

A GUIDE TO Baseball in April

Gary Soto

He had never been so embarrassed. He would have to ask his parents to move the family out of town.

THE BOOK AT A GLANCE

Baseball in April is a collection of eleven short stories about the everyday experiences of Mexican American young people.

Setting: contemporary working-class neighborhoods in cities of California's Central Valley.

Of Special Note: Spanish words and phrases used in the short stories are listed in alphabetical order at the end of the book.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

These stories are easy to read; each one quickly develops a plot and theme that will appeal to students. The main character of each story is a Mexican American youngster with family, friends, and feelings that students will immediately recognize as much like their own. It's clear that Soto likes kids and understands what they care about.

BACKGROUND

Mexican Americans. Spain conquered the Aztec Indian Empire of Mexico in 1519. The ancestors of some Mexican Americans settled in what is now the southwestern United States before any other group except American Indians. By the end of the 16th century, New Spain, as Mexico was then called, began to colonize the territory that is now the states of Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas.

In the more recent past, thousands of Mexicans immigrated to the United States during the Mexican Revolution of 1911–1920. Since the Second World War, most Mexican immigrants to the United States have settled in California and Texas. In the 1960s young Mexican Americans began to identify themselves as *Chicano*, a slang word once used to refer to a poor Mexican or Mexican American. Calling themselves Chicanos reflects the pride of Mexican Americans in *La Raza*, the people of Spanish-Mexican-Indian heritage.

THE STORIES

“BROKEN CHAIN”

Protagonist: Alfonso, a seventh-grader who wants to look grown-up.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Ernie, Alfonso's brother, two years older than Alfonso.

Sandra, seventh-grader with ponytails who likes Alfonso just as he is.

Conflict: Alfonso's internal conflict between insecurity and confidence.

Theme: Looking grown-up or handsomer than average is not as important—or as attractive to a seventh-grade girl—as behaving in a grown-up way.

PLOT

Alfonso hates the way he looks. His family can't afford braces for teeth, so he tries unsuccessfully for hours to straighten them himself by pushing them with his thumbs. After he gives up and decides to clean his bike, a depressed Ernie tells Alfonso that two girls who were supposed to meet him and his friend Frostie never appeared. Later in the day a **plot complication** develops when Alfonso rescues a little boy caught on the barbed-wire fence at his old elementary school. He is delighted when the boy's sister, Sandra, agrees to go biking with him. He asks Ernie if he can borrow Ernie's bike for Sandra to ride; Ernie refuses. After school on Monday while Alfonso cleans his bike, the chain breaks. Now Alfonso needs two bikes if he wants to go riding with Sandra. Ernie, on his way to catch frogs, again refuses to loan Alfonso his bike. At the **climax** of the story, Ernie finally lends his bike to Alfonso. Ernie's bike is dirty, but Alfonso, riding with Sandra perched on the crossbar, suddenly realizes that outward appearances are not important.

“BASEBALL IN APRIL”

Protagonists: Michael and Jesse are brothers who love to play baseball. Michael is eleven, Jesse is nine.

Conflict: The brothers’ external conflict between their dismal baseball skills and their intense desire to play on a team.

Theme: Being part of a team and having fun is more important than winning.

PLOT

Michael and Jesse try out for Little League, but the coaches seem uninterested even though the brothers do their best. Neither boy makes a Little League team. A friend tells the brothers about a team that practices near Hobo Park. The enthusiastic coach of the Hobos lets anyone play. Michael quits the Hobos when he finds a girlfriend, but Jesse continues to play all summer, although his batting doesn’t improve. At the story’s **climax** Jesse finally gets on base when the pitcher throws a ball that hits his leg. When baseball season is over, Jesse remembers the fun he had playing on a team—even though he knows he didn’t play well.

“TWO DREAMERS”

Protagonists: Hector Molina, a quiet, nine-year-old boy, and Luis Molina, Hector’s grandfather, a night watchman who dreams of retiring a wealthy man.

Conflict: Luis’s external conflict between wanting to buy real estate and not having the money to invest.

Theme: Love between a grandson and grandfather is built on the dreams and trust they share.

PLOT

Hector’s grandfather Luis hears that his son-in-law made a lot of money by buying a house and reselling it. Luis thinks he might like to fund his retirement by making money in real estate. His wife thinks this is a crazy idea since they already have a house and don’t have money to buy another one. Hector and Luis see a house with a “For Sale” sign. Luis offers Hector two dollars to act as his interpreter in two calls to the real estate agent. The agent overwhelms Hector with information about the house and finally tells him the price, which is much too high for his grandfather. His grandfather fears that his wife will find out he has been “pretending to be a big shot.” While Hector is on the phone with the agent, his grandmother calls out to see what her two “locos” are doing, and a nervous Luis hangs up the phone. In the story’s **climax** Luis promises to give Hector four dollars if Hector saves him from his wife’s scolding. Hector tells his grandmother that he was calling a friend, and Grandfather corroborates the lie. Luis gives Hector two dollars and promises to give his grandson the rest when he becomes rich.

