

# Discussion Guide to the Novels of Pam Muñoz Ryan | Scholastic.com

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This Discussion Guide features the novels of Pam Muñoz Ryan. Scholastic also provides a [discussion guide](#) for *Esperanza Rising* featuring guided student questions with answers provided for an instructor.

## Discussion Guide to the Novels of Pam Muñoz Ryan

### About Pam Muñoz Ryan

Pam Muñoz Ryan has written over twenty-five books for young people. She draws on the rich cultural heritage of her family background, as well as important segments of American history, to create memorable books that are exciting to read, and that depict strong human values. Many of her books explore aspects of the Latino experience in America, or illuminate little-known but significant episodes in American history. All of her books are based on extensive research, and reflect her strong commitment to cultural and historical authenticity, as well as respect for her audience of young readers.

Born and raised in California's San Joaquin Valley, Pam Muñoz Ryan comes from a background that is an ethnic mix of Spanish, Mexican, Basque, Italian, and Oklahoman. Her grandparents on her mother's side came to the U.S. from Mexico in the 1930s. She is the oldest of three sisters and the oldest of twenty-three cousins on her mother's side, so many of her childhood memories revolve around big, noisy family gatherings with nearby cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. "When I was with one grandmother, I ate enchiladas and rice and beans," she says. "When I was with the other, I ate black-eyed peas, fried okra, and peach cobbler."

When she was in fifth grade, her family moved across town. She was the new kid at school who didn't fit in, and that's when she discovered the East Bakersfield branch library. "It became my refuge," says Pam. "I spent many long, hot valley summers riding my bike to the library. The library became my favorite hang-out because my family didn't have a swimming pool and the library was air-conditioned. That's how I got hooked on reading and books."

Pam received her bachelor's degree at San Diego State University. After college, she knew that she wanted to work in a profession that had something to do with books, and she thought that would be teaching. She became a bilingual teacher and an administrator, and then a full-time mom, raising her four children. Eventually she went back to school and received her master's degree in education, and it was then that a professor suggested she consider writing. That's when she finally knew what she really wanted to do.

Today Pam is a full-time writer and lives about thirty miles north of San Diego near the Pacific Ocean with her husband, her grown children who frequently come and go, and their two dogs.

### Riding Freedom

Illustrated by Brian Selznick

Scholastic Press 1998 Ages 8-12 144 pages

Hardcover: 0-590-95766-X \$16.95

Paperback: 0-439-08796-1 \$4.99

Spanish Paperback: 0-439-23761-0 \$4.50

Arizona Young Reader's Award  
California Young Reader Medal Winner,  
Texas Bluebonnet Award (Noteworthy)  
Willa Cather Award  
IRA Teacher's Choice  
Parenting Magazine "Reading Magic" Award

"Ebullient...tautly structured...With a pacing that moves along at a gallop, this is a skillful execution of a fascinating historical detail." - *Publisher Weekly*, starred review

"Fascinating... a compact and exciting story... kids will read it just for the adventure." - *School Library Journal*

"Lively... middle-schoolers will love the horse adventures and the stories of [Charley Parkhurst's] trickery." - *Booklist*

### **About the Book**

Charlotte Parkhurst is orphaned at age two when her parents are tragically killed in a wagon accident in mid-nineteenth century Massachusetts. Raised in an orphanage, Charlotte learns little about love and much about survival. Her only friends in the orphanage are Vern, the stable hand who helps develop her natural affinity for horses, and Hayward, an awkward younger boy who is devoted to her after she rescues him from bullies. When Hayward is adopted and Charlotte is forbidden to go to the stable, she boldly runs away from the orphanage.

Life would be difficult enough as a runaway, but for a girl it would be almost impossible. So Charlotte disguises herself as a boy and becomes "Charley," using some of Hayward's old clothes and ingeniously dodging close human contact. She not only survives, but she thrives, first by being a stable hand, and then by becoming a stage coach driver, initially in Rhode Island and later in California, always maintaining her male disguise. Charlotte finally realizes her dream of owning land, and eventually votes, disguised as a man, in a national election - she is the first woman to vote in the United States, fifty-two years before women gained the legal right to cast a ballot. She maintains her male identity until the end and it is not discovered that she is actually a woman until after her death.

