

MANY VOICES LITERATURE SERIES

Snapshot

Literature for Young Adults



PERFECTION  LEARNING

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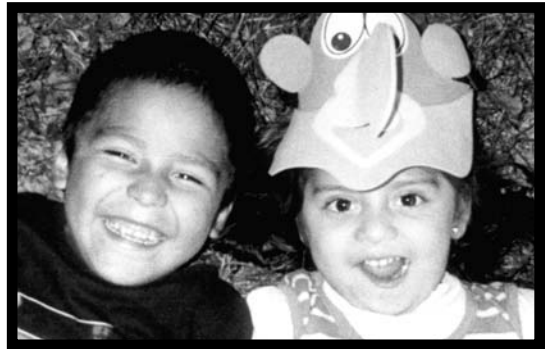
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Life in the Middle



Adults sometimes think that kids have it easy—no job to get to, no debts, and no major responsibilities. But you know that’s not the real picture. You have a job all right—to attend school and learn all you can. You may not have the same concerns that adults have, but you do have concerns, and many young people today feel an overwhelming sense of responsibility to their friends, their schools, and their families.

They also worry about what the future holds—never mind getting through one more day in the present. Most students your age feel lost and confused now and again. “Who am I and where am I going?” you may ask. Finding out is an important part of growing up.

We have gathered the selections in this book with your life in mind—your hopes, your dreams, your fears, your interests, your happy times, and your sad times, too. We have chosen stories and poems written by the finest authors of our time—people who understand the human condition and delight in sharing their interesting perspectives with readers your age. They know that becoming an adult is not an easy journey. You will encounter dead ends, rough roads, and washed out bridges. But you will also experience the exhilaration of the wind in your hair and the sun in your face.

Your life right now may not always be what you’d like it to be, but at least on a good day, it should be exciting, challenging, and educational. It should offer you the chance to be creative and adventurous—and to get to know yourself a little better, too. We hope you enjoy what you read in the pages to come, and that your reading helps you better understand your “life in the middle.”

Active Reading

What Is It and Why Is It Important?

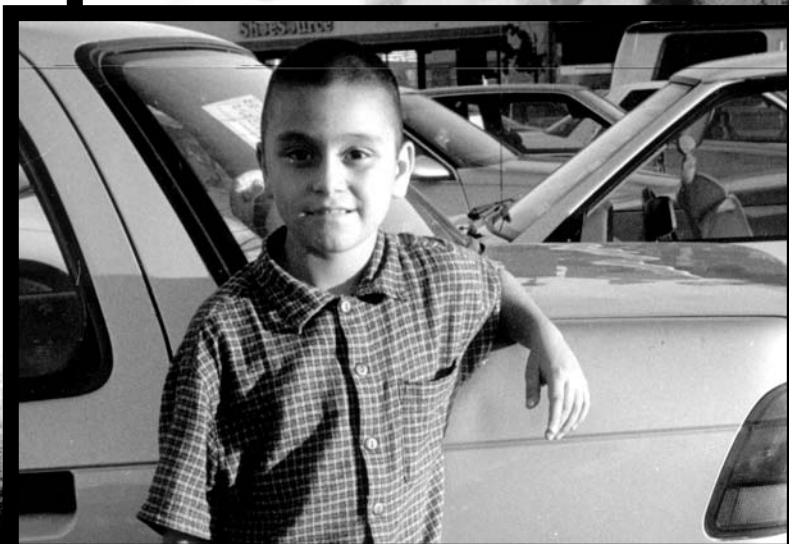


Reading is a lot like sports. Both require practice and a good understanding of the rules. In both you have a goal, either to reach the finish line or to finish the last line. And both demand active participation. Of course reading does not leave you sweaty and exhausted like a good game of soccer, but it does require lots of activity—mind activity. Like a good athlete, a good reader must be on his or her toes, ready at all times to spring into action.

