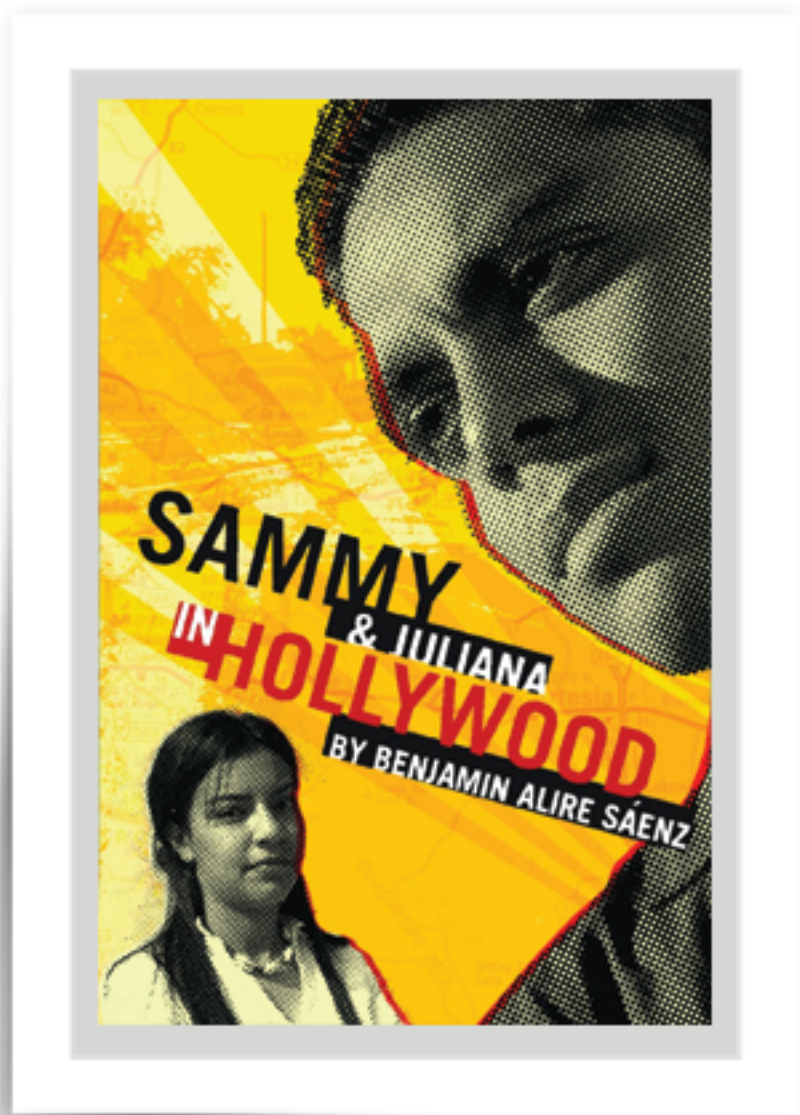


# VAMOS A LEER

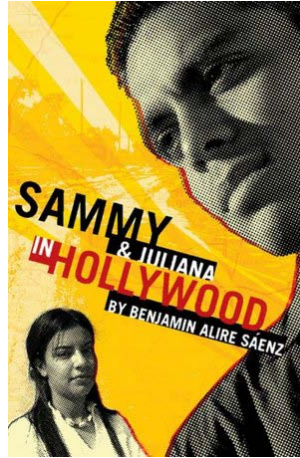
*teaching latin america through literacy*



# VAMOS A LEER

Educator's Guide

Sammy & Juliana in Hollywood  
Written by Benjamin Alire Sáenz  
Published by Cinco Puntos Press, 2004  
ISBN: 0938317814  
Grades 9-12



## BOOK SUMMARY

The “Hollywood” where Sammy Santos and Juliana Ríos live is not the West Coast one, the one with all the glitz and glitter. This Hollywood is a tough barrio at the edge of a small town in southern New Mexico. Sammy and his friends—members of the 1969 high school graduating class—face a world of racism, dress codes, war in Vietnam and barrio violence. In the summer before his senior year begins, Sammy falls in love with Juliana, a girl whose tough veneer disguises a world of hurt. By summer’s end, Juliana is dead. Sammy grieves, and in his grief, the memory of Juliana becomes his guide through this difficult year. Sammy is a smart kid, but he’s angry. He’s angry about Juliana’s death, he’s angry about the poverty his father and his sister must endure, he’s angry at his high school and its thinly disguised gringo racism, and he’s angry he might not be able to go to college. Benjamin Alire Sáenz, evoking the bittersweet ambience found in such novels as McMurtry’s *The Last Picture Show*, captures the essence of what it meant to grow up Chicano in small-town America in the late 1960s.

