had no idea what I was doing. It was one of the hardest things that I had ever done: I had never done so many paintings for one project before, and it took a lot longer than I thought it would!

What happened next?

Once I turned it in, someone offered me another book who had seen my first book. This taught me how important it was to do a good job on each book because that could lead to the next book, and they did. With my first three books, I was turning in illustration assignments without knowing that there was an entire community of librarians, teachers, authors, illustrators, book lovers, or the SCBWI. That changed in 2010, when I won a few awards from the American Library Association [Pura Belpré Honors for Illustration]. Everyone greeted me with open arms, and was so kind, thoughtful, and supportive. I asked myself, "Did I just find my creative family?" And, the answer was, "Yes!" I'm so grateful for all of this—and to be a working artist.

When do you begin teaching?

After I graduated from art school and before I moved to N.Y.C., I taught art lessons for kids and a high school mural program at the Carnegie Art Museum of Oxnard [Calif.]. With my mural class, the students could see the energy that comes from collaboration—and that was so exciting to be a part of. This is one of my goals when I teach classes or do school visits: that students feel connected to the art process. I also encourage them to make creativity part of their lives, whether they want to sing, dance, paint, etc. Because when you do this, you start to think differently and develop creative problem-solving skills.

How have your teaching and interactions with kids influenced your work?



Both constantly remind me who my audience is! They also help me to visualize them as I work. That is my true inspiration. And, whether I am teaching a class or doing a school visit, the real magic happens when we get to draw together. That's because when I see their creativity; it inspires the creativity in me. I also get excited for them and try to help them see their potential. It was hard for me to see mine for a long time until I met an artist during a school visit. You never know what will come of one!



Can you talk a little about your upcoming book?

My debut as an author-illustrator will be out in May 2022 from Simon & Schuster. It's called *Growing an Artist* and is based on my life growing up and working with my father, who was a landscape contractor. The little boy in the book is an artist and he brings his sketchbook along with him to his father's work and starts drawing. Because of this, he helps his father with his drawings of his landscape design. They end up working on this together, and they get a big job. It's a story about creativity and how your ideas can become reality.

What are you working on now?

A-M-O-R Spells L-O-V-E by Michael Genhart [Holiday House/Neal Porter Books, May 2024] is a story of the National Spanish Spelling Bee. It is about a boy who is studying for the bee with his grandma, and while preparing, he learns that long ago when she was younger she was punished for speaking Spanish at school in the U.S., that her teacher called her names and treated her poorly. Like *Growing an Artist*, it is based on real-life experiences. The book blends together some of the history of Spanish-speaking in America with a celebration of speaking and spelling in Spanish.

Do you have any advice to aspiring artists of any age?

Approach art like a kid! Take art classes, buy supplies, and have a spot in your house, classroom, or library ready to go. Visit art museums. Be inspired by music. Go to plays or performances. Study other artists. Work at it. You'll be encouraged and sometimes discouraged. But you can learn from discouragement. It may not always



turn out exactly the way you want, but then ask yourself, “What can I do differently or change?” And soon, you’ll start thinking outside the box and using creative problem solving. That’s what we need more of in this world! Some of the most successful people have an artistic side to them—and it makes them successful. Art allows everyone to be creative and to show sides of ourselves that are hard to express in words. So, do it!