



TEACHING & DISCUSSION GUIDE

THE BORDER BETWEEN US

A NOVEL BY RUDY RUIZ

Book Club & Classroom Discussion Guide: Coming of Age in an Immigrant Family

SETTING UP DISCUSSIONS

The Border Between Us is a border Bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story that charts the journey of Ramón Lopez in pursuit of his American dream within the context of his Mexican-American immigrant family's own difficult history, thwarted aspirations and complex dynamics.

Some of the themes broadly highlighted in the story are: the U.S.-Mexico border, immigration, the generational divides caused by acculturation, the inspiration and challenges of reaching for the American dream as a first-generation U.S.-born citizen. Specifically, within our protagonist's journey, the highly personal coming-of-age themes that Ramón López grapples with include: the transition from wide-eyed

childhood admiration of one's parents to the adolescent realization that our parents are flawed human beings, first loves and relationships, personal growth, the importance of friendships and mentors, and the struggle to balance the gravity of culture, family and home with great ambitions.

RECAPPING KEY CHARACTERS

Ramón López – At the start, Ramón is a young boy who innocently worships his father. He adopts his dad's faith in the American Dream and aspires to great things in life. We learn that he is a sensitive and thoughtful soul early on. And, as we witness his family's struggles through his maturing perspective over the years, we feel for him and can't help but

root for him as he tries to figure out who he is, what he truly values, and how to build his life, reaching for his dreams without forsaking his true self.

Joe López – Joe is Ramón's father. He is a hard-working tire man. He spends his days shuttling back and forth to Matamoros, Mexico to pick up worn tire casings and bring them for recapping at this plant in Brownsville, Texas. Joe's parents came from Mexico during the Mexican Revolution and he was raised in poverty but harbors a vibrant American dream of entrepreneurial success, which he strives to impart on his son along with values and wisdom rooted in Mexican culture. He is generous and devoted to family, but his shortcomings and miscalculations stump him at every turn and over time his failures create a painful chasm between himself and his son.

Marisol López – Marisol is Ramón's mother, Joe's long-suffering wife. She finds herself trapped in the traditional role of wife and mother, one exacerbated by her husband's machismo. She becomes focused on raising Ramón's younger brother when he is born with developmental disabilities. But as life goes on and the challenges she faces mount, she finds a way to persevere in becoming her own person as well as a vital provider to her family.

Grandma Fina – Grandma Fina is the heart of the López family, the matriarch. She is Joe's mother, Ramón's grandmother, a caretaker for her many failed sons, an adoptive mother one of her grandkids, and a source of stability and hope whenever anyone in her orbit is in need.

Rubén López – Rubén is Ramón's younger brother. After a grueling breech birth, Rubén must face life with a range of physical and intellectual disabilities. He thus dominates most of their parents' attention and resources, often rendering Ramón a "glass child." While Ramón at first resents Rubén for having changed the family dynamic so drastically, over time he comes to appreciate his younger brother's quiet wisdom, patience, positivity and perseverance.

Cousin David – Ramón's favorite cousin is a light in the darkness during some of the most turbulent times in his life. Raised by Grandma Fina, Cousin David is like another brother to Ramón, pure of heart and loyal to a fault.

Julia Guerrero – Julia is a talented artist who becomes

Ramón's first infatuation, introducing him to his first experiences as a young adult away from his family.

Reeser – Reeser is Julia's boyfriend, a surfer with a penchant for driving too fast while listening to heavy metal and for taking out life's frustrations on his fellow Dungeons & Dragons adventurers.

Clara – Clara is a wealthy New Yorker who Ramón meets and dates in college. She opens his eyes to a whole different world in the Big City, one that challenges Ramón to reevaluate his dreams and their potential costs.

Dante – Dante is Ramón's best friend, a football player he tutors in high school.

Uncle Bobby – Joe's brother and the once-great hope of the López clan.

Mr. Dean – A well-meaning counselor that makes a big difference in Ramón's life.

Marcela Martinez – Ramón's art teacher and mentor, she prepares Ramón to pursue his dreams as an artist.

Fernandez Family – Distant relatives of the López family who still reside across the border in Mexico, enduring difficult conditions with the help of Ramón's father.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 When we first meet Ramón, he and his father embark on a mission across the border. What does Ramón begin to learn during this experience?
- 2 When Ramón receives a free donut at the end of the first chapter, what do his subsequent actions symbolize?
- 3 What does the story about the chile show us about Ramón's character and his internal reflections about the balance between ethics and aspirations?
- 4 In "That Boy Could Run," why do you think Uncle Bobby does what he does? If you had been in Ramón's shoes, what might you have done the same or differently?

- 5 In “Allegiance,” Ramón must choose between his own goals and loyalty to his family. Have you ever been in that position? What do you think about Ramón’s choices in this situation?
- 6 Why do you think Ramón’s father faces so many challenges in pursuit of his American dream? And how does that impact his relationship with Ramón?
- 7 How do you think Ramón’s brother, Rubén, influences Ramón’s journey?
- 8 As Ramón grows into a teenager, he faces a range of challenges. Which stood out to you as the most difficult? Have you ever encountered similar situations in your life? How do you think they impact Ramón in his personal growth? How did your experiences impact your life and your sense of self?

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

There are many types of borders explored in the novel. Which stand out to you? Do you feel Ramón was trapped by the borders or pushed to grow beyond them? Do you think he succeeded or failed? As you reflect on Ramón’s story, do you see any parallels in your own life?

- 1 How did reading *The Border Between Us* affect your view and opinions about the U.S.-Mexico border and immigration?
- 2 What borders do you encounter every day? What might you apply from Ramón López’s experiences in dealing with those borders within your own life?
- 3 The relationship between Ramón and his parents is complex, involving not just the usual dynamics but also those added by border life and acculturation as well as the presence of a disabled sibling in the family. How did reading about the López family cause you to reflect on the intricacies of your own family life?

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