## AWARDS & RECOGNITIONS

- Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults, YALSA, 2005
- Américas Award
- Finalist, L.A. Times Book Prize
- JHunt Award for Young Adult Literature
- Texas TAYSHAS List
- Capitol Choices

## AUTHOR'S CORNER

A little bit about Benjamin Alire Sáenz:

Benjamin Alire Sáenz is a Chicano poet, writer, professor and painter who has lived most of his life near the U.S.-Mexico border. He calls himself a "fronterizo" -- a Spanish word for border resident -- because, he says, the border is integral to his identity and work.

He was born in 1954 in Old Picacho, a small farming village outside of Las Cruces, New Mexico, forty-two miles north of the U.S. / Mexico border. He was the fourth of seven children and was brought up in a traditional Mexican-American Catholic family. He entered the seminary in 1972, a decision that was as much political as it was religious. After concluding his theological studies at the University of Louvain, he was ordained a Catholic priest. Three and a half years later, he left the priesthood.



At the age of 30, he entered the University of Texas at El Paso. He later received a fellowship at the University of Iowa. In 1988, he received a Wallace E. Stegner Fellowship in poetry from Stanford University. In 1993, he returned to the border to teach in the bilingual MFA program at UTEP.

Sáenz is the author of a previous book of poetry, *Calendar of Dust*, which won an American Book Award. Cinco Puntos published two of his other books of poetry called [Elegies in Blue](#) and the now out of print, [Dark and Perfect Angels](#). He is the author of numerous novels, books for children and young adults as well as a collection of short stories. His bestselling bilingual children's books include: [A Gift from Papá Diego](#), [Grandma Fina and Her Wonderful Umbrellas](#) and [A Perfect Season for Dreaming](#). His award winning young adult novel is [Sammy & Juliana in Hollywood](#).

(Information compiled from

[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/indepth\\_coverage/entertainment/poetry/profiles/poet\\_saenz.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/indepth_coverage/entertainment/poetry/profiles/poet_saenz.html) and

[http://www.cincopuntos.com/authors\\_detail.sstg?id=3](http://www.cincopuntos.com/authors_detail.sstg?id=3) )

For more on Benjamin Alire Sáenz check out the links below:

- [A video of Sáenz reading from his latest Young Adult book \*I Sang to the Monster\*](#)
- [A video and transcript of an interview with Sáenz discussing the violence on the U.S.-Mexico border](#)

USING SAMMY  
& JULIANA IN  
THE  
CLASSROOM

*Sammy & Juliana in Hollywood* is the story of one teenage boy's coming-of-age, but at the same time, it's so much more than that. Denise Chávez explains, "Sammy and Juliana in Hollywood is our American Graffiti. No, that's not right. It's our Mexican Graffiti" ([http://www.cincopuntos.com/products\\_detail.sstg?id=175](http://www.cincopuntos.com/products_detail.sstg?id=175)). It's a statement about life—life as a Mexican teenager living in a small town in the United States in the late 1960s. Sammy Santos lives in the Hollywood barrio of Las Cruces, New Mexico. The novel is the story of his senior year of high school—the year he must deal with the violent death of his girlfriend, the reality of the enduring poverty of his family, the racist policies of his high school, and the consequences of the Vietnam War. While set in the 1960s, it's a book that I believe will speak strongly to our students today. In fact, I wish I had read this book sooner, before my years as a middle school teacher. I saw older versions of my students in its pages.

Unfortunately, many of our students will never hear about this book, much less be given the opportunity to read it. Its drawback? An unflinching author who doesn't withhold the painful details. While doing research on the book *Sammy & Juliana in Hollywood* I came across the following discussion of the book on the blog *A Literary Odyssey*.

