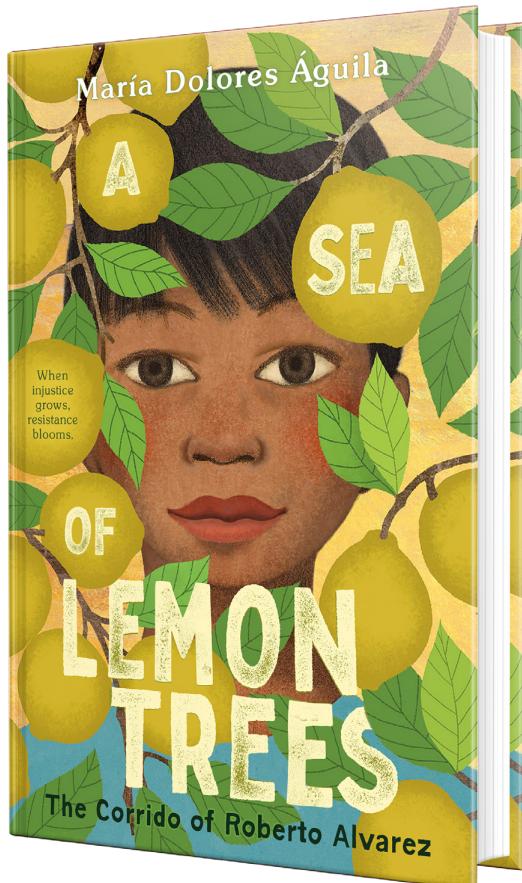


# A Teacher's Guide for A SEA OF LEMON TREES The Corrido of Roberto Alvarez



## ABOUT THE BOOK

Newbery Honor Book

Pura Belpré Award Children's Author Honor Book

Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction Winner

Jane Addams Children's Book Award Winner

Charlotte Huck Award Winner

National Book Award Longlist for Young People's Literature

Based on the true story of Roberto Alvarez and the Lemon Grove Incident, this vivid and uplifting middle-grade debut novel in verse about one young child's courage to stand up for what is right, and the determination of the Mexican community, is perfect for fans of *Esperanza Rising* and *Inside Out and Back Again*.

★ “Powerful and lyrical . . . A moving portrait of community resistance.” —*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ “Empowering.” —*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

Twelve-year-old Roberto Alvarez is the youngest of his siblings, born on United States soil. He's *el futuro*, their dream for a life away from the fire of the Mexican Revolution.

Moved by anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican propaganda, the Lemon Grove school board and the chamber of commerce create a separate “Americanization” school for the Mexican children attending the Lemon Grove Grammar School. But the new Olive Street School is an old barn retrofitted for the children, who are now forced to attend a segregated school. Amid threats of deportation, El Comité de Vecinos risks everything to stand their ground and, with the support of the Mexican consulate, choose Roberto as the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit against the school board.

From the critically acclaimed author María Dolores Águila (*Barrio Rising*) comes an inspiring novel in verse set against the backdrop of the Great Depression and Mexican Repatriation, based on the true story of the first successful school desegregation case in the United States, two decades before *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**María Dolores Águila** is a Chicana poet and author from San Diego. Deeply inspired by Chicana history and art, she seeks to write empowering and inclusive stories about everything she learns. She also loves drinking coffee, browsing the bookshelves at her local library, and spending time with her family.



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**Dear Educator,**

First, *thank you*. At a time when books are being challenged and censored, bringing *A Sea of Lemon Trees* into your classroom is a tremendous act of courage.

*A Sea of Lemon Trees* tells the story of Roberto Alvarez and the Lemon Grove Incident of 1931, the first successful school desegregation case in the United States. Roberto's world was shaped by the Great Depression, Mexican Repatriation, the dust bowl, and the realities of Juan Crow laws and Americanization schools in the American Southwest. These forces worked to erase language, culture, and belonging for Mexican American families. And still, in the face of all that, a small group of committed neighbors came together, resisted, and won.

I wrote *A Sea of Lemon Trees* to honor the history of resistance and resilience in the Mexican American community. While this story does not shy away from a difficult and painful history, at its heart, it's about resistance, community, and justice. It's also about the small pockets of resilience that sustained this community during a hard time, from holiday traditions like piñatas, to the importance of corridos, ballads that carried news and memories to colonias near and far during the Great Depression.

