

Educator Guide for **Alebrijes** by Donna Barba Higuera



Summary

This is the story as it was told to me by Leandro the Mighty.

For 400 years, Earth has been a barren wasteland. The few humans that survive scrape together an existence in the cruel city of Pocatel — or go it alone in the wilderness beyond, filled with wandering spirits and wyrms. They don't last long.

13-year-old pickpocket Leandro and his sister Gabi do what they can to forge a life in Pocatel. The city does not take kindly to Cascabel like them — the descendants of those who worked the San Joaquin Valley for generations.

When Gabi is caught stealing precious fruit from the Pocatelan elite, Leandro takes the fall. But his exile proves more than he ever could have imagined — far from a simple banishment, his consciousness is placed inside an ancient drone and left to fend on its own. But beyond the walls of Pocatel lie other alebrijes like Leandro who seek for a better world — as well as mutant monsters, wasteland pirates, a hidden oasis, and the truth.

From Donna Barba Higuera, Newbery and Pura Belpré Medal-winning author of *The Last Cuentista*, comes another novel to astonish us and create a whole new imaginative world; that holds a mirror to our own.

Note for Educators

The guide will have suggestions for teachers in italics. This guide includes activities and questions for middle grade readers (ages 10-14/4th-7th grade)

About the Author

Donna Barba Higuera grew up in Central California and now lives in the Pacific Northwest. She has spent her entire life blending folklore with her experiences into stories that fill her imagination. Now she weaves them to write picture books and novels. Her books include the *New York Times* best-selling *The Last Cuentista*, which received the Newbery Medal and Pura Belpré Award; *Lupe Wong Won't Dance*, which received the Pura Belpré honor, Sid Fleischman award and PNBA award. She's also written the picture books *El Cucuy Is Scared, Too!*, *It's Navidad El Cucuy*, as well as *The Yellow Handkerchief*. She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her family which consists of her husband, children, dogs, chickens, and frogs.

About the Discussion Guide Creator

Patricia Ruiz-Rivera, author of the educator guide, has a doctoral degree in Comparative Literature with a focus on Latin American and French culture, fiction, and history. Patricia is an avid reader who speaks five languages, loves golden retriever puppies, and drinks copious amounts of coffee.

Before Reading

Students will complete mini-research projects, answer critical questions and discuss expectations about the book. As a teacher, you can facilitate discussions in the classroom or a Learning Management System (LMS) such as Canvas, Blackboard, or Moodle.

1. Book Title:

What does *alebrijes* mean?

2. Mini Dictionary:

There are a few unfamiliar words or phrases that come into play in this novel. Review this mini dictionary with students and ask them to write down any unfamiliar words, look them up on an online dictionary, and write their definition in your notebook.

- a. **Hongo:** mushroom
- b. **Cascabel:** rattle
- c. **No digas nada:** Don't say anything
- d. **Por supuesto:** of course!
- e. **Gracias:** Thank you
- f. **Loca:** Crazy woman/girl
- g. **Cállate:** Shut up
- h. **Ven acá:** Come here
- i. **Saben que:** You know
- j. **Tataratata abuelo/a:** great-great grandfather/grandmother
- k. **Tonterías:** nonsense/silly things
- l. **Delincuente:** criminal
- m. **Por si necesitamos huir:** In case we need to flee
- n. **No lo hagas:** Don't do it
- o. **Hijo:** son
- p. **Gusano:** worm
- q. **¿Qué hay de nuestras familias?:** what about our families?
- r. **Que bonito:** How nice
- s. **Escuela:** school
- t. **¿Estás seguro?:** are you sure?
- u. **Quien sea:** whoever

3. Summary:

Read the book summary printed above and keep a running list of words you may be unfamiliar with in your notebook. Write down ways in which you think the story will unfold, including predictions based on details and examples from the summary. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4; 4-5.2]**

4. Research the Author:

Research the writer of the book, Donna Barba Higuera. Study her author biography and do some research on the books that she had previously written – particularly her last science fiction book, *The Last Cuentista*. What is that book about? Why do you think she wanted to write *Alebrijes*? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.4]**

5. Dystopian Literature:

Research what the word dystopia means and look up the summary of major teen dystopian books such as *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner*, and *The Giver*. What do all of those books have in common? What is the thematic relevance of these books?

