

# Educator Guide

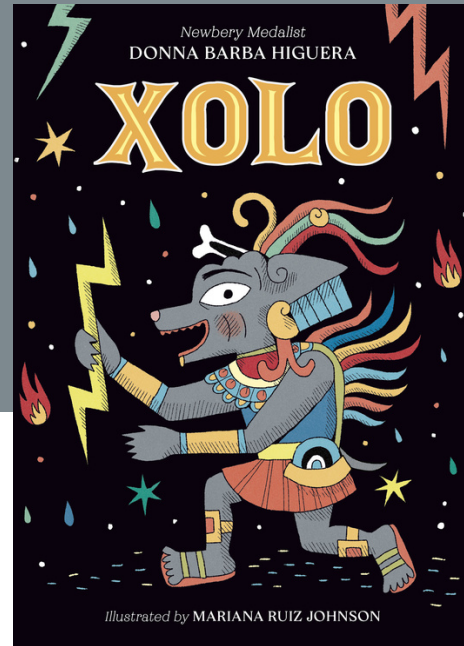
## *Xolo*

*Written by Donna Barba Higuera*

*Illustrated by Mariana Ruiz Johnson*

Published by Levine Querido, 2025

Grades K-5



## Synopsis

It is said the mighty feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl helped create the earth. He is the hero who stole back the bones of humanity from the evil god of the Underworld. In his quest to bring humans to the Earth, Quetzalcoatl's dog-headed twin brother, Xolotl, was present. Not much is known of Xolotl, the god of lightning, death, and misfortune. A monster.

**This is what really happened.**

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# 1. Introducing the Book

*Xolo* is a myth-based picture book, which means students may encounter new gods, names, and cultural symbols. We want excitement, not fear, to guide their reading.

To prepare students:

## **Build Curiosity**

Introduce the story as an Aztec myth reimagined for young readers.

Say: “Myths use magic, bravery, and imagination to explain how the world works.”

## **Normalize the Underworld**

Reassure students gently: “Even though the book shows the Underworld, it isn’t meant to be scary. This story is really about courage, loyalty, and friendship.”

## **Preview Pronunciations**

Teach the names up front so students feel empowered and comfortable.

## **Invite Wonder**

Ask:

- “Why do humans create myths?”
- “What can stories teach us that facts alone can’t?”

This sets students up for joyful engagement and positions the book as an experience, not just a text.

# 2. Overview

In *Xolo: How One Good Dog Saved Humankind*, Newbery Medalist Donna Barba Higuera brings Aztec mythology to life through the eyes of a loyal dog-headed god. Blending humor, heart, and heroism, the story reminds readers that courage can look quiet, love can look loyal, and joy can be found even in the darkest places.

### 3. Themes and Big Ideas

- Courage, loyalty, and identity
- Light and darkness, finding balance
- The bond between humans and animals
- Mesoamerican mythology and storytelling
- Doing good “when no one is watching”

### 4. Standards Alignment ((TEKS + Common Core)

#### TEKS

- **Reading:** 3.6–3.9 - Purpose, plot, character, theme, and illustration analysis
- **Writing:** 3.11 - Narrative writing with strong details
- **Social Studies:** 3.2 and 3.12 - Cultural symbols, traditions, and myths
- **Fine Arts:** §117 - Symbolism, color, contrast, and expressive illustration
- **SEL:** Empathy, courage, identity, and belonging

#### Common Core

- **RL.3.1–3.7:** Character analysis, theme, vocabulary, and illustration meaning
- **W.3.3:** Write narratives with descriptive detail
- **SL.3.1:** Collaborative discussions

## 5. Before Reading

Choose one or more:

### **Author and Illustrator Notes (Read Before the Story)**

At the back of *Xolo*, the author and illustrator explain why they created this book and how they chose to tell this story. Even though these notes appear at the end of the book, we read them first to help students understand the purpose behind the story.

Explain that Xolo comes from an Aztec myth that has been told for hundreds of years. They wanted to honor that culture and tell the story in a new way.

### Discussion Questions

- Why do you think the Aztec people told stories about gods and the sun, rain, and the Underworld?
- The author says most people know Quetzalcoatl, but not Xolo. Why do you think some characters get remembered more than others?
- The illustrator used real Aztec art styles and symbols. Why is it important to show a culture's art correctly?
- Why do you think the author chose to tell this story from Xolo's point of view instead that of the famous hero?

