

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## The Crossing

by

### Gary Paulsen

### Book Information

Gary Paulsen, The Crossing  
Quiz Number: 11706  
Dell, 1987  
ISBN 0-440-20582-4; LCCN  
114 Pages  
Book Level: 5.8  
Interest Level: UG

Thirteen-year-old Manny, a street kid fighting for survival in a Mexican border town, develops a strange friendship with an emotionally disturbed American soldier who decides to help him get across the border.

**Award:** Margaret A. Edwards Award

**Topics:** Adventure, Escape; Adventure, Survival; Countries/Regions, Mexico; Family Life, Orphans; Popular Groupings, Upper Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; READNOW - Demco Media Turtleback Books, Demco Media - Read Now Grades 9+; Recommended Reading, NY Publ. Library Best Books for the Teen Age; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks

### Main Characters

Four street men vicious men who pursue Manny for the purpose of selling him

Manny Bustos the principal character in the story, a fourteen-year-old orphan who is planning to cross the border from Mexico into Texas

Maria a woman who works at the Two-by-Four bar and cafe, who takes pity on Manny and gives him food

Sergeant Robert S. Locke a Vietnam veteran struggling with tragic memories from the war

### Vocabulary

**barrios** neighborhoods or communities where Spanish is spoken

**inevitably** not able to be avoided or prevented

**obliterate** to do away with completely

**ramrod** a rod used to clean the barrel of a gun

### Synopsis

Fourteen-year-old orphan Manny Bustos wants to escape Juarez, Mexico. He is tired of the minute-by-minute struggle for survival. He has no home, no money, and no food. Often, he has to outrun bigger boys for coins tossed by American tourists. He knows that in order to survive, he must cross the river beneath the Santa Fe Bridge into the United States.

Manny's first attempt to cross the river is interrupted by the border patrol. Just as he decides he can still get across, however, he is caught by "street wolves" and only narrowly escapes being sold. That same night, Manny meets Sergeant Robert Locke, a Vietnam veteran who escapes his nightmares of dead friends by drinking. Robert catches Manny trying to steal his wallet, but does not turn the young boy over to the police.

Manny encounters Robert again on several occasions. They have breakfast together at a hotel, where Manny orders an enormous meal to satisfy his gnawing hunger. They attend a bullfight, and Robert's mind flashes back to the tragedy of Vietnam as the bull is mercilessly killed. Their relationship comes to an explosive end when Robert defends Manny against the four street men who hunt him. Manny watches in disbelief as Robert takes on the four "wolves" one by one until all are overpowered. Robert is mortally wounded in the fight. As he struggles to recover, he realizes he is near death and urges Manny to take his wallet and run across the border before the police arrive. Manny leaves Robert and heads for a new life.

### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

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#### Initial Understanding

Reread the bullfighting scene in chapter ten. Describe the emotions the scene creates in you.

*Answers will vary, but may include sadness, pity, and perhaps anger.*

#### Literary Analysis

Explain one or two conflicts Manny has in the book. Tell about a conflict you have had. How did you resolve it?

*Students may mention the following examples from the story: Manny is an orphan with no money, he must survive on his own, his small size brings him additional hardships during his confrontations with other boys, and he risks capture in trying to cross the border into the United States. Answers and resolutions for student conflicts will vary, but may include conflicts with friends and family members. They may have resolved these conflicts by coming to an agreement through discussion.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

Manny and Robert have very different backgrounds, yet they seem much the same. In what ways are they similar?

*They are similar in a number of ways: both are alone, both are fighting for survival in their own way, both need to leave the past behind, and both are intelligent and quick to pick up on what is going on around them.*

#### Constructing Meaning

If you had the chance to write one more chapter, what might you include?

*Students might respond with a chapter on Manny's attempt to cross the border after Robert dies, what happens to him, and how he copes with his new life and Robert's death.*

### Teachable Skills

**Recognizing Setting** The story's setting takes place in Juarez, Mexico. Manny describes it as

"never quiet. As a border town it was made of noise..." Have students locate other border towns in Mexico on a map. What is the significance of a border town? Identify the Rio Grande on a map. What role does the river play in American and Mexican history? Students can prepare a short presentation explaining laws concerning immigration from Mexico into the United States.

**Understanding Literary Features** A continuous theme throughout the story is Manny's struggle for survival. He has no home, no food, no money, and no family. He is often beaten and chased by bigger boys and knows that "in the usual flow of his life things had to work very fast for Manny or not at all." Have students give examples from the story where "things had to work very fast" for Manny. Have them explain why this philosophy is necessary for his survival.

**Understanding Characterization** Sergeant Robert Locke, a Vietnam veteran, is a complex character. He is haunted by the tragedy of war, and his nightmares are filled with visions and visits from dead friends. Have students research the war in Vietnam. Why was this war fought? How were these veterans treated when they returned? Why was Vietnam different from other American wars? Do students feel Robert's reaction to the war is typical for a veteran? Why or why not?

**Understanding the Main Idea** The author has divided the story into three sections with eleven chapters. None of the chapters have titles. Have students work in groups to outline the book, giving each chapter a title. Students should include a minimum of three main ideas per chapter. Students may use the following example: *The Crossing* I. Section One--The First Meeting A. Chapter One--Manny and Maria 1. Juarez, Mexico is a border town with a bridge crossing into El Paso, Texas. 2. Manny visits Maria to try to get food from her before he crosses the river. 3. Maria thinks Manny is too young to cross the border, but relents and gives him food.