Reading Comprehension

Students will keep an interactive notebook to record thoughts, feelings, questions, and concerns while reading *Alebrijes*. As the teacher, you will facilitate discussions with students who are in the process of reading the book.

1. In your notebook, write down the characters from the book with a brief description of who they are and what their role is in relation to our narrator/main character, Leandro. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.6]**
2. Before the story begins, we see a map of this new world! How do you make sense of it? What are some names that you should be looking out for before you enter the story? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RF.5.4B]**
3. After that wondrous map, we read an inscription that says, “This is the story as it was told to me by Leandro the Mighty.” What do you think this means? Is this a framing narrative? Look up what a framing narrative is and discuss it with your classmates. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5-7.5]**
4. One of the first words of the first chapter is *wyrm*. What word does it remind you of? Why is it spelled with a y? Look up the word *wyrm* in a dictionary. Read the wiki for The Dragon in Beowulf. What are the different meanings of this word? How can it help shape what will later come in the story? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4]**
5. Who is Tía Lula? How is she important to the main character?
6. The narrator says, “The only reason The Cascabeles made it inside the city years ago was the sun above —and ignorance of the danger that lay under our feet as we passed through the valley” on page 3. What do you think this means? What has happened in this world? Who are the Cascabeles? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.7.6]**
7. *Alebrijes* discusses instances of food rationing and food insecurity. Can you look up these terms? How does that make you feel? Read the following sentence from the book, “Yesterday, Gabi didn’t earn a single papa, and Tía Lula ate most of the two I’d earned.” Why do you think the Regime is rationing food? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4 and 4-8.7]**

8. On page 9, we hear about the “dangers that lie outside Pocatel.” Look at the map from the beginning of the novel. Can you see what these dangers might be? If you do, what might these dangers be?
9. What is the main incident that happens in chapter 2? How does the incident with the man with the sunken cheeks make you feel? What does this tell us about the world Leandro and Gabi live in?
10. On page 25, we see the lyrics to a song, “Canción de Cascabeles.” Could you put the lyrics to this song on Google Translate. Given the English translation, what do you think this means? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4]**
11. In chapter 3, Leandro sees a worm up close for the very first time. What is happening here? Is it important or unimportant? Lula also calls Gabi and Leandro “little gusanos,” which is interesting because gusano means worm. Do you think this was intentional? If so, what does this mean? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4 and 6.7]**
12. What happened to Lula by the end of Chapter 4? How is it relevant to the story? What do you think will happen? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.3]**
13. “One more day, Gabi. And we leave Pocatel forever,” Leandro tells his sister on page 63. Do you think this will happen? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.3]**
14. Who is Director Marguerite? What are her ulterior motives?
15. Leandro and Gabi make a huge discovery in chapter 6. What does this mean about the life they had been living? How will this discovery shape their lives from that moment on? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.3]**
16. On page 115, the Emperor says, “We will not speak of deviating from what has kept us alive all these centuries. Preservation above all. Preservation of our customs.” What is the tone of his statement? What do you think he’s proposing? How do you think it’ll affect the Cascabeles? What does a Thinning mean here? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4]**
17. On Chapter 11, Leandro says, “Unlike Celia Stone, I won’t cry. And I won’t lower my eyes to anyone.” What happened with Celia and what does this tell us about Leandro’s character?
18. Leandro and others discuss the Old World (*el mundo viejo*) in regard to pets. What other changes do you think this world and our world have? Use evidence from the book to support your answer. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.1]**
19. We also get a flashback to when Gabi first found an *alebrije*. What kind of alebrije did she find? What is an alebrije in this book?
20. Over the coming chapters, we learn about alebrijes. We see examples such as *Cats: Felis Catus Electronicis* and *Dogs: Canus Lupis Familiaris Electronicis*. Look up the scientific name for cats and dogs. How do they compare to the names listed above? What do you think the *electronicis* part means? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4]**