As you read, remember this is an Aztec myth told with respect from the culture, and told from the side of a character people usually don't hear from.

### **Museum Tour (Online)**

Visit the National Museum of Anthropology (virtual) to see Aztec art, gods, and codices.

- <https://nma.nationalmuseum.gov.ph/>
- [https://kids.kiddle.co/National\\_Museum\\_of\\_Anthropology\\_\(Mexico\)](https://kids.kiddle.co/National_Museum_of_Anthropology_(Mexico))

Purpose: connect myth to visual storytelling.

### **Prediction Warm-Up**

Show the cover and ask:

- "Who do you think Xolo is?"
- "Why might a dog be important in a creation story?"

## 6. During Reading: Discussion Questions by Segment

**Teacher Introduction:** Use the following questions to pause, reflect, and help students make meaning across the story. Questions are aligned to TEKS and CCSS and grouped according to the book's major sections.

### Part 1: The Beginning

**Focus:** Character traits, belonging, jealousy, symbolism

- What do we learn about Xolo and his relationship with Quetzalcoatl?
- Why does Xolo want attention so badly?
- What advice is Xolo's mother trying to give him?
- How does the art show Xolo's emotions (colors, shapes, contrast)?

### Part 2: A Calling

**Focus:** Theme, loneliness, foreshadowing

- Why does Xolo miss humans so much?
- What do we notice about how the other gods treat him?
- How is Mictlantecuhtli's hurt and anger growing?
- What clues hint at a future conflict?

### Part 3: A Duty

**Focus:** Symbolism, internal growth

- What does lightning represent for Xolo?
- Why is guiding the sun important, even if no one sees him?
- What is Xolo learning about courage?

## Part 4: A Quest

**Focus:** Plot development, betrayal, heroism

- How does Xolo show courage during the quest?
- Why does Quetzalcoatl take credit?
- What does this reveal about the brothers?
- How does the author use this moment to build tension?

## Part 5: A Death / Part 6: A Companion

**Focus:** Empathy, transformation, belonging

- How does meeting Mayaken change Xolo?
- Why does the old man trust Xolo, even though he looks different?
- How does Xolo finally discover his purpose?
- Why is the ending powerful even though no one knows Xolo is the hero?

## 7. After Reading

Invite creative, reflective responses such as:

- One minute sketch of Xolo's bravest moment.
- Turn-and-talk: "What does courage look like for *you*?"
- Gallery walk: Students respond to quotes from the book.

## 8. Classroom Activities

### Activity 1: Design Your Own God or Creature

Students create a mythical being that protects the world.

Draw and label a god or creature that protects something important (like the sun, animals, or people). Give it a name and write one sentence explaining its power.

**Standards:** TEKS 3.11, CCSS W.3.3

**Purpose:** Understand myth structure and symbolic storytelling.

### Activity 2: Lightning and Courage (Science + SEL)

Students make lightning jars OR create a storm soundscape.

Use art supplies or sound to show what lightning feels like in the story. Create a picture or sound pattern that matches how Xolo's courage grows.

**Standards:** TEKS Science 3.8, RL.3.7

**Purpose:** Explore symbolism and emotional meaning.

## Activity 3: Dear Xolo Letter Writing

Students write a letter to Xolo describing a moment they were quietly brave.

Write a short letter to Xolo telling him about a time you were brave, even if no one noticed. Use at least one detail from the story.

**Standards:** CCSS W.3.3, TEKS 3.11B

**Purpose:** SEL connection and personal writing voice.

## Activity 4: Story Circle (Oral Retelling)

Students retell the story using movement, sound, or role play.

Work with your group to act out or retell one part of *Xolo* using your voice, movement, or sound. Everyone must have a role.

**Standards:** TEKS 3.1, CCSS SL.3.1

**Purpose:** Build comprehension through oral tradition.

## Activity 5: Dog of Courage Mural

Each student adds a pawprint with an act of kindness or bravery.

Add a piece of drawing (your pawprint) to the class mural that will represent your favorite courage elements you connect with in the book. Share aloud with one other. Recommended as a final project.

**Standards:** Fine Arts and SEL Competencies

**Purpose:** Build community and reinforce themes

## 9. Cross-Curricular Extensions

- Art: Paint lightning using warm/cool contrast.
- Music: Layer rhythms to represent thunder.
- Social Studies: Research the Aztec gods and cultural beliefs.
- Language Arts: Compare Xolo to other world myths.