"This is a book I would love to teach to students, but probably will never be able to. Why? This book is too honest about the lives of teenagers and the darker side of life and humanity. It also contains a lot of profanity, but what I believe to be necessary profanity. It would not have as much power over the reader as it does without it."

Now that I've read the book, I understand. Sadly, it's probably true. Many teachers won't ever use this book. Perhaps we're too afraid to deal with the content, too scared that it may give voice to feelings our students already have, or that we don't know how to handle these ideas or feelings in our classrooms. My hope, however, is that as more of us learn about it, discuss it, and suggest it, more teachers will consider taking a risk, and using it in their classrooms.

The content is heavy, the language isn't always what one may consider 'appropriate' for school, and it's a long book. Yet, (or maybe because of this), it's one of those rare books that may engage many of our students who feel school literature has nothing to offer them. For many students, what we teach in school is neither real nor authentic. Our students can't find themselves reflected in it. That's not the case here.

It's a moving novel. Sáenz is able to get into the head of a teenage boy, and then communicate those depths of emotion—the conflicted feelings of anger, hopelessness, love, and resistance. He has a gift for creating characters that one really cares about, fostering a surprising attachment in the reader.

This makes *Sammy & Juliana* an excellent book to use to explore the art of character development with students. His characters struggle, and they

break your heart. Not all of them make it, yet they fight to survive in one way or another. They might not be stereotypical role models, but I think they are role models nonetheless. They have to grapple with things that we like to pretend our students don't know about: abuse, drugs, sex, war, racism, homosexuality, and tolerance. That's what the reader gets to see—these characters struggling, grappling and trying to make sense of the world they find themselves in.

The resources offered here (check out our Educator's Guide for the book) are meant to encourage teachers to introduce this book to their students. Perhaps we cannot all use this book in its entirety, due to time constraints if nothing else, but I hope that some will consider teaching at least one of the five sections, giving students the opportunity to decide for themselves if they will finish it.

LESSON PLANS  
& ACTIVITIES

In addition to the lesson plans and activities included here, check out the other resources below:

- [Cinco Puntos Press Teacher's Guide for Sammy & Juliana](#)  
The Cinco Puntos Guide is an excellent resource, including very reflective guided reading questions and themes for class discussions. It could easily be used in conjunction with the lesson plans created here, as there is purposefully little overlap in terms of class discussions or guided reading questions.
- [Webcast of interview with Sáenz with transcript](#)
- [Blog entry on Sammy & Juliana in Hollywood](#)

The following lesson plans are divided into three main sections

- Guided Reading Questions to accompany each of the five parts of the novel
- Reflective writing questions that can be used in multiple ways, including extended response questions, formal essays or individual closing assessments.
- Research projects involving important historical background relevant to *Sammy & Juliana in Hollywood*

Literary  
Interpretation:  
Guided Reading  
Questions and  
Writing Prompts

Common Core Standards Addressed:

K-12

Reading

Key Ideas and Details

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure

- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
- Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

#### Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

### Part One: The Way She Looked at Me

#### Pages 3-52

1. On page 4, Sammy writes that the word *obsession* came into his vocabulary the second he met Juliana. What does the word obsession mean? Is there anything that you are obsessed with?
2. What does Sammy mean when he says “She was wrong about that. Secrets cost plenty”? (p. 6)
3. What is the name of the barrio that Sammy lives in? Does it have anything to do with Hollywood, CA? How does Sammy describe it? (p. 9-10)
4. Re-read the last paragraph of Chapter One on page 16. Do you think it is foreshadowing something? What?
5. Why do you think that the chemistry teacher, Mr. Birdwail, is so focused on Juliana? (p. 17-18)
6. Sáenz uses a great deal of descriptive language (like similes and metaphors) to describe Juliana or how Sammy feels about Juliana. Find an example of this descriptive language that stands out to you, explain why you like it. Read the examples below to get you started.  
 “If I’d been born a bird, he’d have cut off my wings” (p. 9).  
 “Her eyes were always half on fire, lightning about to strike—and beautiful in a way that fires and lightning are beautiful, a kind of natural and graceful rage that made all living things stand back in awe” (p. 10).  
 “And then she put her hand on my heart, and I knew she could feel those wings that were throwing themselves against my rib cage” (p. 48).
7. At the end of chapter two, think about all you have learned about Juliana. How would you describe her character? Think about how Sammy views her, the things she says, and her interactions with other characters. Do you think she’s a positive character? Would you describe her as a role model? Do you think she’s strong? Explain your answers with examples from the text.
8. Think about the way that Sammy describes Mrs. Apodaca. He starts out hating her, but does he continue to feel that way? Would you want to be like Mrs. Apodaca? Think about the following statements below as you form your answer.  
 “Sometimes, she stuck her chin out at me. I liked that” (p. 44).