21. Chapter 12 unleashes the secret of *neural links*. What do these mean? Have you heard about this? Can you think of other examples of how this has come up in the media? Think of the 2009 movie, *Avatar*. What happens in this movie that is related to neural links? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.7]**
22. What is a Spark? Can you write down what it means in your notebook?
23. Who is Dolores and what bargain does Leandro set with her? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.3]**
24. On page 159, you find the saying, “Sana sana colita de rana.” There are plenty of *refranes* (sayings or idioms) throughout the book. What do you think the significance of this is? Do you know any sayings or idioms in English? Which ones? Why do you think they’re important in everyday language? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4]**
25. Pages 148 and 186 feature some beautiful drawings, what do they mean? What are we seeing? Why do you think it was important to include this artwork in the book? These drawings were made by David Álvarez, an incredibly talented illustrator and picture book maker. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.7]**
26. The name, Selah, means to “lift up or exalt” in Hebrew. Who is Selah? Why is she important? What do you think is the relationship between her and the meaning of her name?**[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4]**
27. Who are the *alebrijes* that Leandro runs into? What are their names? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4]**
28. “Some of us traveled the Outlands longer than others. We get to start over,” Jovi says, (197). How does this make you feel? Why is this moment so significant for Leandro? How does this help him reframe his life? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.5]**
29. Something major happens at the end of chapter 17. What is it? How does this change Leandro’s journey? He also uncovers more information about the other *alebrijes* in the following chapter. What is it?
30. “If we want to save ourselves and our families, we have to go back,” (285). Why do you think Leandro says this? What does this tell us about his personal character? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.3]**
31. What happens when Leandro goes back to Pocatel?
32. “Our only chance to survive is together,” Leandro yells out in page 340. What does this mean? How is his response different than the response of the governmental figures we saw earlier in the book? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.2]**
33. What happens between Leandro and Gabi in chapter 34? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.3]**
34. What does Leandro uncover about wyrms? Why does this matter? How does this reshape everything you learned about the book?

35. As we approach the end of the book, what ends up happening between the Pocatelans and Cascabeles? Does it fit your predictions of what would happen in the book? [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.5]

36. After everything that went down, the Cascabeles find a new home. How does Gabi react? [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.10]

37. Read the epilogue *carefully*. Compare it to the beginning of the novel before the story fully begins. Who are these characters? Are they new to you? Think back on the research you did on the author of this novel. What other sci-fi novels has she written? What does this mean? Are these two stories perhaps set in the same universe? [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.9]

Post-Reading Exercises

After reading the book, you can have students work on a couple of these independent activities and research projects that will help enhance the thematic importance of the book.

1. Drones/Surveillance: Oso mentions that he was an entertainment drone. What do you think is the meaning of these drones within the story? Look up what drones are today and make a Venn Diagram that discusses the Book Drones vs Real World Drones. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.7]

2. AI & Consciousness: “It’s called neural link. In the Old-World they had started using it to connect people to machines when their bodies failed. This is yours.” Visit chat.openai.com, make an account with the consent of your parents and ask ChatGPT to explain to you what AI and consciousness are. Make sure you tell them the level of difficulty it should use when explaining it to you and keep asking it questions such as “Can AI make mistakes? Can AI have feelings?” You can also ask it about neural links and things like that! Think about other questions the book may be posing, such as Leandro’s phrase, “I am who I am in my mind,” (286). Write up a short essay summarizing what you learned from ChatGPT and what examples of the book relate to AI and consciousness, but do not plagiarize what ChatGPT is teaching you.

3. Refranes y dichos: The book has a lot of different Spanish sayings, such as “Corazones puros y espíritus fuertes son quienes heredarán la tierra.” Look these up on a search engine and figure out what this *refrán* means. Why are these important throughout the book? What significance do they have? Write a short paragraph using evidence from the text in order to explain why they matter. [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.2].