## 10. Book Duets: Reading Beyond *Xolo*

Pair *Xolo* with the following titles to deepen cultural understanding, explore universal themes, and help students compare how stories use myth, courage, and transformation to teach lessons about humanity.

### 1. *Feathered Serpent and the Five Suns* by Duncan Tonatiuh

**Connection:** This Aztec creation myth includes Xolo's twin brother, Quetzalcoatl. Reading both books allows students to compare how traditional mythology portrays heroism versus how *Xolo* reimagines it through quiet courage.

**Focus Idea:** Compare myth structure, tone, and how each author gives agency to different gods.

### 2. *Popo the Xolo* by Paloma Lopez

**Connection:** This picture book describes the way in which a xoloitzcuintle dog named Popo guides Nana, a beloved grandmother, through the nine levels of Mictlan until she reaches her final resting place.

**Focus Idea:** Read the authors' notes of these books to understand the common influence and origin of both stories.

### 3. *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales

**Connection:** Both books celebrate transformation and courage through powerful imagery and the honoring of Mexican cultural roots.

**Focus Idea:** Discuss how art and language carry history, identity, resilience, and hope.

### 4. *They All Saw a Cat* by Brendan Wenzel

**Connection:** This story invites students to explore perspective, how we are seen versus who we truly are. Perfect for discussing how Xolo is misjudged as a "monster" but reveals a compassionate heart.

**Focus Idea:** Analyze point of view and visual interpretation.

### **5. *Gustavo, the Shy Ghost* by Flavia Z. Drago**

**Connection:** Both characters feel unseen or misunderstood but discover connection and belonging through quiet acts of courage.

**Focus Idea:** Support SEL themes around identity, shyness, and bravery.

### **6. *The Night Gardener* by The Fan Brothers**

**Connection:** Like Xolo, the Night Gardener performs acts of beauty and kindness without recognition.

**Focus Idea:** Explore what it means to do good “when no one is watching.”

### **7. *The Dog Who Belonged to No One* by Amy Hest**

**Connection:** Both stories explore loneliness, loyalty, and the transformative bond between dogs and humans.

**Focus Idea:** Compare how characters find belonging through companionship.

### **8. *The Princess and the Warrior* by Duncan Tonatiuh**

**Connection:** Another Aztec tale involving sacrifice, courage, and celestial transformation.

**Focus Idea:** Compare heroic actions and cultural storytelling patterns.

### **9. *Niño Wrestles the World* by Yuyi Morales**

**Connection:** Brings joy, imagination, and play to myth-like battles. Pairs well with *Xolo* to discuss courage in both humorous and serious contexts.

**Focus Idea:** Contrast tone and evaluate different storytelling approaches to bravery.

### **10. *Drum Dream Girl* by Margarita Engle**

**Connection:** A true story of a girl whose quiet courage changes tradition. Both texts show that bravery doesn’t always look loud.

**Focus Idea:** Identify real-world and myth-based examples of “quiet heroes.”

## 11. Part-by-Part Summaries

### **Part 1: The Beginning**

The Earth stops spinning and all life disappears. The gods fall to Earth and choose new roles to help restore the world. Xolo chooses lightning, hoping his brother will finally notice him, but instead he feels more alone and misunderstood. This section sets the stage for Xolo's longing for belonging.

### **Part 2: A Calling**

Xolo misses humans deeply and struggles with loneliness. Meanwhile, Mictlantecuhtli becomes bitter after the gods shame him for collecting human bones. Xolo realizes he wants humans to return, but he feels too scared and powerless to act yet.

### **Part 3: A Duty**

After the gods sacrifice themselves to restart the Earth, Xolo is punished for not jumping into the volcano. He must escort the sun through the Underworld each night. Alone in the darkness, he begins practicing courage and wondering who he wants to become.

### **Part 4: A Quest**

Xolo and Quetzalcoatl attempt to steal back the human bones. Quetzalcoatl panics and abandons Xolo, taking the credit when the gods celebrate. Xolo quietly breaks off his own claw and sends it with the bones, unknowingly creating the first dog.

### **Part 5: A Death**

Xolo meets Mayaken, the first dog born from his claw, and finally feels seen and valued. When Mictlantecuhtli threatens the villagers, Xolo sacrifices his freedom to protect humans and dogs forever, by trapping himself in the Underworld.