That is what Active Reading is all about: Jumping into your reading with both feet, getting involved, being a part of the action, and relating to the characters. The chart below will help you understand, remember, and use the Active Reading strategies. If you train yourself to use these strategies every time you read, they will become second nature to you. Soon, you will be using them without being aware of them. You will become a skilled reader who learns efficiently and enjoys reading.

The Six Active Reading Strategies

- **Questioning** Ask questions that come to mind as you read.
Example: *The first little pig built his house of straw, what will the second little pig use?*
- **Predicting** Use what has happened to guess what will happen next.
Example: *The Big Bad Wolf is going to huff and puff and blow the stick house down, just as he did the straw house.*
- **Clarifying** Clear up confusion and answer any questions you may have.
Example: *The wolf blew down two houses, but does he really think he can also blow down a brick house? Yes. He tries, but fails.*
- **Connecting** Compare the text with something in your own experience or with other things you have read or seen.
Example: *I think that the wolf has met his match. If I were the wolf, I would leave this third pig alone.*
- **Summarizing** Review what has happened so far.
Example: *The wolf has been able to blow down a straw and a stick house, but not the brick house of the third little pig. He is now going to climb down the third little pig's chimney.*
- **Evaluating** Use evidence in the selection as well as your common sense to form opinions and arrive at conclusions.
Example: *The story of the wolf and the three little pigs is a good example of using the right materials to combat disaster.*



UNIT TWO

Family Album

*Our own talk at dinner was loud with belly
laughs and marked by our pointing forks
at one another.*

from "Looking for Work"
by Gary Soto

Active Reading Alert!

PREDICTING

As you read the selections in this unit, keep guessing as to what will happen next. Predicting keeps you thinking about the plot, what the characters are up to, and where the author may take you next. As your predictions come true (or do not), you can make new predictions—right up until the end of the story.



Looking for Work

Gary Soto



ne July, while killing ants on the kitchen sink with a rolled newspaper, I had a nine-year-old's vision of wealth that would save us from ourselves. For weeks I had drunk Kool-Aid and watched morning reruns of *Father Knows Best*,¹ whose family was so uncomplicated in its routine that I very much wanted to imitate it. The first step was to get my brother and sister to wear shoes at dinner.

"Come on, Rick—come on, Deb," I whined. But Rick **mimicked** me and the same day that I asked him to wear shoes he came to the dinner table in only his swim trunks. My mother didn't notice, nor did my sister, as we sat to eat our beans and tortillas in the stifling heat of our kitchen. We all gleamed like cellophane, wiping the sweat from our brows with the backs of our hands as we talked about the day: Frankie our neighbor was beat up by Faustino; the swimming pool at the playground would be closed for a day because the pump was broken.

Such was our life. So that morning, while doing in the train of ants which arrived each day, I decided to become wealthy, and right away! After downing a bowl of cereal, I took a rake from the garage and started up the block to look for work.

We lived on an ordinary block of mostly working-class people: warehousemen, egg candler²s, welders, mechanics, and a union plumber. And there were many retired people who kept their lawns green and the gutters uncluttered of the chewing gum wrappers we dropped as we rode by on our bikes. They bent down to gather our litter, muttering at our evilness.

At the corner house I rapped the screen door and a very large woman in a muu-muu³ answered. She sized me up and then asked what I could do.

"Rake leaves," I answered, smiling.

"It's summer, and there ain't no leaves," she countered. Her face was pinched with lines; fat jiggled under her chin. She pointed to the lawn, then the flower bed, and said: "You see any leaves there—or there?" I followed her pointing arm, stupidly. But she had a job

mimicked
made fun of by
imitating



LITERARY LENS

As you read, compare and contrast the family in the story with families you know.

1 *Father Knows Best*: a television show that aired from 1954 to 1962, depicting a picture-perfect family with a mother, a father, and three children

2 **egg candler**: people who test eggs for quality

3 **muu-muu**: a long, loose dress with bright colors and patterns

for me and that was to get her a Coke at the liquor store. She gave me twenty cents, and after ditching my rake in a bush, off I ran. I returned with an unbagged Pepsi, for which she thanked me and gave me a nickel from her apron.