I know some themes in this novel may connect deeply to students' lived experiences and current realities. My wish is that this guide helps you navigate those conversations with the deepest care, while keeping the focus on resilience, belonging, and hope. By teaching this story, you give students the opportunity to see how history is not distant but remains alive in the struggles and victories of their own communities.

Thank you again for your courage, your compassion, and your commitment to your students. These histories come to light because of teachers like you.

With gratitude,

*Maria Dolores Águila*



# BACKGROUND INFORMATION

## Lemon Grove

*A Sea of Lemon Trees* is set in Lemon Grove, a city in San Diego County, California, that was the site of one of the first school segregation cases in what we know as the United States. In 1931, Lemon Grove Grammar School officials decided that the school would admit all students, except Mexican Americans, who were going to be sent to a “new school” established in an old building that was set in an old barn-yard. The Mexican parents, community members, and Mexican consulate worked together to take the school district to court in a case known as *Roberto Alvarez v. the Board of Trustees of the Lemon Grove School District*. *A Sea of Lemon Trees* is inspired by this event and Roberto Alvarez is the protagonists of the book. Before reading the book, read the author’s essay “A Brief Background and History of the Lemon Grove Incident” included at the end of the book as well as the bibliography.

## Other Lemon Grove resources include:

Larry Dane Brimner, illustrated by Maya Gonzalez, *Without Separation: Prejudice, Segregation, and the Case of Roberto Alvarez* (Calkins Creek, 2021)

Christy Hale, *Todos Iguales/All Equal: Un corrido de Lemon Grove/A Ballad of Lemon Grove* (Children’s Book Press, 2019)

## The Lemon Grove Incident, documentary

Helen M. Ofield, Pete Smith, and Lemon Grove Historical Society, *Lemon Grove* (Arcadia Publishing, Images of America series, 2010)

## San Diego History Center: The Lemon Grove Incident

## The Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, and the Mexican Repatriation

During the late 1920s, the United States faced an economic crisis and stock market crash commonly known as the Great Depression. Many families and working parents lost their jobs and their homes, and several moved across the country. Businesses and the agricultural industry were also impacted and the damage went into the 1930s, facing other issues such as environmental changes and drought. This period of agricultural damage and farming uncertainty, called the dust bowl, also impacted Mexican American families, many of them migrant workers. The economic and job instability created animosity between white Americans and city agencies toward Mexican Americans and strengthened prejudice against them. One of the projects that impacted Mexican American communities in the United States was the Mexican Repatriation, as where they were removed from their homes and deported to Mexico. One of the main reasons was to give jobs to “Americans,” meaning white Americans, during this era of work shortage.

## For more information about these events:

[America's Forgotten History of Mexican American 'Repatriation'](#)

[Depression and the Struggle for Survival](#)

[Mexican Communities in the Great Depression](#)

[National Drought Mitigation Center: The Dust Bowl](#)

[A School of Their Own: Educating Okie Children in 1930s California](#)



## Teaching “Mexican Repatriation”: Uncovering Histories of Deportation and Belonging

### Some books to share with students include:

Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (University of New Mexico Press, 1995)

Milton Meltzer, *Driven from the Land: The Story of the Dust Bowl* (Benchmark Books, 2000)

Martin W. Sandler, *Picturing a Nation: The Great Depression's Finest Photographers Introduce America to Itself* (Candlewick Press, 2021)

Elliot Smith, *History in Pictures: Focus on the Great Depression* (Lerner Publications, 2023)

Veronica B. Wilkins, *Turning Points in U.S. History: Dust Bowl* (Pogo Books, 2020)

## Americanization and Segregation in Schools

Injustices, oppression, and racism have existed and are ingrained in society since the inception of the United States. With an influx and migration of peoples to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, the government and its agencies created plans to assimilate immigrants to a “common way of American life.” Children and schools were not exempt from that, and Americanization projects were part of an agenda to force the English language on students and to “erase” their cultures, traditions, languages, ways of life. In addition, school segregation was part of that project and Mexican American families and children were impacted as well. The Lemon Grove Incident is one example. Before discussing the book with students, become familiar with other cases of school segregation to share with students.