*“She didn’t wear disguises for people like the rest of us. She didn’t. She didn’t soften herself. She didn’t make herself more acceptable to the people around her” (p. 45).*

*“Sometimes, you find things out about people. And after that, you can’t hate them anymore” (p. 46).*

9. What happens to Juliana at the end of this section? How does Sammy respond? How does the community respond?

## **Part Two: Pifas and Gigi and the Politics of Hollywood**

### **Pages 53-112**

1. What do you think about how Sammy chooses to deal with the situation on Friday night when he finds himself in the middle of a fight? Do you think he handles the pressure well? What would you have done? Think about how he describes his frustrations at the top of page 62. Have you ever felt that way?
2. What do you think of the following exchange between Gigi and Sammy? What do you think it means? Do you agree?  
*“Oh, right. Guys can talk how they want. Girls. They just gotta look good.”*  
*“Everyone has to look good, Gigi. This is America” (p. 64).*
3. Why do you think Sammy creates this idea of the garden (p. 62)? What does the garden represent? What is in Sammy’s garden?
4. What does Sammy mean when he says “Could have done a commercial for Colgate toothpaste—well, except you could tell he was a Mexican, which wasn’t a good thing if you wanted to be in a commercial” (p. 67). Why would he say this?
5. Who are the “Brown Berets” that René references? (p. 75)
6. What “system” are they referring to when René and Pifas argue about Pifas joining the army? (p. 75)
7. What do you think Sammy is talking about in the following quote?  
*“That maybe we weren’t kids anymore and that last summer’s baseball games in the empty lot behind the Apodaca’s house were something that we’d lost. Lost without even knowing it. That was the problem with growing up—you lost things you didn’t know you had” (p. 77).*  
They’ve lost something more than baseball games, what is Sammy really referring to?
8. By the time Pifas leaves for the army, Sammy’s feelings for Pifas and his opinion about Pifas have changed. How have they changed? What does Sammy think about Pifas now?
9. On the first day back to school the students find out about the new dress code. What do you think of the dress code? Do you think it’s fair? Is it like your own dress code?
10. When describing how he feels about school, Sammy writes, “If I had a rebellious mind, I didn’t let my body in on it. My body was a good soldier” (p. 95). What do you think he means by this?
11. Why does Gigi want to be class president?
12. What happens when Gigi gets up to give her speech? What does she say? How does the audience respond? What do you think of Gigi’s speech?

13. What does Sammy's father mean when he says "Maybe we shouldn't hate losing so much, you know that Sammy? I mean—it's the only thing we're good at" (p. 112). What sort of political critique do you think the author is offering here?

### **Part Three: Another Name for Exile**

#### **Pages 113-172**

1. Think about Sammy's discussion of why some students are afraid of school. Where does this fear come from? Do you understand what students mean about school when they say "They make you hate your mom and dad. They turn you into a gringo" (p. 114). Have you ever been afraid of school?
2. What does the quote mean "School, well, school was an all-English thing" (p. 114)? Do you agree with this? Do you think schools in the United States are ever really bilingual?
3. What does the statement "It was better to be from Ireland than to be from Mexico. I knew that" tell us about race or racism in Hollywood? (p. 116)
4. Sammy says that he was never afraid before, but then he finds himself afraid of everything. At the end of Chapter 13, he realizes why he became so fearful. What does he learn about himself? Does he still believe that what Father Fallon called him was true?
5. Why do you think it is that ". . .everybody thought he was so. . .far out and groovy because he spoke Spanish. Nobody thought Mexicans were far-out and groovy because we spoke English. Nope. That's not the way it worked. Nope, I didn't like gringos who got to be more Mexican than Mexicans" (p. 140)?
6. Jaime and Sammy get into an argument while riding in Eric's car. During their discussion Eric asks "And what do you know about me?" Sammy responds "You're from Hollywood" (p. 142). Now that you're half way through the book, what do you think it means to be from Hollywood?
7. Sammy's group of friends all deal with what happens to Eric and Jaime differently. Were you surprised by how Sammy and René reacted? Gigi and Angel? Do you think Sammy is right when he says "You know something, I think girls are braver than guys. . ." (p. 168)?