I skipped off her porch, fetched my rake, and crossed the street to the next block where Mrs. Moore, mother of Earl the retarded man, let me weed a flower bed. She handed me a trowel⁴ and for a good part of the morning my fingers dipped into the moist dirt, ripping up runners of Bermuda grass. Worms surfaced in my search for deep roots, and I cut them in halves, tossing them to Mrs. Moore's cat who pawed them playfully as they dried in the sun. I made out Earl whose face was pressed to the back window of the house, and although he was calling to me I couldn't understand what he was trying to say. Embarrassed, I worked without looking up, but I imagined his **contorted** mouth and the ring of keys attached to his belt—keys that jingled with each palsied step. He scared me and I worked quickly to finish the flower bed. When I did finish Mrs. Moore gave me a quarter and two peaches from her tree, which I washed there but ate in the alley behind my house.

contorted
twisted and strained

I was sucking on the second one, a bit of juice staining the front of my T-shirt, when Little John, my best friend, came walking down the alley with a baseball bat over his shoulder, knocking over trash cans as he made his way toward me.

Little John and I went to St. John's Catholic School, where we sat among the "stupids." Miss Marino, our teacher, alternated the rows of good students with the bad, hoping that by sitting side-by-side with the bright students the stupids might become more intelligent, as though intelligence were **contagious**. But we didn't progress as she had hoped. She grew frustrated when one day, while dismissing class for recess, Little John couldn't get up because his arms were stuck in the slats of the chair's backrest. She scolded us with a shaking finger when we knocked over the globe, denting the already troubled Africa. She muttered curses when Leroy White, a real stupid but a great softball player with the gift to hit to all fields, openly chewed his host when he made his First Communion; his hands swung at his sides as he returned to the pew looking around with a big smile.

contagious
spread from one person to another; catching

4 **trowel**: a garden tool used to smooth, shape, or dig

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Little John asked what I was doing, and I told him that I was taking a break from work, as I sat comfortably among high weeds. He wanted to join me, but I reminded him that the last time he'd gone door-to-door asking for work his mother had whipped him. I was with him when his mother, a New Jersey Italian who could rise up in anger one moment and love the next, told me in a polite but matter-of-fact voice that I had to leave because she was going to beat her son. She gave me a homemade popsicle, ushered me to the door, and said that I could see Little John the next day. But it was sooner than that. I went around to his bedroom window to suck my popsicle and watch Little John dodge his mother's blows, a few hitting their mark but many whirring air.

It was midday when Little John and I converged in the alley, the sun blazing in the high nineties, and he suggested that we go to Roosevelt High School to swim. He needed five cents to make fifteen, the cost of admission, and I lent him a nickel. We ran home for my bike and when my sister found out that we were going swimming, she started to cry because she didn't have the fifteen cents but only an empty Coke bottle. I waved for her to come and three of us mounted the bike—Debra on the crossbar, Little John on the handlebars and holding the Coke bottle which we would cash for a nickel and make up the difference that would allow all of us to get in, and me pumping up the crooked streets, dodging cars and pot holes. We spent the day swimming under the afternoon sun, so that when we got home our mom asked us what was darker, the floor or us? She **feigned** a stern posture, her hands on her hips and her mouth puckered. We played along. Looking down, Debbie and I said in unison, "Us."

*feigned
pretended*

That evening at dinner we all sat down in our bathing suits to eat our beans, laughing and chewing loudly. Our mom was in a good mood, so I took a risk and asked her if sometime we could have turtle soup. A few days before I had watched a television program in which a Polynesian tribe killed a large turtle, gutted it, and then stewed it over an open fire. The turtle, basted in a sugary sauce, looked delicious as I ate an afternoon bowl of cereal, but my sister, who was watching the program with a glass of Kool-Aid between her knees, said, "Caca."

bewilderment
*being confused or
puzzled*

rifts
*divisions, unfriendly
feelings*

My mother looked at me in **bewilderment**. "Boy, are you a crazy Mexican. Where did you get the idea that people eat turtles?"