### **Discussion Questions**

#### **Characters**

1. What circumstances have contributed to Charlotte's survival?
2. Why did Charlotte leave the orphanage? What part did Mrs. Boyle and Mr. Millshark and Hayward have in Charlotte's decision to run away?
3. Why does Ebenezer give Charlotte a chance to work at his stable? At what point does he realize that she is a girl? Why doesn't he turn her in to Mr. Millshark?
4. How does the trip to California change Charlotte? What are the things she can do in California that she couldn't do in the East?
5. How does Charlotte compensate for her bad eye after her accident with the horse? Why does she insist on driving again?

6. Charlotte keeps to herself, but she does need other people. Which other characters are the most important influences on her life? How does each of them contribute to her personality and to her development?

### **Setting**

1. How is Charlotte's life at the orphanage different from the boys in the orphanage? How does the time she spends in the stable affect her? How does the time she spends in the kitchen affect her?
2. How is Charlotte's life different in the West than it was in Rhode Island? Why did she want to move to California? What were the good and bad points of living in California in the mid-nineteenth century?
3. How does Charlotte's life change after she buys her own land? Why was it so important to her to have property of her own?

### **Themes**

1. What is the importance of the strip of leather that Charlotte always wears around her wrist? Can objects provide a sense of comfort for an individual? What other objects give this sense of comfort?
2. What does Vern mean when he says that "a name ought to stand for something." What other lessons does Charlotte learn from Vern?
3. What role does friendship play in this story? Is it possible to live a life without friends? How important are friends in your life?
4. What is the meaning of the title, *Riding Freedom*? How many different ways does the theme of freedom appear in this story? What does "freedom" mean to you?

### **Esperanza Rising**

Scholastic Press 2000 Ages 9-14 272 pages

Hardcover: 0-439-12041-1 \$15.95

Paperback: 0-439-12042-X \$5.99

Spanish Paperback: 0-439-39885-1 \$4.99

Audiobook Edition: *Esperanza Rising*. Listening Library, 2001.

ALA Pura Belpré Award

ALA Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults

Américas Award Honor Book

IRA Notable Book for a Global Society

Jane Addams Children's Book Award

Judy Lopez Memorial Award

NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People

Smithsonian Institution Notable Book for Children

Publishers Weekly Best Book of the Year

"Easy to booktalk, useful in classroom discussions, and accessible as pleasure reading, this well-written novel belongs in all collections" - *School Library Journal*, starred review

"Told in a lyrical, fairy tale-like style....Ryan poetically conveys Esperanza's ties to the land by crafting her stories to the rhythm of the seasons. Readers will be swept up by vivid descriptions." - *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"Ryan writes a moving story in clear, poetic language...the book offers excellent opportunities for discussion and curriculum support." - *Booklist*

## **About the Book**

This inspiring story of Esperanza Ortega's journey from a life of luxury in Mexico to a new life in the harsh conditions of a migrant labor camp in California in the 1930s is based on the life of the author's own grandmother.

Esperanza Ortega's happy life on her family's large ranch in Mexico ends abruptly with the murder of her father. Forced to flee their land and her greedy uncles who take it over, thirteen-year-old Esperanza and her mother escape with their former servants — her father's foreman Alfonso, his wife Hortensia, and their sixteen-year-old son Miguel — to a migrant camp in California. Abuelita, Esperanza's beloved grandmother, must stay in Mexico because of an injury that makes it difficult for her to travel. Life in the agricultural camps is a hard adjustment, and when Mama falls ill from exhaustion and the new climate, it is up to Esperanza to earn money by working in the packing sheds as well as helping with the chores of their new extended family in the farm camp. The transformation she undergoes from a pampered rich girl to a hardworking and compassionate young woman happens slowly as Esperanza struggles to understand her new life. Readers will gain a deep understanding of the historical forces of the Depression, labor strikes, and the immigrant experience in Southern California in the 1930s through Esperanza's story. The importance of family ties is underscored when Miguel returns secretly to Mexico bringing Abuelita north for a grand reunion with Esperanza and her mother.

## **Discussion Questions**

### **Characters**

1. What does Esperanza mean when she says to Miguel that there is a "deep river" that runs between them? How does this change when they move to California?
2. Discuss the characters of Tío Luis and Tío Marco. How are they different from Esperanza's father?
3. Why do Alfonso and Hortensia offer to take Esperanza and her mother to America with them even though they are risking their lives to help them escape?
4. On the train ride to California, Esperanza refuses to allow a peasant girl to touch her treasured doll; yet later she offers to give the doll to Isabel, Miguel's cousin. What has brought about this change in Esperanza's feelings?
5. Why does Esperanza dislike Marta when they first meet? What makes Esperanza change her mind about Marta?
6. Why is Mama the only one to get sick with Valley Fever? How does her illness affect Esperanza?