### **Part Four: The Citizens of Hollywood Rise Up Against the System**

#### **Pages 174-247**

1. What do we learn about the school administration in the section about Sammy and the "situation" with his belt? Have you ever had a school administrator tell you "I've never liked you" (p. 176)? How would that make you feel?
2. What does it say about the school administration when they disappear in the middle of the fight? (p. 209)
3. Compare Mrs. Davis with the rest of the school administration. Think about her actions during the school sit-in and her conversations with Sammy throughout the book. Is she different



from other school administrators and staff? How? Give examples from the book.

4. Why do you think it meant so much to René that they won the vote for changing the school dress code? (p. 215)
5. How would you feel about home if you were Sammy? Think about what he writes on page 218 to help you answer. How do you feel about your own home? Do you feel like Sammy or does home mean something different to you?
6. Re-read the following quote from the section where Sammy gets his acceptance letter to college:  
*“Maybe I sometimes had these demons of optimism that just took over my body. But then, life, well, life just sort of exorcised those demons. And I was back to my serious, get-real-you’re-just-a-guy-from-Hollywood attitude. That’s why you needed to survive. Otherwise you’d break. Like Reyes. Maybe that’s why he did heroin—because his dreams were too big”* (p. 219).  
Do you understand how Sammy feels? Have you ever felt this way? How would you deal with feeling like no matter how hard you worked, or how valid your dreams were, life would limit you from accomplishing your goals. Do you think this still happens to students today?
7. Did you think that Pifas would make it back to Hollywood after the war? Why? Think about the clues that the author gives us leading up to Pifas’ death. What do you think Sammy means when he tells the Colonel “we’ve learned something” (p. 245)?

### Part Five: Welcome to Hollywood

#### Pages 247-291

1. What did graduation mean to Sammy?
2. Think about what Sammy says, “I’d had plans. Plans change” (p. 269). Knowing everything that has happened in the book so far, what do you think this means? If you were Sammy, would you put much hope in plans?
3. Sammy is talking about his truck, but there’s also a deeper theme at work. What do you think he means?—“Great. Everybody wanted to change my truck to make it more acceptable. Red. Yellow. Black. Right then, right there, I decided not to paint my truck. People didn’t like it—hell, they could walk” (p. 273).
4. How has Sammy’s relationship with Mrs. Apodaca changed over the course of the book? What do you think he’s learned from her?
5. How do you feel about the ending of the book? Is it what you wanted? How would you have ended it?

#### Reflective Writing Prompts

1. Now that you have read the entire book, go back and re-read the following quote from Sammy at the very beginning of the book:

*“The first thing the dead do is lose their voices. But they have their*

*ways of making us listen. Maybe the dead need those of us who made it out alive to go out into the streets and tell everyone what happened. Maybe they want us to do more than tell. Maybe they want us to shout. Maybe they want us to point fingers. Maybe they want us to tell anyone who'll stop and listen that once, the world was theirs, too. Maybe they won't leave us alone until we say their names out loud again and again and again."*

In light of everything that happened in the book, what do you think this quote means? Use examples from the story to support your answer.

2. Think about the garden that Sammy creates (p. 62-63). Why do you think Sammy creates this garden? What would be in your garden and why?
3. Re-read the quote below:

*"It was hard to be there. To look at him. To play this game like everything was fine, like he was just going away to camp or on vacation or like he was just moving away to California. I wasn't good at pretending. But I knew that's the only way people survived. Stay, I told myself. Just stay. Pretend. Like the rest of the world" (p. 88).*

What do you think Sammy means when he writes that the only way that people survive is by pretending? Do you think you've ever done that—pretend to survive?

