

A Discussion Guide to

PABLO CARTAYA



THE EPIC FAIL OF
ARTURO ZAMORA

MARCUS VEGA
DOESN'T SPEAK SPANISH

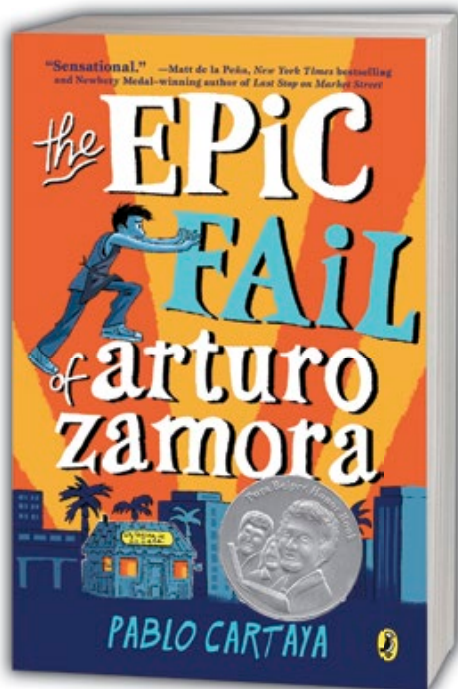


EACH TINY SPARK



A 2018 PURA BELPRÉ AUTHOR HONOR BOOK

**Save the restaurant. Save the town. Get the girl.
Make Abuela proud. Can thirteen-year-old
Arturo Zamora do it all, or is he in for a
BIG, EPIC FAIL?**



For Arturo, summertime in Miami means playing basketball until dark, sipping mango smoothies, and keeping cool under banyan trees. And maybe a few shifts as junior lunchtime dishwasher at Abuela's restaurant. Maybe. But this summer also includes Carmen, a poetry enthusiast who moves into Arturo's apartment complex and turns his stomach into a deep fryer. He almost doesn't notice the smarmy land developer who rolls into town and threatens to change it. Arturo refuses to let his family and community go down without a fight, and as he schemes with Carmen, Arturo discovers the power of poetry and protest through untold family stories and the work of José Martí.

★ **"Irresistibly exquisite."**

—KIRKUS REVIEWS

★ **"Engrossing."**

—BOOKLIST

★ **"Vibrant."**

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

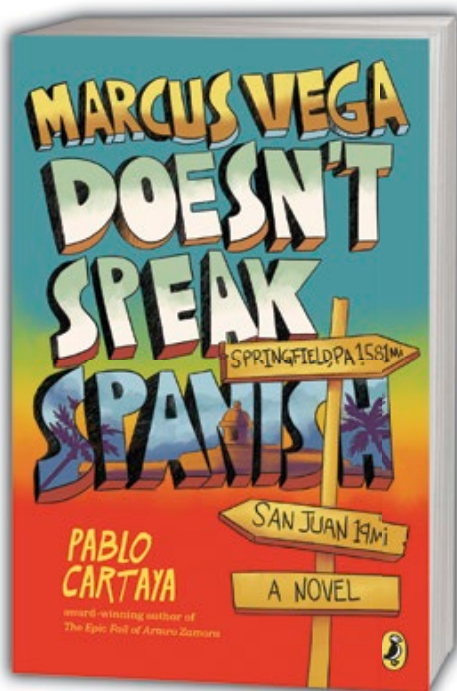
1. This novel begins with Arturo's "note to self." What is the effect of the book beginning here?
2. Why is food so important to Arturo and his family?
3. Look at Chapter 4, "ice scream: a dialogue." This chapter is very different than the rest of the novel. Why did the author choose to make this almost like a play with dialogue and stage directions?
4. Who was Jose Martí? Why is he so important for this book?
5. Carmen's protest sign reads "FAMILY IS COMMUNITY—COMMUNITY IS FAMILY." What does this mean?
6. After Arturo is upset because he feels like he failed, he takes a moment to directly address the reader of his book. "Dear reader, I told you not to be fooled by high expectations." Why do you think he talks directly to the reader? Did you feel like he was talking to you? Explain.
7. What are Arturo's epic fails? How do they impact him, and those around him, throughout the story?
8. Is Wilfrido Pipo evil? Why or why not?
9. Why does Arturo decide to use a poem to address the neighborhood?
10. Would you make any of the recipes at the end of the book? Why do you think the author included the recipes?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Arturo, Carmen, and Arturo's family protest Pipo's proposed plan. While their involvement is on a large scale, think of something that's happening in your own community and create a protest sign to advocate for yourself, your class, your school, or whoever! On the back of the sign, explain the history of the situation and propose an idea for how to fix it. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1, CCSS.ELA LITERACY.WHST.6-8.2)

Arturo's abuelo leaves him letters. Write a letter to your own future relatives—tell about a time when you made a difference in the world and give your future relative wisdom about how they could be a changemaker. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3)

One boy's search for his father leads him to Puerto Rico in this moving middle-grade novel.



Marcus Vega is six feet tall, 180 pounds, and the owner of a premature mustache. When you look like this and you're only in the eighth grade, you're both a threat and a target.

After a fight at school leaves Marcus facing suspension, Marcus's mom decides it's time for a change of environment. She takes Marcus and his younger brother to Puerto Rico to spend a week with relatives they don't remember or have never met. But Marcus can't focus knowing that his father—who walked out of their lives ten years ago—is somewhere on the island.

