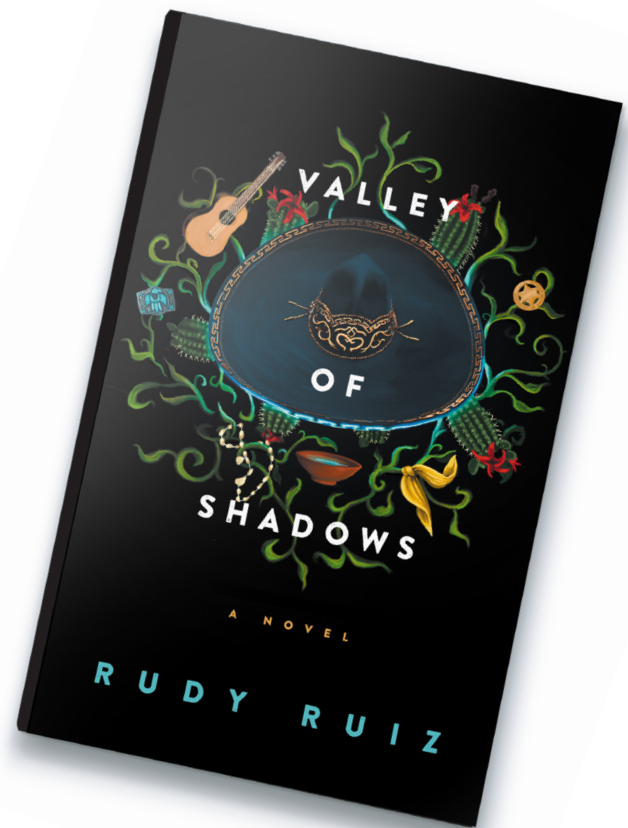


TEACHING & DISCUSSION GUIDE

VALLEY OF SHADOWS

A NOVEL

BY RUDY RUIZ



TEACHING & DISCUSSION GUIDE: FACING ISOLATION, SOCIAL INJUSTICE & MULTIGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

SETTING UP DISCUSSIONS:

Valley of Shadows is as much about a place as it is about the people that populate it. As the novel's title implies, the shadow of history leans long and lingers along the U.S.-Mexico border. The echoes of people who have passed physically from this world also live on. The caprices of history as well as climate bring shifting meaning to the border, impacting the lives of the townspeople of the mythical bordertown of Olvido. Some of the themes that permeate the story are: grief and isolation, the injustices suffered by the Apache and Mexican residents of the region who suddenly find themselves at the mercy of Anglo-American settlers amidst America's Western expansion, permeable borders, and the enduring effects of past family traumas in future generations. One thing is certain, as our protagonist's journey illuminates: we cannot face, much less overcome, these still relevant challenges by ourselves. Solitario Cisneros turns to friends and community – living and dead – as he grapples with how to rejoin society amidst his crippling grief and guilt in order to save his town from evil and destruction.

RECAPPING KEY CHARACTERS:

Solitario Cisneros – Solitario has felt lonely and isolated his whole life. He is convinced a mystical family curse

stands between him and his elusive dream of love and companionship. Justice and honor are his guiding principles, keeping him on steady ground while everything around him is constantly shifting. When we meet him, Solitario has lost everything that mattered to him in life. He is a recluse, hiding from the world.

Onawa – Onawa is a young Mexican-Apache woman who has loved Solitario since she first met him and saved his life. Enthusiastic and idealistic, Onawa is a gifted seer and healer, but she is constrained by the discrimination against her both her ethnic background and her gender.

Elias – Elias is Solitario's right-hand man and best friend. He is a loyal companion in both life and death. When he and his family come to a tragic end, his spirit devotes itself to saving his surviving daughter and to exacting revenge.

Mr. Boggs – Mr. Boggs is a banker who has dared to venture from the safety of Boston to the wilderness of the West in search of his fortune. In the process, he risks exposing his family to the deadly risks of life on the frontier. Unlike some of his fellow Anglo settlers, Mr. Boggs strives to see past the color of people's skin or their native language, making him a potentially trustworthy partner in saving the town of Olvido.

