

# Piñata Books

## Teacher's Guide

*Trino's Choice*

By Diane Gonzales Bertrand

(Arte Publico Press, 1999)

“This story was inspired as I sat in a bookstore in El Paso, Texas, waiting to sign copies of my novel, *Sweet Fifteen*. The store owner told me a story about a group of Latino teens who were left to paint over graffiti. The supervisor had left them paint, but nothing to eat or drink. She told me that she had two dozen hard-boiled eggs and a six-pack of red soda in her store refrigerator. She walked across the street and shared it with the boys. I was touched by her random act of kindness, and started thinking, what if a Latino youth was in some type of dramatic situation, a matter of life or death? What if he ran into a bookstore, and received an act of kindness from a stranger like her? Thus, Trino was born.

If you read closely, you'll see how this “random act of kindness theme” was developed in many of the characters in the story. Even though Trino's life is rough, he can learn from kindness. It's a choice we can all make to become a better person.”

*Diane Gonzales Bertrand*

### Critics Praise

*Named to the 2001-2002 Texas Lone Star Reading List*

*“Best Book of the Year”, young adult category, ForeWord Magazine*

*Recipient, Austin Writers' League Teddy Award for Best Children's Book*

*Finalist, Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award*

*Best Young Adult Fiction, Latino Literary Hall of Fame*

*Houston Area Independent School Library Network Recommended List for 2000*

### About the Book

Seventh-grade Trino Olivares likes video games a lot more than he likes books. In fact, he doesn't have much use for most “school types.” But when Rosca, an older teen with a vicious streak, invites Trino to start hanging out with his crowd — and maybe make some quick money, too — the boy doesn't know what to think. It's up to Trino to decide which choices will impress his friends — and which choices are the best for Trino. *Trino's Choice* is a dramatic story about the difficult problems that children today face — often with little guidance — and the sometimes deadly consequences that can result.

“This is a dramatic and realistic contemporary novel.”

— *Booklist*

“Thirteen-year-old Trino is a welcome addition in a book that deserves a sequel.”

—VOYA

## TEACHING OVERVIEW

*Trino's Choice* explores the difficulties young people today face in making choices of all kinds—without much help. Trino is the eldest child in his single-parent home, and he must deal with mounting pressures at home and at school, especially the decision to make some fast money. The characters and situations facilitate discussions of the hardships endured by teenagers today, differences in familial structures, and the important need for mentor-figures for young people.

This teacher's guide offers Language Arts activities that satisfy general content standards. They are suggested as initial activities on which the teacher can expand, substitute, and/or incorporate into their instruction.

## COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES

The following Before, During, and After Reading strategies contain activities for improving reading and writing skills. Where appropriate, the skill addressed by each of the activities is noted in parenthesis.

### BEFORE READING

Explore the word “choice” that appears as part of the title. Sample topics may include: why we have to make choices, different choices different people have to make, and their own personal choices. Invite students to individually make a list of choices (big and small) that they face on a daily basis. Ask for specific examples such as “I make a choice whether or not to do my homework every night.” After several minutes, have them pair up and make a Venn Diagram (two intersecting circles) that shares their own and their partner's daily choices on each side. In the intersection, students should write choices that they both make (**Writing**: for a variety of purposes: to express, discover, record, develop, reflect, share ideas and/or problem solve). Within each partner pair, have them place a star next to all the choices they feel are most difficult to make. Bring these lists into a classroom discussion of choices that seem more difficult and explore some solutions to a few of the issues (**Listening/Speaking**: purposes/ to gain information, to enjoy and appreciate). Ask students to be alert readers and notice examples of making difficult choices throughout the book.

Invite students to study the cover of the book. Make predictions about the story using the cover art, the back cover writing, and the opening page in Chapter One. Have them make connections between the title and the cover art. What could *Trino's Choice* be? Also, what connections does the subject matter have to the character's culture (i.e: what stereotypes exist between crime and specific cultural groups, etc.)? (**Reading**: cross-cultural themes and connections).

### AS READING PROGRESSES

The following sample questions enable students to identify main ideas, make predictions, and draw conclusions (**Reading**: drawing inferences and supporting with textual

evidence). Have students refer to a dictionary as they encounter unfamiliar words (**Reading:** Vocabulary development).