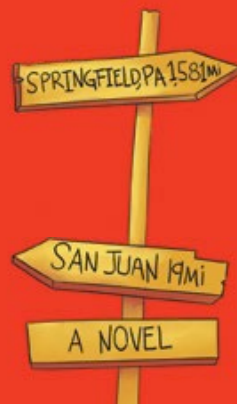
So begins Marcus's incredible journey, a series of misadventures that take him all over Puerto Rico in search of his namesake. Marcus doesn't know if he'll ever find his father, but what he ultimately discovers changes his life. And he even learns a bit of Spanish along the way.

★ **"Excellent."**

—SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL

★ **"An ideal read for boys or reluctant readers."**

—SCHOOL LIBRARY CONNECTION



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When we are introduced to Marcus, he's described as "the Mastodon of Montgomery Middle, the Springfield Skyscraper, the Moving Mountain, the Terrible Tower," but his actions and care for his brother contradict these images of him as a big monster. How would you describe Marcus instead?
2. Why does Principal Jenkins suggest Charlie attend another school?
3. Marcus's businesses help enforce school rules. Is it wrong that he's making money by doing this? Explain.
4. Do you think Danny's petition to keep Marcus in school was useful? Why did Danny start this petition?
5. Why does Marcus's mother eventually decide that the family should go to Puerto Rico?
6. The book is called *Marcus Vega Doesn't Speak Spanish*, and throughout the novel Marcus himself admits that he doesn't know the language. Is this true? Do you think Marcus doesn't know Spanish? Explain.
7. How do you feel about the fact that much of the Spanish dialogue isn't translated? Why might the author have chosen to not include an English translation or glossary?
8. Marcus gets angry a few times during this book—he punches Stephen, and later he also punches Sergio's truck. What could he do to better channel his emotions?
9. What does Charlie mean when he tells his father, "You broke the rules!" after he tries to explain his absence to Marcus?
10. Marcus observes that Puerto Rico changed his mom: "This post-Puerto Rico Mom is fierce. Who knew beautiful weather, old architecture, a gorgeous countryside, and exotic fruits and vegetables could do that to a person?" Do you think Puerto Rico changed Marcus and Charlie, too? If so, how?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

In the Author's Note at the end of the book, Pablo Cartaya explains that this book represents a Puerto Rico before it was devastated by hurricanes in 2017. Knowing that Puerto Rico's landscape was so changed by these events, do some research on Puerto Rico before and after the hurricanes, and write a compare and contrast report explaining the significant changes to the island after these events. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RST.6-8.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.7, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.6)

Keeping in mind the travel guides Charlie gets in the airport for Puerto Rico, create your own travel guide for the island. Your guide should incorporate images, text, and other elements to encourage travelers to visit Puerto Rico. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.4, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.6)

A sparkling middle grade novel about a daughter and father finding their way back to each other in the face of their changing family and community.



Emilia Torres has a wandering mind. It's hard for her to follow along at school, and sometimes she forgets to do what her mom or abuela asks. But she remembers what matters: a time when her family was whole and home made sense. When Dad returns from deployment, Emilia expects that her life will get back to normal. Instead, it unravels.

Dad shuts himself in the back stall of their family's auto shop to work on an old car. Emilia peeks in on him daily, mesmerized by his welder. One day, Dad calls Emilia over. Then, he teaches her how to weld. And over time, flickers of her old dad reappear.

But as Emilia finds a way to repair the relationship with her father at home, her community ruptures with some of her classmates, like her best friend, Gus, at the center of the conflict.

*PERFECT FOR FANS OF
SEE YOU IN THE COSMOS,
AMINA'S VOICE, AND
THE THING ABOUT JELLYFISH.*



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why does Emilia record videos to send to her father when he is deployed?
2. Emilia and her family drink café con leche, Cuban coffee. Her mother says that the smell of it is “the sweet aroma of our island [Cuba] and our ancestors.” What does that mean?
3. Why does Emilia choose to begin her tour at the Latino food store?
4. When Emilia discovers that the Olympic stadium was built by immigrants who then risked deportation, she wonders about the fate of her family members who are immigrants. She thinks: “Who makes the rules about who gets to stay somewhere and who has to leave?” This is a big question. Should someone have the power to dictate where another lives? If they stay or go?
5. Why do you think many students in Emilia’s class don’t know about the history of Park View and Merryville?
6. Why does Gus forgive Emilia for standing him up at Clarissa’s party?
7. Why does Mr. Richt cancel the travel brochure project?
8. Eventually, Emilia Rosa insists that Clarissa call her by her real name, instead of “Emi Rose.” Why is it so important that Emilia Rosa be called by her real, full name?
9. Describe Emilia’s relationships with her family (mother, father, and grandmother). Why would she be okay with her mother taking the job in San Francisco when her family is so rarely all together?
10. Emilia’s father makes her a video at the end of the book. How does Emilia react to this video?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Emilia and Gus’s video makes a big impact on their school, and Mr. Richt even hopes to share it with the community. In keeping with this moment in the text, make a video, like Emilia and Gus, about something going on at your school. The videos should include interviews and other footage relevant to the topic. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7)

So many of Pablo Cartaya’s books seek to understand familial connections, but they also highlight the families that we make for ourselves that often transcend biological relations. Keeping this in mind, create family trees (both biological and chosen), doing research on your family archives to construct relations and see connections. These projects should be creative and should be accompanied by a brief, reflective writing where you explain your creative processes. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.10, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.7)

About
PABLO CARTAYA



Pablo Cartaya is an award-winning author, speaker, actor, and educator. In 2018, he received a Pura Belpré Author Honor for his middle grade novel, *The Epic Fail of Arturo Zamora*. His second novel, *Marcus Vega Doesn't Speak Spanish*, is available now. His third novel, *Each Tiny Spark*, publishes in 2019. Learn more about Pablo at pablocartaya.com and follow him on Twitter @phcartaya.

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