The Dobbs Twins – Two young men who served as deputies to the murdered Sheriff Tolbert. They remind Solitario of his own failed relationship with his brother, but also give him hope

that younger generations of Americans might be more tolerant of the Mexican and Apache people.

Minerva – Minerva is Solitario’s grandmother. She is a bruja who in a moment of rage and sorrow cast a curse that haunts her beloved grandson.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Consider Solitario’s journey from the moment his grandmother Minerva bids him to leave Caja Pinta in order to feel the powerful family curse. Which of the other characters are most vital to his growth as a person? Why?
2. The characters in the novel are very much rooted in a sense of place. Olvido is the mythical bordertown setting of the novel. El Escondido is the ranch Solitario hides out on, communing with his wife Luz’s spirit. However, Solitario ended up here after fleeing his birthplace of Caja Pinta and La Frontera. How much of Solitario’s identity comes from where he was born and raised? How much of who he is – and who he strives to become also depends on him going beyond La Frontera? What does his experience in the Rurales mean for him? How does it change him? And what does Olvido mean to him? How does he feel when he must re-enter society as a Mexican-American? Do you see sense of place as important in your own life and self-identity?
3. Solitario’s destiny seems defined by the circumstances of his birth, when he is born as the younger twin, orphaned and cursed in one fell swoop. What do you feel la maldición de Caja Pinta represents in the story? Do you believe it is real or self-propagated? How does it relate to history and social issues that persist today? Do you ever feel like you must fight to rise above some pre-ordained destiny? Why?
4. Solitario wishes to escape the family curse and Onawa yearns to find her place in the world. However, the obstacles standing between them and their dreams are just as large. What are those obstacles? Which are internal and which are external?
5. Both la maldición de Caja Pinta (Fulgencio’s family curse) and the presence of macho pride are major challenges for Solitario. How important do you think it is that Solitario understand what part of his problems come from the curse and what part lies within himself? Do you think he succeeds in tackling both aspects of what is preventing him from being a good partner for Luz and later Onawa?
6. Solitario is close to people who have died. He sees and

talks to them. What role do these departed spirits play in his life? Do you ever feel a spiritual connection to loved ones who have departed? If so, what role do they – or their memories – play in your life?

7. Onawa often rescues Solitario yet is treated poorly by most of the villagers. How do you feel about Onawa? Might she be the true hero of the novel?
8. At the end of the novel, is Solitario still truly alone?
9. The novel is written in the style of magical realism. What did you think of the magical aspects of the story? What did they represent to you?
10. Do you think Solitario overcame his curse or is he still on a journey that has not come to a conclusion at the end of the novel? How and why?

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:

1. How did reading Valley of Shadows make you think or rethink about the history of the U.S.-Mexico border and the classic tradition of American Westerns?
2. What obstacles do you feel exist between you and your dreams for your life, both internally and externally? Do you ever feel constrained by the weight of history? What are you doing to try to overcome those obstacles? Who do you think can be of most help to you in your journey?
3. Have you ever experienced any of the gender role challenges that Solitario and Onawa ran into in life, like his macho pride and her marginalization by others? If so, how has that experience made you feel? Is there anything you would like to do in your life to help yourself or others overcome obstacles created by traditional gender roles or value systems?
4. What do borders mean to you? Do you feel you transcend borders in your own life, whether those may be physical, emotional, generational or spiritual? Do you ever feel other people have a different view of borders than you do? Have you ever tried to change somebody’s mind about how they see the difference between one side of a border and another? What do you find most helpful in changing a person’s mind about something like that?
5. How did a climate event shape the story in Valley of Shadows? How does it relate to the global challenge of climate refugees today?
6. Social injustice and its history of being propagated by

authority figures against minority groups is as relevant today as it was in the 1880's. What can we take away from Valley of Shadows in thinking about ways to approach racially and ethnically motivated discrimination and violence today?

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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