“BARBIE”

Protagonist: Veronica Solis, a young girl who loves Barbie dolls.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Rudy, Veronica’s uncle; he gives her two dolls: an “imitation” Barbie and a real Barbie.

Donna, Rudy’s girlfriend.

Helen Solis, Veronica’s mother, Rudy’s sister.

Martha, Veronica’s friend; she has two Barbies and one Ken doll.

Conflict: Veronica’s internal conflict between adoring a doll completely unlike herself and loving a doll who looks like her.

Theme: Prettiest is not always best.

PLOT

Veronica desperately wants a Barbie doll like the ones she sees advertised on television. She is bitterly disappointed when her uncle Rudy gives her a black-haired imitation Barbie for Christmas. She thinks this doll is ugly and throws it against the wall. The following year, Rudy brings his fiancée, the blond, blue-eyed Donna, to meet the family. The two give Veronica a Barbie doll with three Barbie outfits. Later, when Veronica and Martha play together at Martha’s house, Martha tries to switch Barbies so that she can have Veronica’s newer doll. In the story’s **climax** Veronica is devastated when she discovers that Barbie has somehow lost her head on the trip home. Martha helps Veronica search, but the girls cannot find the head. A distraught Veronica yells at Martha, and her friend runs home. That night a calmer Veronica lovingly takes both poor, headless Barbie and black-haired, fake Barbie to bed.

“THE NO-GUITAR BLUES”

Protagonist: Fausto, a teenager who wants to be a rock musician.

Conflict: Fausto’s internal conflict between his longing to keep the reward money and his feelings of guilt about tricking Roger’s kind owners.

Theme: Dishonesty brings only guilt; honesty is often rewarded.

PLOT

Fausto wants a guitar so he can become a rock musician. When his mother tells him a guitar costs too much, he tries to earn the money to buy one. He finds a dog named Roger with an address on its collar. He takes the dog to its owners and lies about where he found it, saying it was way over by the freeway. Roger’s owners give Fausto a twenty-dollar reward. That’s enough to buy a secondhand guitar, but Fausto, torn by guilt, goes to church and, in the **climax** of the story, drops the money into the collection basket. The next

day, his mother remembers seeing her father's guitar on when she cleaned out his garage. Grandfather Lupe gives the guitar to Fausto, who is confident that this is the beginning of a successful musical career.

“SEVENTH GRADE”

Protagonist: Victor Rodriguez, a seventh-grader who has a crush on a classmate named Teresa.

Conflict: Victor's internal conflict between fear of embarrassment and his desire to impress Teresa.

Theme: Sometimes even the most hopeless situation turns out well in the end.

PLOT

Victor signs up for French because he hopes Teresa will be in his class. In a gently humorous **characterization** of seventh-grade boys, Victor's friend Michael practices scowling because he thinks having the same look as the models in *GQ* will attract girls. Victor himself resorts to scowling when his attempts at conversation with Teresa fall flat. In French class Victor is so eager to impress Teresa that he raises his hand when the teacher asks if anyone knows French. When Victor tries to make up something that sounds like French, he thinks everyone—not just the teacher—must know he is a fool for speaking gibberish. But Teresa believes that Victor can speak French, and his dreams come true when she asks him to help her. His French teacher, recalling some embarrassing dating experiences in his own past, doesn't give Victor's pretense away. In the happy **resolution**, Victor has won Teresa, and Mr. Bueller has won a dedicated student.

“MOTHER AND DAUGHTER”

Protagonists: Yollie Moreno, a pretty, intelligent eighth-grader, and Mrs. Moreno, Yollie's mother.

MAIN CHARACTER

Sister Kelley, teacher at Yollie's school, in charge of the eighth-grade fall dance.

Conflicts: Yollie and Mrs. Moreno face internal conflict as they try to reconcile Yollie's present needs and Mrs. Moreno's hopes for Yollie's future.

Theme: It's not always possible to sacrifice happiness in the present for future long-term goals.

PLOT

Mrs. Moreno is saving money for her long-term goal of college for Yollie and refuses to spend a penny of it for a new dress for her daughter to wear to a party. Instead, she dyes Yollie's white summer dress black. At the outdoor party, as she is dancing with Ernie, the boy she has a crush on, it begins to rain. Drying off inside, Yollie is mortified when she sees black dye dripping out of her dress and she runs home. Confronted by how deeply Yollie has been hurt by her attempts at frugality, Mrs.

Moreno cries. The next day, after Ernie calls Yollie to ask for a date, Mrs. Moreno takes some of the money she has been saving, and mother and daughter buy a new outfit that will withstand any weather.

“THE KARATE KID”

Protagonist: Gilbert Sanchez, a quiet and studious fifth-grader.

Conflict: Gilbert's internal conflict between his movie image of self-defense and the reality of learning to defend himself.

Theme: Movie magic can't always be applied to real life.