### **Chapter One: Trino**

1. After reading this chapter, speculate about Trino's problems. What could he be running from?
2. Describe Trino's initial and later reactions to the book he picks up. Could the book on Tomas Rivera have a similar effect?
3. Why was the bookstore owner so kind? Do you think Trino would be likely to return her act of kindness at the end of the chapter?

### **Chapter Two: School-Types**

1. What are the differences between the "school-types" and Trino? Why are the "school-types" comfortable in the bookstore and Trino is not? Are there differences even among the "school types"?
2. Why do you think Maggie is interested in having Trino return to the bookstore? What does she see in him that Trino does not?
3. What draws the "school-types" to writers like Rivera and Emilce Montoya? Why doesn't Trino have the same need?

### **Chapter Three: Home Boy**

1. What does Trino find when he runs home? What does his family look like?
2. Trino has been running since Chapter 1. Why is he running and what decision does he make that will continue his escape?
3. Describe Trino's choices regarding Mr. Epifano's store incident. What does he owe to Rosca?

### **Chapter Four: Slice of Life**

1. On page 26, Trino's states, "I hate my life". What details do we have to confirm this statement?
2. What is Rosca's problem with Trino? What do we learn from Rosca about Trino's hiding?
3. How does Trino spend his time? How does his criticism of Garces compare to his own behavior?

### **Chapter Five: The Book Basket**

1. What do Trino's words, "Never let them know where to stick the knife?" (39), let us know about his character and life?
2. If Trino apparently relates to Montoya's subject matter, why does he resist admitting this?

### **Chapter Six: Montoya**

1. Compare Trino's internal reaction to Montoya and his actual conversation with him. Why do the two differ?
2. "Read" into Montoya's advice in the manner he advises Trino to read. Why is it important to him that Trino specifically reads his book?

3. How can Trino be affected by poetry and Montoya's book? What does each have to offer him?

### **Chapter Seven: Garces**

1. Compare the "male presence" in Trino's life of both Garces and Nick. How does each make an impact on the family and home life?
2. How is Trino recognizing his feelings in different situations more than before? Find at least two examples and describe the before and after results.

### **Chapter Eight: Friends**

1. How do the topics of conversation differ for Trino depending on the group of friends he is with? Why is this so?
2. Examine Zipper and Rogelio as "types." Which type would they be and why do they need to fit this model?
3. Why is the excerpt from Montoya's poem significant for Trino? What would be his interpretation?

### **Chapter Nine: Slack Time**

1. How and why is tension building between Trino, Zipper, and Rogelio?
2. How has Trino's fear and his guilty feelings impacted his daily life?
3. Why does Trino resent Nick? Does he have reason to feel this way?

### **Chapter Ten: Zoomer**

1. Describe Nick and Trino's relationship. Can Trino's acceptance be bought like his brothers'?
2. Why doesn't Rosca abandon Trino? Does Trino have an option to leave Rosca and that lifestyle behind?
3. How does Trino's growing interest in Lisana affect his other relationships: with his family, friends, etc?

### **Chapter Eleven: Crackdown**

1. Trino used to run with Rogelio and Zipper, now he more often runs away from them. How have his frustrations with them grown? What does he now expect from friends?
2. Identify Trino's options when confronting Rosca's preposition? Predict where those choices could lead him. Does your choice correspond with the decision Trino takes?

### **Chapter Twelve: Rosca**

1. What have been Trino's motives to aid Rosca before? Is his responsibility to his family an old or new pressure? Consider the changes in the household.

2. How does Nick's comment, "If I don't give you a chance to earn some money, you'll find someone to steal from, won't you?" (page 98), make you feel? Is he sympathetic or judgmental?
3. Both Trino and his mother are angry. What separate circumstances have caused this anger to escalate? Is there a real culprit at fault?
4. Trino finally acts on the choice presented in the last chapter. What is the series of events that leads to the dramatic ending? Does Trino have a way out?