4. Dystopian Literature: We had brief discussions about whether or not the book is a dystopia. Dystopia comes from the Greek, dys- (bad) and topia/topos (place). What do you think this means in the context of the novel? Read this article from Masterclass that establishes what a dystopia is and watch this video titled “How to recognize a dystopia.” Do you believe *Alebrijes* is a dystopian novel? Use the five characteristics of a dystopia to write an essay explaining whether or not the book classifies as a piece of dystopian literature. Please provide clear evidence from the book. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.9]**

5. Library Research: On page 67, Leandro runs into a public library. “A house for books,” as he says. Think of a topic that you would like to share with your classmates, visit your nearest library and research this topic. Please present a thesis statement with your topic and evidence you have found from the library.

6. Book Report: Leandro says, “I had a real book once, and I even knew all the words in it.” What is your favorite book? Work on a book report to present your favorite book of all time to the class. Make sure you present a summary of the plot, the characters, and the main themes of the book. How do those differ from the plot, characters, and themes of *Alebrijes*? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.9]**

Themes Activities

As students parse out the main ideas and themes of the novel, you may suggest that they work on these projects or activities. Students will answer questions regarding multiple themes or central ideas of the text. During this exercise, they will provide objective summaries of specific parts of the text and provide further analysis of these specific ideas. You may use some of the additional resources to help explain and guide the conversation around thesis statements and textual evidence. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.6] [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.9]**

1. Government Control: One of the main characteristics of a dystopian novel is the theme of government control. Does this happen in the book? What are some examples in the novel that show that The Regime has literally seized control over everyone’s life? What are some of the horrible ways in which the government applies this control?

2. Social Inequality and Food Scarcity: Throughout the book, you see Lula, Leandro and Gabi struggling with food insecurity. You see social inequality throughout Pocatel. “But, in a way, just like we all competed for food, and forgot who we were, now we are competing to find our families — even if it means sacrificing others. I get it, but it makes me sad,” Leandro thinks to himself. Find other instances where Leandro questions what survival means in terms of finding food and/or fighting for your life.

3. Ecological Disaster: The novel consists of a brother and sister seeking survival. It often talks about the time before everything changed. Can you point to those examples? Can you think of any examples of disaster in movies or tv shows that you've seen, or books or articles that you've read?

4. Sibling Love: Everything Leandro does, he does because he loves his sister. Do you identify with Leandro on this matter? Find examples within the text on how Leandro did everything he could for his sister. Write a short essay explaining why sibling love is an important theme within the story and what this means within a dystopian story. Add any external examples that you might think of and use evidence from the book to support your thesis statement.

Additional Resources for Educators

Since the book discusses conversations around food insecurity, I have included some educator resources on how to have these conversations with a younger audience as well as some historical resources around the potato famine in Ireland that may help broaden the understanding of survival.

Website:

Thesis Statement for Middle Grade Students. Link, Recovered Aug 1st, 2023.

<https://jackson-consulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/How-to-Write-a-thesis-statement.pdf>

Website:

Thesis Statement in Literary Analysis Papers. Link, Recovered Aug 1st, 2023.

https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1620142357/smhsorg/a4wyrzt3qk9seylmaqr3/Thesis_statement_handout__1.pdf

Article:

Derek Spencer, Why Teach Dystopian Literature. Link, Recovered August 1st 2023.

<https://www.prestwickhouse.com/blog/post/2015/06/why-teach-dystopian-literature>

Book:

Jessica A. Heyback and Eric Sheffield, *Dystopia and Education: Insights into Theory, Praxis, and Policy in an Age of Utopia-Gone-Wrong*. Information Age Publishing, 2013.

Book:

Susan Campbell, *Black Potatoes*. Houghton Mifflin, 2005. Historical book about the Irish famine and how the English government contributed to this. This book might help contextualize conversations about food insecurity and how sometimes governmental structures can contribute to it.

Website:

Masterclass, *What is Dystopian Fiction?*

<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-dystopian-fiction-learn-about-the-5-characteristics-of-dystopian-fiction-with-examples>

Website:

Creative English Teacher, Teaching Utopia and Dystopia. Link, Recovered July 28th, 2021.

<https://creativeenglishteacher.com/pages/teaching-utopia-and-dystopia>

Website:

Global Food Security Lesson Plan.

<https://agclassroom.org/matrix/lesson/540/>

Website:

Facing History: Generative AI.

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/learning-navigate-generative-ai-content-media-literacy-strategies>