PLOT

When Gilbert sees *The Karate Kid* on video, he identifies with the slight hero who magically gains courage and skill by standing on one leg like a stork and flapping his arms. This technique doesn't work for Gilbert when he fights the school bully, Pete the Heat, and gets knocked down. Thinking that he needs to learn from a karate master, he finds an instructor. His mother agrees to pay for the lessons, but a disappointed Gilbert finds real-life karate completely different from movie karate. Gilbert's instructor is interested only in money; his fellow students are disrespectful and noisy; and the classes are boring. Not surprisingly, Pete the Heat beats up Gilbert again. Gilbert is actually happy when his instructor closes the studio; and when Gilbert's mother asks him if he wants to go to another karate school, Gilbert says that he has learned enough to protect himself. He has learned a lesson about the movies and about himself, a lesson that serves as the **theme** for this story.

“LA BAMBA”

Protagonist: Manuel Gomez, one of seven children, a fifth-grader who wants to stand out from the crowd.

Conflict: Manuel's internal conflict between his desire to be in the limelight and his fear of public failure.

Theme: Recognition often comes when one least expects it.

PLOT

Manuel volunteers to lip-sync “La Bamba” in his school's talent show and accepts his friend's suggestion that he dance to the music, too. During rehearsal, Manuel drops his record, but fortunately it doesn't break. Things usually go wrong for Manuel, but he's confident nothing can go wrong this time. In the **climax** of the story, the record sticks during his performance—so Manuel has to move his lips and dance to the same words over and over again. The audience breaks into wild applause and laughter as Manuel runs off-stage. Later, Manuel is amazed to find out that everyone thinks he meant to be funny and intentionally made the record stick.

“THE MARBLE CHAMP”

Protagonist: **Lupe Medrano**, a shy twelve-year-old who excels in academics but not in sports.

Conflict: External conflict between Lupe’s lack of ability in sports and her desire to be a winner.

Theme: If you’re highly motivated and practice a lot, you too may be a winner.

PLOT

Determined to be good in at least one sport, Lupe exercises and practices until she develops muscles and skills for playing marbles. Her parents encourage her new interest and even rig up lights in the back yard so she can practice after dark. In the championship she wins the girls’ competition and then beats the winner of the boys’ competition. In the story’s **resolution** Lupe, who seems unusually modest and mature for her age, gives credit to her powerful thumb, not to herself.

“GROWING UP”

Protagonist: **Maria**, a tenth-grader who thinks she’s too old to go on family vacations.

Conflict: As Maria grows up, she experiences an internal conflict between her need for independence and her desire to remain close to her family.

Theme: Recognizing that you’re growing up can be a bittersweet experience.

PLOT

Bored by vacations with her large family, Maria tells her father that she wants to stay home this year. After an argument Maria’s father, who shares his daughter’s awkwardness in expressing love, agrees that she can stay with her godmother while the family is away. Maria’s freedom doesn’t give her as much pleasure as she had expected: She has a good time with her friend Becky and her godmother but she worries about her family’s safety every time she hears a traffic accident reported in the news. When the family returns, Maria resents the fact that they had a great time without her. She is pleased to realize that she does care about her family and that she is becoming a more mature person.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Discussion groups or students doing individual research projects might focus on the following activities.

1. Sharing the Stories

You might want to assign one story to each student or have students read all the stories.

- Ask students to choose their favorite story and discuss why they like it. How authentic are the **characters, dialogue, conflicts, and resolution**?
- Have volunteers find a way to present their favorite story to the class (or to another class), using role-playing, a videotape of a play based on the story, a series of comic strips, or a group reading.

2. Extending the Story

Ask students to choose one story that they would like to see developed into a young-adult novel or after-school TV film.

- Have two or three volunteers write an episode that might directly follow the story they have chosen.
- Have students imagine that the main character in their favorite story is ten years older than he or she was in the story. Ask them to collaborate in describing this adult character. Have students discuss whether it might (or might not) be a good idea for their novel or film to end with a scene showing the adult that their character has become.

MEET THE WRITER

Gary Soto (1952–) grew up in a working-class Mexican American neighborhood in Fresno, California. His poems, stories, and novels come from his childhood memories. For several years he taught English and Chicano Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, but he now works full time writing for children and adults. His autobiographical essays *Living up the Street* won the Before Columbus Foundation’s American Book Award.

READ ON

Gary Soto, *Neighborhood Odes* and *A Fire in My Hands*. Two collections of poetry for young people.

Lensey Namioka, “**The All-American Slurp.**” A humorous short story about the experiences of a young Chinese American girl and her family.

O. Henry, “**After Twenty Years.**” A classic short story about friendship, duty, loyalty, and the difficulty of doing the right thing.

William Blinn, *Brian’s Song*. An award-winning play about friendship, competition, love, trust, and courage.

Toni Cade Bambara, “**Raymond’s Run.**” A popular story about a girl who is a mixture of self-confidence and uncertainty.

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