## Setting

1. Why does Esperanza's father have a special feeling for his land? Do you think every landowner in Mexico felt the "heartbeat" of the earth?
2. How does Abuelita's experience of leaving Spain for Mexico compare to Esperanza's of leaving Mexico for the United States?
3. Compare the two train rides - the one Esperanza and Miguel took as young children and the one they take to California. What is significant about the description of the earlier train ride in the story?
4. Compare the setting in Aguascalientes to the company camp in California. How is Esperanza's life different in each place? How is it similar?
5. Why do Josefina and Hortensia tell Esperanza and Miguel to shop only at the Japanese store? What does Alfonso mean when he tells Miguel that Mr. Yakota is "getting rich on other people's bad manners"?
6. Compare the strikers' camp to the company camp. How does seeing the strikers' camp affect Esperanza?

## Themes

1. When Esperanza still lives at El Rancho de las Rosas, she and her friends look forward to their Quinceañeras, their presentation parties, after which they would be old enough to marry, "rising to the positions of their mothers before them." Compare this idea of "rising" to the rest of the story and to the title. How does the meaning change?
2. Discuss the Mexican proverbs at the beginning of the book and how they relate to the story:  
*"He who falls today may rise tomorrow."*  
*"The rich person is richer when he becomes poor, than the poor person when he becomes rich."*
3. Look up the legend of the Phoenix that Esperanza's grandmother tells her about when they decide to leave for America. What does Abuelita mean when she says "We are like the phoenix?"
4. Why does the author name each chapter for a fruit or vegetable? What is the significance of each type of fruit or vegetable to that part of the story?
5. What is the significance of the rose cuttings that Alfonso and Miguel carry with them from Mexico?
6. Abuelita risks her life to rescue the crocheting, then gives it to Esperanza when she leaves Mexico. How does crocheting reflect their experiences? What does Abuelita mean when she speaks of "mountains and valleys" in the stitching?

## Becoming Naomi León

Scholastic Press 2004 Ages 8-12 256 pages

Hardcover: 0-439- 26969-5 \$16.95

Audiobook Edition: *Becoming Naomi León*. Listening Library, 2004.

"Ryan's sure-handed storytelling and affection for her characters convey a clear sense of Naomi's triumph." - *Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

"With its quirky characterizations and folksy atmosphere, this engrossing family drama resembles a Sharon Creech novel on the surface, but it has its own uniquely affecting emotional core." - *Horn Book*

### **About the Book**

Naomi and her brother Owen have been living happily for seven years with Gram, their great-grandmother, at Avocado Acres Trailer Rancho in Lemon Tree, California. When the mother who abandoned them shows up after a long absence, eleven-year-old Naomi is confused about her feelings. Soon Naomi learns about her mother's true motives, comes to trust Gram's ongoing devotion more than ever, and starts to unravel the mystery surrounding her father Santiago. A whirlwind trailer ride to Mexico, a new extended family that embraces her, and her participation in a local festival all help Naomi understand her León heritage and develop her own strength and determination. As these events unfold, Naomi begins to prepare for her greatest test — the day in court when her very future depends on speaking her truth — and she becomes who she is meant to be — the Naomi Soledad León Outlaw, Naomi the lioness, of her wildest dreams.

### **Discussion Questions**

#### **Characters**

1. What kind of person is Gram? Why is it important to Gram to keep Naomi and Owen living with her? Why didn't Gram tell the children about Santiago in the beginning?
2. Why does Naomi speak so softly? Does she act differently in school than she does at home? Why is it so easy for her to make friends with Blanca?
3. Why does Owen put tape on his clothes? How does this help him? Why do you think Owen has such a cheerful outlook on life, in spite of his handicaps?
4. Why does Terri Lynn change her name to Skyla? Why does she want to see her children again? Why does she treat Naomi and Owen so differently? Why doesn't she come to the school for the teacher's conferences?
5. Compare Santiago and Clive. How does each of them treat the children? Who do you think would make a more responsible and loving father? Why does Santiago run when he first sees Naomi and Owen?
6. Why do the men invite Naomi to help them carve the radishes? Do you think her skill in carving is inherited? Why does carving the animals make her feel good?

#### **Setting**

1. Compare Avocado Acres to Barrio Jalatlaco. What makes each a home? Does Naomi feel "at home" in each place?
2. What makes life in Lemon Tree so special to Naomi and Owen?