"On television," I said, explaining the program. Then I took it a step further. "Mom, do you think we could get dressed up for dinner one of these days? David King does."

"Ay, Dios,"⁵ my mother laughed. She started collecting the dinner plates, but my brother wouldn't let go of his. He was still drawing a picture in the bean sauce. Giggling, he said it was me, but I didn't want to listen because I wanted an answer from Mom. This was the summer when I spent the mornings in front of the television that showed the comfortable lives of white kids. There were no beatings, no **rifts** in the family. They wore bright clothes; toys tumbled from their closets. They hopped into bed with kisses and woke to glasses of fresh orange juice, and to a father sitting before his morning coffee while the mother buttered his toast. They hurried through the day making friends and gobs of money, returning home to a warmly lit living room, and then dinner. *Leave It to Beaver*⁶ was the program I replayed in my mind:

"May I have the mashed potatoes?" asks Beaver with a smile.

"Sure, Beav," replies Wally as he taps the corners of his mouth with a starched napkin.

The father looks on in his suit. The mother, decked out in earrings and a pearl necklace, cuts into her steak and blushes. Their conversation is politely clipped.

"Swell," says Beaver, his cheeks puffed with food.

Our own talk at dinner was loud with belly laughs and marked by our pointing forks at one another. The subjects were commonplace.

"Gary, let's go to the ditch tomorrow," my brother suggests. He explains that he has made a life preserver out of four empty detergent bottles strung together with twine and that he will make me one if I can find more bottles. "No way are we going to drown."

"Yeah, then we could have a dirt clod fight," I reply, so happy to be alive.

Whereas the Beaver's family enjoyed dessert in dishes at the table, our mom sent us outside, and more often than not I went into the alley to peek over the neighbor's fences and spy out fruit, apricot or peaches.

⁵ *Ay, Dios*: Spanish for "Oh, God"

⁶ *Leave It to Beaver*: a sitcom that aired from 1957 to 1963 on which the characters Wally and Beaver were brothers

I had asked my mom and again she laughed that I was a crazy *chavalo*⁷ as she stood in front of the sink, her arms rising and falling with suds, face glistening from the heat. She sent me outside where my brother and sister were sitting in the shade that the fence threw out like a blanket. They were talking about me when I plopped down next to them. They looked at one another and then Debbie, my eight-year-old sister, started in.

“What’s this crap about getting dressed up?”

She had entered her **profanity** stage. A year later she would give up such words and slip into her Catholic uniform, and into squealing on my brother and me when we “cussed this” and “cussed that.”

I tried to convince them that if we improved the way we looked we might get along better in life. White people would like us more. They might invite us places, like their homes or front yards. They might not hate us so much.

My sister called me a “craphead,” and got up to leave with a stalk of grass dangling from her mouth. “They’ll never like us.”

profanity
using bad words;
swearing



7 *chavalo*: Spanish for “young person”

8 **Armenian**: from Armenia, a country in southeast Europe



My brother's mood lightened as he talked about the ditch—the white water, the broken pieces of glass, and the rusted car fenders that awaited our knees. There would be toads, and rocks to smash them.

David King, the only person we knew who resembled the middle class, called from over the fence. David was Catholic, of Armenian⁸ and French **descent**, and his closet was filled with toys. A bear-shaped cookie jar, like the ones on television, sat on the kitchen counter. His mother was remarkably kind while she put up with the racket we made on the street. Evenings, she often watered the front yard and it must have upset her to see us—my brother and I and others—jump from trees laughing, the unkillable kids of the very poor, who got up unshaken, brushed off, and climbed into another one to try again.