### For a selection of resources that educators can share with students about different school integration/segregation cases see:

Yolanda Gladded, as told to Dr. Tamara Pizzoli, illustrated by Keisha Morris, *When the Schools Shut Down: A Young Girl's Story of Virginia's "Lost Generation" and the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Decision* (Harper, 2022)

Susan E. Goodman, illustrated by E. B. Lewis, *The First Step: How One Girl Put Segregation on Trial* (Bloomsbury, 2016)

Cynthia Levinson, illustrated by Mirelle Ortega, *Free to Learn: How Alfredo Lopez Fought for the Right to Go to School* (Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2024)

### Lum v. Rice Supreme Court Ruling

Toni Morrison, *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004)

P. O'Connell Pearson, *We Are Your Children Too: Black Students, White Supremacists, and the Battle for America's Schools in Prince Edward County, Virginia* (Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2023)

Vaunda Micheaux Nelson, illustrated by Alex Bostic, *Small Shoes, Great Strides: How Three Brave Girls Opened Doors to School Equality* (Carolrhoda Books, 2023)

Duncan Tonatiuh, *Separated Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez & Her Family's Fight for Desegregation* (Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2014)

## Juan Crow Laws

Modeled after the Jim Crow laws and ideologies enforced and replicated in Southern states against Black Americans, Juan Crow laws discriminated against Mexican Americans mainly in the Southwest. Children, their social settings, and their schools were also impacted by these laws.



**For more information and to provide context for students see:**

**Blood and Betrayal in the Southwest**

**Juan Crow: A Discriminatory Past with Contemporary Consequences Against Mexican Americans**

**Towards a More Perfect Union: Understanding Systemic Racism and Resulting Inequity**

**in Latino Communities** (see page 11)

## **Corridos**

The subtitle of the book is *The Corrido of Roberto Alvarez*, and there is a character who strums his guitar and sings corridos throughout the book. Corridos are songs or ballads that originated in Central Mexico and around the Mexican-US border, with a narrative style and verses that tell a story. They were also used during the Great Depression to pass along information about the lives, struggles, and overall experiences of Mexican Americans. A corrido consists of specific metric lines, with lyrics that briefly introduce the theme or the main character, the story and events surrounding the theme or character, and an ending.

**Listen to corridos featured in *A Sea of Lemon Trees***

**Las Posadas (page 45)**

**La Crisis Actual Part 1 & 2 (page 116)**

**El Deportado Parts 1 & 2 (page 205)**

**For more information about corridos see:**

**The Corrido: A Cultural Ballad of the Mexican-American Experience**

**Corridos: (Mostly) True Stories in Verse with Music**

**Singing the Great Depression: Mexican and Mexican American Perspectives Through Corridos (1929–1949)**

**Traditional Mexican Corridos**

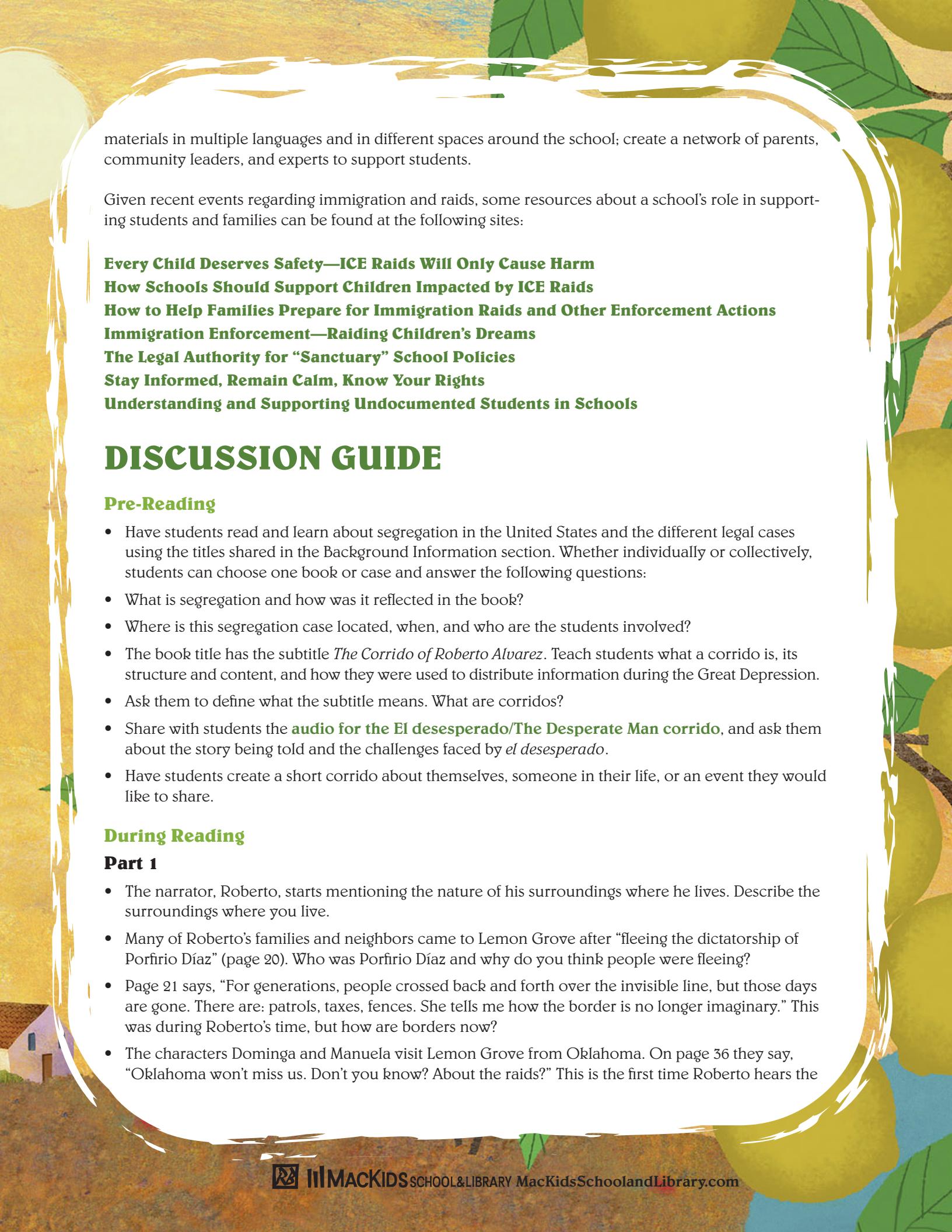
## **Notes to Educators: Preparing Yourself and Your Students**