### **Chapter Thirteen: Flip the Switch**

1. Trino refers to Zipper and Rogelio as friends to the cops, who again say he needs to find better friends. How do Zipper and Rogelio fulfill or not fulfill the expectations Trino has for a friend?
2. Think about the character of Zipper throughout the story. Identify at least two different ways he could have been "saved."
3. Examine Trino's relationship with different older males up to this point. Has Nick turned out to be like the others? Why does Trino allow him to help him?

### **Chapter Fourteen: Lisana**

1. How do you think Trino's teachers view him after the incident? Does the behavior of his friends affect the way he is viewed?
2. Trino finally confides in someone. How was he able to get past his reservations about sharing himself?
3. How does Lisana's friendship help Trino? Why does her opinion matter so much throughout the course of the story?

## **AFTER READING**

### **Writing Activities:**

1. Thinking about the choice Trino had to make, choose a character that you think has Trino's best interest in mind. Write a letter to Trino as that character and give Trino your advice as to what he should do. Be sure to give good reasons why he should or should not rob the car wash with Rosca and the other guys. (**Reading:** analyzing characters).
2. The end of the book resolves the main conflict between Trino and Rosca. However, the book still leaves other questions unanswered. Discuss the author's decision to leave the story with a variety of possibilities for Trino. List some of the possible ways for Trino to change his life. Choose one of these options and address it in the opening scene of a sequel to *Trino's Choice*. What has changed? How has Trino made a better decision as to this issue in his life now? (**Writing:** purposes/ to record, to describe).

### **Discussion Activity:**

1. Revisit the word "choice". Have students compare the difficult choices they identified before reading the book and Trino's choices throughout the book.

Students should use superlatives (“My choice is easier than/harder than ...”) in comparing one of their choices to Trino’s choice. Have the original partner pair discuss how their views on making choices has changed/not changed as a result of reading *Trino’s Choice*. How does the student go about making decisions now as opposed to before? What new things does he/she consider? What lessons did Trino offer? (**Listening/Speaking:** purpose/reflecting on ideas)

#### **OTHER FOLLOW-UP/ EXTENSION ACTIVITIES**

1. Ask students to consider what a film production of *Trino’s Choice* would look like. Brainstorm who would write the screenplay, who would act in the movie, and what scenes could be omitted and what new ones added. Have students create a movie poster advertising this new film that contains the brainstormed information. (**Viewing:** production; producing visual to extend or represent meaning)
2. Invite students to reflect on the books, movies, television shows, etc. that have had a deep impact on their life and/or way of thinking. Ask each student to choose one particular example and research the story behind a book or film, a little about the author or director, or any other piece of added information. Have them write-up a short essay including the original work and its impact on his/her own life, plus the researched information. The essay should conclude with how this new information changes/or does not change the student’s view on the work they initially selected. (**Writing:** purposes/ inquiry/ research)
3. Discuss students’ reception of *Trino’s Choice*. Have each student contribute one piece of positive or negative criticism and record the list on a piece of easel paper. Then, ask students to write a letter of support for the inclusion of *Trino’s Choice* in the school curriculum in their city. Have them address their letters to the city’s office of public education or other appropriate person/office. Students will be expected to write in a persuasive style that is also mechanically correct. (**Writing:** purposes/ to express, to describe)
4. Ask students to think about all the problems Trino faced throughout the book. Some possible options include a single-parent home, poverty, lack of male role models, peer pressure, etc. Ask the students to research some possible sources of help for Trino and his family, or others like them. Students can select a problem to address and then find a corresponding organization/ agency. Invite students to write a letter, as Trino, to the agency that describes what his problem is, what he found out about the organization/ agency, and that then asks for help from the agency. Students should carefully organize their letters and pay attention to mechanics. (**Writing:** purposes/ inquiry/ research)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DIANE GONZALES BERTRAND is Writer-in-Residence at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas. Her other novels for teens include *Sweet Fifteen*, *Lessons of the Game*, and the sequel, *Trino's Time*. She wrote a novel for children, *Alicia's Treasure*, and the bi-lingual picture books, *Sip, Slurp, Soup, Soup/Caldo, caldo, caldo, Family, Familia, The Last Doll / La última muñeca*, and *Uncle Chente's Picnic/El picnic de Tío Chente*. Her books are published by Arte Publico Press in Houston, Texas. She lives in San Antonio with her husband and two children.