3. Is Naomi's school a safe place for her? Is it a safe place for Owen? Compare the way Owen is treated at school to the way he is treated at the hospital.
4. Look up information about La Noche de los Rábanos. What is special about this festival? Does your community have local festivals?
5. What do you think Santiago's life is like in his home village? Why can't Naomi and Owen go to live with him? Do you think they will in the future?

### **Themes**

1. Which characters act most like a mother in this story? Is it necessary to be related to be a "mother" to someone? In what ways does Skyla act like a mother; and in what ways does she frighten her children?
2. Which are the important friendships portrayed in the story? What does friendship mean to people and how does it affect their lives?
3. Look carefully at the names of the chapters. Why does the author name each chapter for a group of animals? How do the collective nouns describe the animals? How do they relate to what is happening in each chapter?
4. Chapter 10, halfway through the book, is called "A Schizophrenia of Hawks." What is the meaning of "schizophrenia"? Does this term apply to a character or characters in the story or to the action in that chapter? Explain.
5. At the end of the book, Mr. Marble says that Naomi has grown from a mouse to a lioness. What did he mean by that? In addition to Naomi, which other characters in the book change and grow to understand themselves better? Discuss the theme of growth in this story.

### **Exploring Themes in the Novels of Pam Muñoz Ryan**

#### **Names**

In *Riding Freedom* Vern says, "naming something was important. That a name ought to stand for something." Discuss the importance of "Naming" in all three of these books. Why does Vern call the horses names like Freedom, Justice, and Charity? What is the importance of Esperanza's name? Why does Naomi say that her "biggest problem" is her last name, and yet Gram is proud of the name Outlaw? Why does Terri Lynn change her name to Skyla? How does a name affect a person, a place, or an object? How are names important in your own life?

#### **Journeys**

Journeys are central in each of these stories. Discuss the ways in which each journey affects the characters - Charlotte's decision to run away from the orphanage, and then to go West; Esperanza and Mama's journey from Mexico to California; Naomi, Owen, and Gram's journey to Mexico. How does an actual journey help bring about changes in a character's life and affect the struggles each has to face?

#### **Freedom**

In all of these stories, the theme of Freedom emerges: freedom to determine your own destiny, to be in charge of your own life rather than allowing others to control you. Charlotte, Esperanza, and Naomi are all about the same age when these stories begin, yet they are each in a very different situation. Compare the amount of control each character has over her own destiny. Compare the different ways they each find to take control.

Who are the friends and/or family members who are most helpful to them, and who are the ones who would keep them from having the kind of life they want? How would you react if you found yourself in their shoes?

### **Goals**

Charlotte, Esperanza, and Naomi each have important goals they are working toward: Charlotte wants her own ranch, Esperanza wants to bring her grandmother to California, Naomi wants to stay with Gram and Owen. How does each of them work toward her goal? What are the personality traits and outside forces for each of these characters that help her reach her goals? How does working toward a goal contribute to each character's sense of herself?

### **Family**

There are many different types of Family in these books. Compare the family situations of Charlotte, Esperanza, and Naomi. How does each character's family — or lack of family — affect her life? Who do you think are the strongest mother figures? Who do you think are the strongest father figures? How does each of these characters feel about her family, and whom does each character count on the most? What does "family" mean to you?

### **Other Books to Compare and Contrast**

#### **Between Cultures**

*Before We Were Free*, by Julia Alvarez. Knopf, 2002. Many of 12-year-old Anita's relatives have emigrated to the United States, and she slowly realizes how precarious her life is in the Dominican Republic when her father and uncle are arrested.

*Behind the Mountains (First Person Fiction)*, by Edwidge Danticat. Orchard Books/Scholastic, 2002. Celiane Espérance and her family escape a politically unstable and impoverished Haiti, and start a new life in Brooklyn, New York. See also other titles in the First Person Fiction series.

*So Far From Home, The Diary of Mary Driscoll (Dear America)*, by Barry Denenberg. Scholastic, 1997. A thirteen-year-old girl flees from the Irish potato famine and endures hardship as a mill worker in Lowell, Massachusetts, during the 1840s.

*Dreams in the Golden Country, The Diary of Zipporah Feldman (Dear America)*, by Kathryn Lasky. Scholastic, 1998. A Jewish girl emigrates from Russia to a new life in New York City's lower east side in the early 1900s.

#### **Adventurous Women**

*Adaline Falling Star*, by Mary Pope Osborne, Scholastic Press, 2000. Half-breed Adaline suffers prejudice from her relatives in St. Louis while her father - the legendary Kit Carson - explores the West, and soon runs away in search of him.