Students' social geographies and the political and historical contexts in which they exist, impact their behavior, emotions, perspectives, and relationships with others. They bring their whole selves into classrooms, and educators should undergo reflection and provide students with socio-emotional support and understanding.

*A Sea of Lemon Trees* includes a letter to readers expressing that they "should be aware that the book mentions poverty, deportation, racism, and colorism, reflecting the historical context in which it is set." Educators should be mindful that these issues and oppressions are being experienced by their students, friends, families, and communities. Some things to reflect on: Does your school incorporate trauma-informed classroom strategies? Is your school and classroom a "safe haven" or do you have "safety zones" for students and families? What type of networks or supports are provided, and which policies, strategies, and actions do they have in place?

Uncertainty and fear can be overwhelming and present among educators, our students, their families, and their communities. It is important for everyone to stay informed, know your rights and relevant information, and remain as calm as our emotions allow us. Some best practices are to share "know your rights" family-preparedness and school-preparedness plans with students and school workers; have





materials in multiple languages and in different spaces around the school; create a network of parents, community leaders, and experts to support students.

Given recent events regarding immigration and raids, some resources about a school's role in supporting students and families can be found at the following sites:

**Every Child Deserves Safety—ICE Raids Will Only Cause Harm**

**How Schools Should Support Children Impacted by ICE Raids**

**How to Help Families Prepare for Immigration Raids and Other Enforcement Actions**

**Immigration Enforcement—Raiding Children's Dreams**

**The Legal Authority for "Sanctuary" School Policies**

**Stay Informed, Remain Calm, Know Your Rights**

**Understanding and Supporting Undocumented Students in Schools**

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Pre-Reading

- Have students read and learn about segregation in the United States and the different legal cases using the titles shared in the Background Information section. Whether individually or collectively, students can choose one book or case and answer the following questions:
  - What is segregation and how was it reflected in the book?
  - Where is this segregation case located, when, and who are the students involved?
  - The book title has the subtitle *The Corrido of Roberto Alvarez*. Teach students what a corrido is, its structure and content, and how they were used to distribute information during the Great Depression.
  - Ask them to define what the subtitle means. What are corridos?
  - Share with students the **audio for the El desesperado/The Desperate Man corrido**, and ask them about the story being told and the challenges faced by *el desesperado*.
  - Have students create a short corrido about themselves, someone in their life, or an event they would like to share.