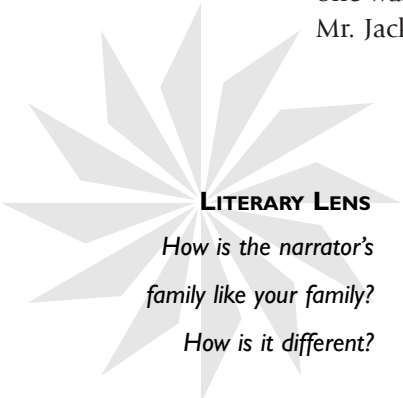
David called again. Rick got up and slapped grass from his pants. When I asked if I could come along he said no. David said no. They were two years older so their affairs were different from mine. They greeted one another with foul names and took off down the alley to look for trouble.

I went inside the house, turned on the television, and was about to sit down with a glass of Kool-Aid when Mom shooed me outside.

"It's still light," she said. "Later you'll bug me to let you stay out longer. So go on."

I downed my Kool-Aid and went outside to the front yard. No one was around. The day had cooled and a breeze rustled the trees. Mr. Jackson, the plumber, was watering his lawn and when he saw me he turned away to wash off his front steps. There was more than an hour of light left, so I took advantage of it and decided to look for work. I felt suddenly alive as I skipped down the block in search of an overgrown flower bed and the dime that would end the day right.

descent
heritage; birth



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RESPONDING TO UNIT TWO

Family Album

REFLECTING

1. There are many different kinds of families in this unit. Some include only one parent. Others include grandparents and brothers and sisters. Based on what you have read, what do you think makes a family?
2. Of all the families you read about in this unit, which would you most like to have as your next-door neighbor? Why?
3. Think about Ashleigh’s predicament in “Ashes.” What do you think she will do? What would you do in her place?
4. What does the minister mean when he says at Grandpa’s funeral, “This is a day to celebrate life”?

ANALYZING

5. Each of the families featured in this unit has strengths and weaknesses. Develop a chart like the one below and list the strengths and weaknesses of each family.

Selection	Family Members	Strengths	Weaknesses
Looking for Work	<i>Gary Sister Brother Mother</i>	<i>Laughter Caring Support</i>	<i>No money Mom overworked Kids on their own a lot</i>
A Plate of Peas			
Ashes			
After the Divorce			
Atomic Blue Pieces			
The Night the Bear Ate Goombaw			
Saying Good-bye to the Tall Man			

6. What is the main idea, or major theme, of Gary Soto’s autobiographical account, “Looking for Work”?
7. “The Night the Bear Ate Goombaw” might be called a “comedy of errors.” Analyze the mix-ups in this story that help to make it amusing.

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8. The mood of a piece of writing is the primary feeling it conveys. For example, “The Night the Bear Ate Goombaw” has a light-hearted mood. How would you describe the mood in the poem “Because I could not stop for Death”?
9. **Active Reading** What events in the story “A Plate of Peas” were you able to predict in your reading? How often do you estimate you used the Active Reading strategies of questioning and predicting in this unit?

DISCUSSING

Different people in a family often take on different roles. For example, one person might be seen as the most responsible, another might be considered the most lighthearted, and a third might be thought of as the most emotional. What roles do you fulfill in your family? What roles do you perform in your life as a student and as a friend?

WRITING

Tales of Great Aunt Jack Most families have stories that are passed from person to person and generation to generation. Interview family members about another family member’s famous adventure or about a long-standing family tradition—or simply make one up! Use your interviews to develop an essay or a short story.

Look at Us Find photos of your family to create an album of your history. Assemble the photos in a book of your own making, starting with pictures of you and others when you were a baby and progressing to the present. At each stage, write a short account of your impressions, memories, thoughts, or feelings about the people in the photographs.

WORK IN PROGRESS

Roots As a class, work together to decide what a family tree showing extended family members or a friendship tree showing a circle of friends might look like. When you have gathered all your ideas, choose either the family tree or the friendship tree to work on individually. Try to include birth and death dates in the family tree and phone numbers or e-mail addresses in the friendship tree.

Families of the World, Unite! Choose a country you have never been to and research the culture and traditions of families in the country. Answer questions such as “What do families do for recreation?” “What is the average family size?” “What chores are assigned to the children?” Think of questions you’d like answered; then research the subject and give a short presentation.