### **Part 6: A Companion**

Xolo becomes the guardian who guides humans safely into the afterlife. Even though the world doesn't know he was the true hero, Xolo finds belonging in loyalty, love, and his eternal duty. He is no longer alone.

## 12. Closing Reflection

When we think of heroes, we often imagine big moments.

But *Xolo* reminds us that sometimes courage means showing up quietly, staying loyal, and doing good even when no one sees. Every student can connect to Xolo's bravery in their own way.

## 13. Pronunciation Guide

Xolo: **sho-lo**

Quetzalcoatl: **ket-suhl-kuh-wah-tl**

Xolotl: **shoh-loht**

Coatllicue: **koh-aht-LEE-kweh**

Centeotl: **sen-tay-OHT-ul**

Mayahuel: **my-ya-whall**

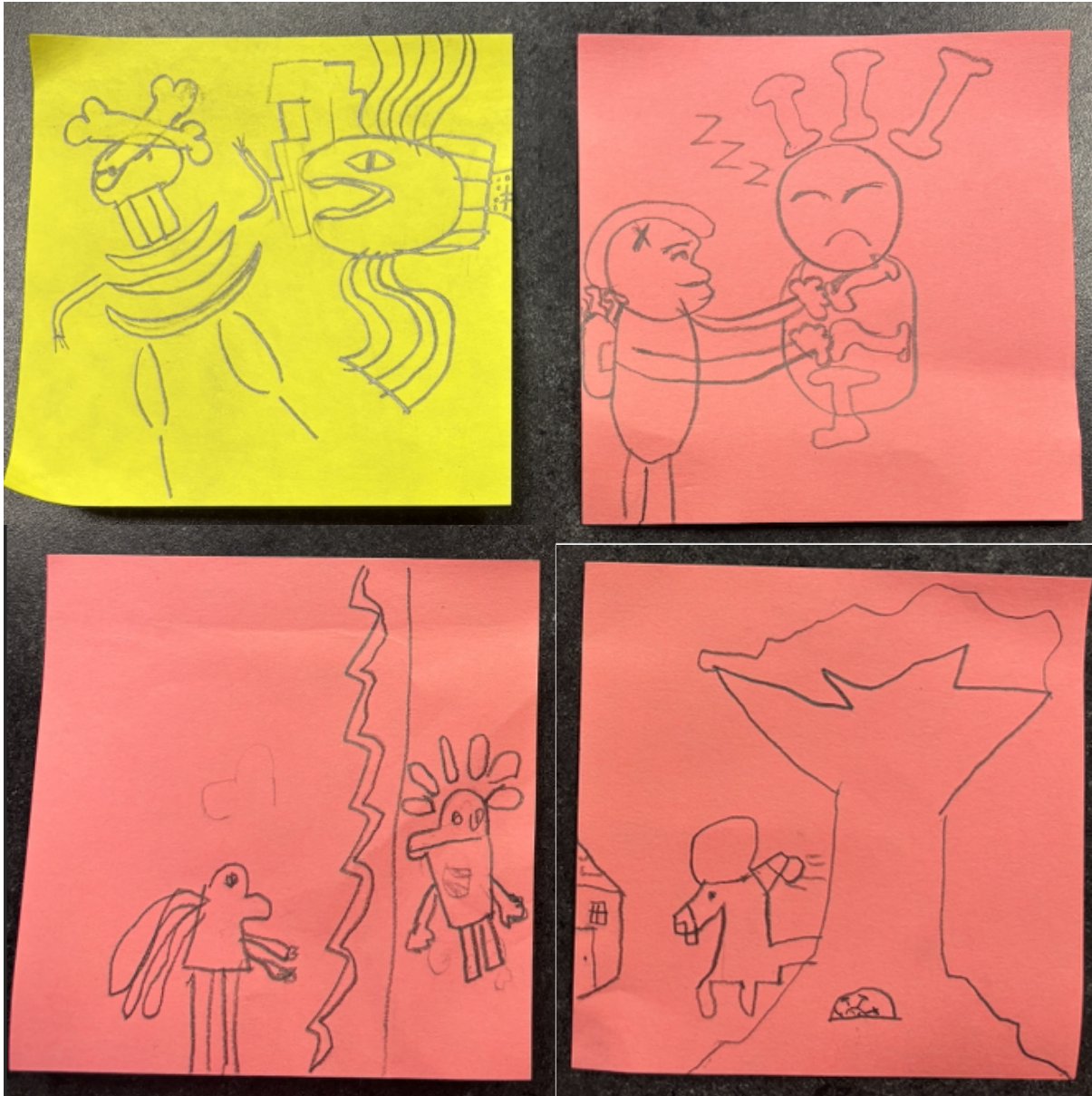
Tlaloc: **tlah-lohk**

Tezcatlipoca: **tez-kat-lee-POH-kah**

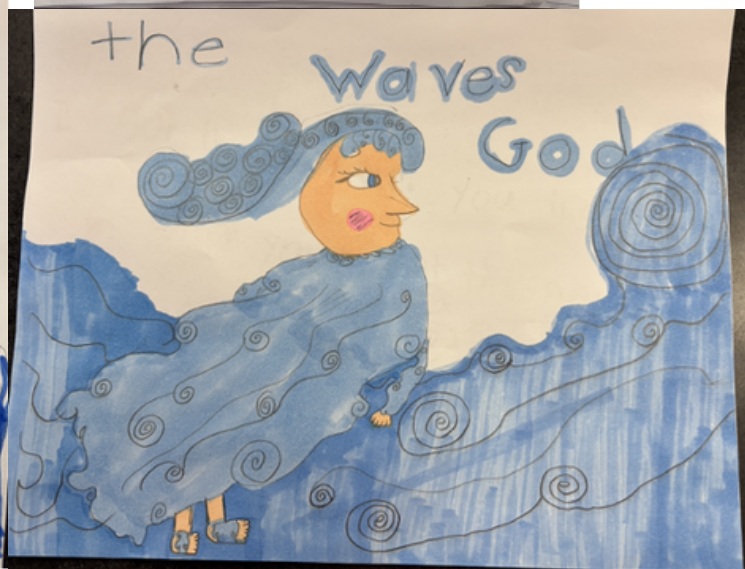
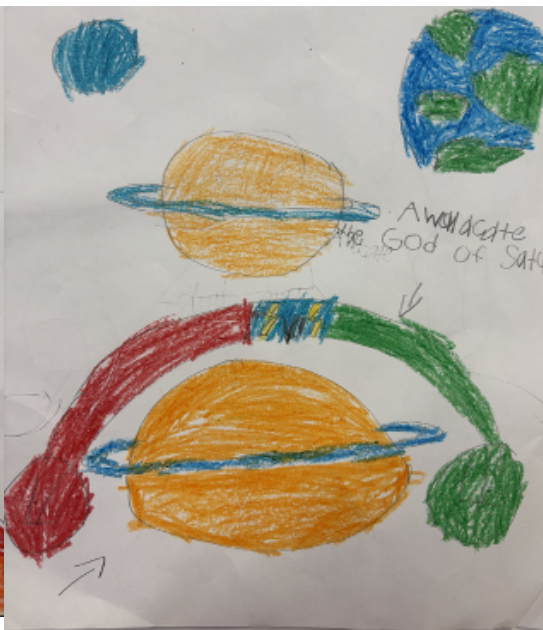
Chimalma: **chee-mahl-mah**

## 14. Student Examples

### One Minute Sketch of Xolo's Bravest Moment: Student Examples



## Activity 1: Student Examples



## About the Author



Donna Barba Higuera is an award-winning author who masterfully blends folklore with her lived experiences to create captivating stories for young readers. Growing up in the dust-filled oil fields of Central California, she spent her life weaving tales that sparked her imagination.

Now residing in the Pacific Northwest with her family and a lively menagerie of pets, Donna is the acclaimed author of picture books like *El Cucuy Is Scared, Too!* and *The Yellow Handkerchief*. Her middle-grade novels have garnered significant recognition: *Lupe Wong Won't Dance* received the Sid Fleischman Award for Humor and a Pura Belpré Honor, while her second novel, *The Last Cuentista*, was awarded both the John Newbery Medal and the Pura Belpré Award. *The Last Cuentista* was also named a Best Book of the Year by the *Boston Globe*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Time*. Her newest book, *Xolo*, reimagines the Aztec myth of the origin of man—and man's best friend.

## About the Illustrator



Mariana Ruiz Johnson studied fine art and illustration of books for children, and has been published as an author and illustrator on every continent. She currently lives in the outskirts of Buenos Aires with her husband and two children.