4. The author describes Sammy's nervousness with a mixture of descriptive language and similes in the following quote:

*"I woke up nervous. You know the feeling. Your stomach is churning. You want to go back to bed. Only if you did, you wouldn't be able to fall back asleep. Your stomach feels like you swallowed a pigeon, and it was slamming your insides, trying to get out. Panic city" (p. 107).*

Have you ever felt nervous like that? How would you describe it? Can you come up with different similes, metaphors or descriptive language to explain it?

5. Part Two of the book is called "Pifas and Gigi and the Politics of Hollywood." What kind of political statement is the author making with this section? Think about the politics of war that got Pifas drafted, the politics of high school where Gigi didn't win the elections, and Humphrey's landslide win in Hollywood, but national loss.

6. Have you ever felt as angry as Sammy did?—"I was one angry

*seventeen-year-old. Reyes was dead. And he died for nothing. Pifas was fighting a war that we didn't even call a war. And those things were changing me. Something broke in me. Something broke. But that something needed to be broken. It did. Sometimes you have to tear something down so you can build something new"* (p. 202). If you've felt that angry before, what made you feel that way? How did you deal with it?

7. How would you feel if you were a teenager in Sammy's high school—if you were Pifas, René, Sammy, Gigi, or Juliana? Would you feel hopeful? Do you think things in high school now are much different? Or are they very similar?
8. Sammy references wings or the pigeon he feels inside himself throughout the book. He first feels it with Juliana (p. 50) and believes it's gone when she dies, but we find out it's not. What do you think the wings or the pigeon symbolize? Why are they significant to Sammy?
9. Sammy believes that both he and Gigi have a bird inside them, but he describes them much differently. How are their two birds different? Why do you think they're different? Think about how the author develops both of these characters. Use the following pages to help answer the questions. These pages reference various places that discuss Sammy and Gigi's birds—pages 110, 190, 206, 238, 241, 244, 262.
10. Do you think Sammy really sees himself or his potential as others do? Think about what Eric wrote to him (p. 222), how Gigi feels about him, how Pifas followed him around (p. 235), or what Mrs. Davis does for him. How would you characterize or describe Sammy? Do you think he is a role model?

## HISTORY

### Common Core Standards Addressed:

#### K-12

#### Reading

##### Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

##### Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

#### Writing

##### Text Types and Purposes

- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the

effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

#### Production and Distribution of Writing

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

#### Research to Build and Present Knowledge

- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

#### **The United States in the late 1960s**

The book takes place at a tumultuous time in U.S. history—the late 1960s. The time period plays a pivotal role in the book. Have students research this period of time. If time permits, allow individual students or groups to pick a specific event or theme during this historical period, research it, determine how it relates to or is significant to the book, and then present their findings to the class. The following are some examples—Find out what the Vietnam War was about and how it ended. Who was Hubert Humphreys? What is the significance of the Chicano movement?

#### **Civil Rights Strategies**

In the fourth section of the book the students plan a sit-in to protest things in the school. What is the history of the sit-in? When else has it been used and for what other purposes?

#### **Mayan History**

Sammy writes that they all had birds inside of them, but he says that Gigi’s bird isn’t a common pigeon, but a Quetzal. Research the Quetzal. What was the significance of the Quetzal in Mayan culture? Why do you think Sammy would pick this bird for Gigi?

#### ABOUT THIS GUIDE



The Latin American & Iberian Institute (LAI) receives resources from the U.S. Department of Education to support K-12 teachers teaching about Latin America. Our goal is to provide a supportive environment for teachers across grade levels and subject areas so they can bring regional and linguistic knowledge of Latin America into their classrooms. For more information and materials that support teaching about Latin America in the classroom, visit our website at <http://laii.unm.edu/outreach>

Written by staff at the LAI, **Vamos a Leer Educator’s Guides** provide an excellent way to teach about Latin America through literacy. Each guide is

based upon a book featured in the Vamos a Leer book group. For more on Vamos a Leer, visit our blog at [bit.ly/vamosaleer](http://bit.ly/vamosaleer). This guide was prepared 07/2012 by Katrina Dillon, LAII Project Assistant.