### During Reading

#### Part 1

- The narrator, Roberto, starts mentioning the nature of his surroundings where he lives. Describe the surroundings where you live.
- Many of Roberto's families and neighbors came to Lemon Grove after "fleeing the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz" (page 20). Who was Porfirio Díaz and why do you think people were fleeing?
- Page 21 says, "For generations, people crossed back and forth over the invisible line, but those days are gone. There are: patrols, taxes, fences. She tells me how the border is no longer imaginary." This was during Roberto's time, but how are borders now?
- The characters Dominga and Manuela visit Lemon Grove from Oklahoma. On page 36 they say, "Oklahoma won't miss us. Don't you know? About the raids?" This is the first time Roberto hears the



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word “raid” and wants to look it up in the dictionary. What are raids? How do you feel about raids happening to children and their families?

- At the end of Part 1, Roberto learns that the school plans to separate Mexican students from the other students and tells himself, “who could imagine they would turn us away for the color of our skin and the language we speak?” (page 104). How do you think Roberto and the other Mexican students feel when learning that they won’t be able to continue going to their school because they are Mexicans? Do you think it is fair?

## Part 2

- Roberto says that he “exists between English and Spanish, Mexican and American” (page 108). Do you feel you exist between different worlds? If you are comfortable sharing your feelings, which worlds do you exist between?
- Anastácio strums his guitar and shares melodies and tunes that become corridos. Revisit what corridos are and keep track of Anastácio’s corrido (in Spanish) throughout the book. Which story is he telling?
- On pages 122–23, the neighbors form the El Comité de Vecinos de Lemon Grove, and they mention how “we need to organize and fight this! We must show nuestros hijos that we will not allow ourselves to be treated this way.” What do they mean by organizing? What do you think about adults and children getting together to fight for what is fair?
- El Comité decides to support the students and help them get back to school, but they need lawyers and have to raise funds. How do Roberto and the community raise funds?
- Roberto starts hearing new words, like deposition, prosecutor, addendums, codefendant. Make a list of these words and look them up in the dictionary.
- Roberto is selected to be the lead plaintiff and voice in this case. Why do you think Roberto was chosen? How would you feel if you were chosen to lead the fight against something that was unfair?

## Part 3

- On page 179, Roberto says how “a dictionary can tell you what a word you’ve never heard means.” He relies on the dictionary to look up words he doesn’t know or understand. While reading the book, identify and make a list of those words you don’t know the meaning of. Then gather all the words from each student to create a collective dictionary.
- Roberto’s friend and classmate David and his family are deported. Roberto learns that raids are also done with “cursive words on fancy paper” (page 186). What other families are separated?
- Roberto is constantly reminded that he is *el futuro* (the future). What does that mean? How do you see the future for Roberto?
- The main events of the story happen during the holiday seasons. Roberto and his community celebrate El Día de la Virgen de la Guadalupe, Las Posadas, Día de los Reyes, Día de la Candelaria and they participate in a tamalada. Learn about these holidays (if you don’t know about them already) and describe what they mean. How does Roberto describe the tamalada and each person’s role in preparing this wrapped dish?
- At the end of Part 3, Roberto says, “My name is Roberto Alvarez. I am twelve years old. I am in the fifth grade. I was born in La Mesa, California” (page 217). Can you write down how you would say something like this but about you? How are these statements similar to or different from your fellow classmates?



#### Part 4

- Roberto travels from Lemon Grove to downtown San Diego by train to go to the courtroom for his case. What does Roberto see and learn during his trip?
- On page 243, Roberto is called to approach the front of the courtroom and sit on the bench. He is asked a lot of questions. How is Roberto feeling while being questioned? Describe his answers.
- After the courtroom events, what was the final decision? Were Roberto and his classmates able to go back to Lemon Grove Grammar School?
- The story ends with “There is so much I do not know about the world, but I hope that people learn about what happened in the sea of lemon trees. I make a wish that children of every color can go to school together and never feel like they do not belong” (page 269). After reading and discussing *A Sea of Lemon Trees: The Corrido of Roberto Alvarez*, what did you learn about Roberto, his school, and his community?

### POST-READING ACTION

- *Eres el futuro.* You are the future of this world. How do you envision a future for you, your family, and your classmates?
- Have students write letters to local officials and community members about the right of all children to attend school and the things they deserve to have at school. Have them also write words of support to immigrant children and families.

This guide was written by Sujei Lugo. Sujei Lugo holds a Ph.D. in Library and Information Science and is a children's librarian, independent researcher, and children's book reviewer.