*Booty: Girl Pirates of the High Seas*, by Sara Lorimer, illus. by Susan Synarski. Chronicle, 2002. Brief but



stirring accounts of twelve women throughout history who have defied convention to live lives of adventure, hardship, and sometimes cruelty.

*When Esther Morris Headed West*, by Connie Wooldridge, illus. by Jacqueline Rogers. Holiday House, 2001. A feisty woman heads for Wyoming Territory in 1869 where she becomes a justice of the peace, the first woman in the country to hold public office.

### **The Hard Life**

*The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child*, by Francisco Jimenez. Houghton Mifflin, 1999. The author, now a college professor, looks back on his childhood. As an immigrant from Tlaquepaque, Mexico, he came with his family to California, working in the agricultural fields in the 1940s. The story continues in *Breaking Through* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001)

*An Elegy on the Death of Cesar Chavez*, by Rudolfo A. Anaya, illus. by Gaspar Enriquez. Cinco Puntos Press, 2000. A biographical account and chronology accompany this poem that celebrates the achievements of this organizer of the farmworkers, and vividly evokes the powerful feelings he was able to raise in his admirers.

*Out of the Dust*, by Karen Hesse. Scholastic Press, 1997. Fourteen-year-old Billie Jo's narrative displays a gritty strength as she deals with terrible losses and daily hardships on an Oklahoma farm during the Dust Bowl years of the Great Depression.

*The Journal of C. J. Jackson, A Dust Bowl Migrant (My Name is America)*, by William Durbin. Scholastic, 2002. Effectively portrays the plight of the Dust Bowl families who became migrant workers in California.

*Survival in the Storm, The Dust Bowl Diary of Grace Edwards (Dear America)*, by Katelan Janke. Scholastic, 2002. Grace bravely faces life in a time of hardship.

### **Resourcefulness and Growth**

*Here Today*, by Ann Martin. Scholastic Press, 2004. Ellie has to cope with her mother's erratic behavior and decision to move to New York City to "find herself," while Ellie, her siblings, and her friend are subjected to bullying at school and vandalism in their neighborhood.

*The Same Stuff as Stars*, by Katherine Paterson. Clarion Books, 2002. Twelve-year-old Angel Morgan acts as the head of the family and cares for her younger brother as their mother often acts in strange ways. When the mother suddenly leaves the children with their great-grandmother, all of Angel's resourcefulness is necessary to create a solid family experience.

*The Young Man and the Sea*, by Rodman Philbrick. The Blue Sky Press/Scholastic, 2004. Skiff Beaman's fisherman father reacts to the death of Skiff's mother by drinking beer and letting his boat sink at their dock. It's up to Skiff to turn their life around, and he faces the challenge with courage and determination.

### **Web Sites**

The author's own web site: [www.pammunozryan.com/](http://www.pammunozryan.com/)

California Gold Rush information: [www.pbs.org/goldrush](http://www.pbs.org/goldrush)

Shadows of the Past (story of Charlotte Parkhurst): [www.sptddog.com/sotp/parkhurst.html](http://www.sptddog.com/sotp/parkhurst.html)

Photos of life during the Great Depression:

<http://history1900s.about.com/library/photos/blyindexdepression.htm>

List of collective nouns developed by the Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center:

<http://www.npwrc.usgs.gov/help/faq/animals/names.htm>

Alateen, a program to help teenagers whose lives have been affected by family members who abuse alcohol: [www.al-anon.alateen.org/alateen.html](http://www.al-anon.alateen.org/alateen.html)

Discussion guide written by Connie Rockman, children's literature consultant, adjunct professor of literature for children and young adults at the University of Bridgeport and Sacred Heart University, and editor of *The Eighth and Ninth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators* (H. W. Wilson, 2000).

- Part of Collection:

[Pam Muñoz Ryan Author Study](#)

- Subjects:

Great Depression, Main Idea and Details, Literature, Compare and Contrast, Plot, Character, Setting, Reading Response, Determination and Perseverance, Equality, Fairness, Justice, Extended Families, Immigration, Jobs, Careers, Work, Mexico, United States, Mexican and Mexican American, Social Studies through Literature, Women's Rights Movement, Kindness and Compassion, Tolerance and Acceptance, Foster Care, Friends and Friendship, Moving, Prejudice and Tolerance Experiences, Running Away, Survival

- Skills:

Compare and Contrast, Identifying Author's Purpose, Main Idea and Details, Plot, Character and Setting, Theme, Biographies, Social Studies