

Tortilla Sun, by Jennifer Cervantes

Review by Kimberly Mach

Description from book jacket:

When twelve-year-old Izzy discovers a beat-up baseball marked with the partially obscured phrase “Because... magic,” she is determined to figure out the missing words. Could her father have written them? What secrets does this old ball have to tell? Her mom certainly isn’t sharing any – especially when it comes to Izzy’s father, who died before she was born.

But when Izzy spends the summer in her Nana’s remote New Mexico village, she discovers long-buried secrets that come alive in an enchanted landscape of majestic mountains, whispering winds, and tortilla suns. Izzy finds herself on an adventure to connect the hidden pieces of her past. And just maybe she will discover the missing words that could change her life forever...but only if she can learn to create a few words of her own.

My two cents:

Tortilla Sun is a perfect middle grade novel. It is well-constructed, has all the required pieces, and that little extra something that keeps you thinking about the story long after you’ve read it. It is a book I am looking forward to sharing with my grade six students in a booktalk.

What I loved most were the surprising elements; the pieces I didn’t expect. I didn’t expect to meet a master storyteller as a character. Socorro, almost mythic in description, appears and guides Izzy and the members of the village with her wisdom and tales of the people. In fact, she helps Izzy, an aspiring writer, find her way to write and finish the stories she’s been struggling with. With Socorro’s guidance and the help of Nana and her new friends, Izzy is able to find her own *cuento*, or story. The characters were as rich and varied as village life - like the members of a large family. In fact, one of my favorite scenes is when six of the characters, ranging in age from Nana to young Maggie, play baseball together. Mrs. Castillo with her shiny nails surprises them all and hits a homerun.

I didn’t expect to find the essence of baseball in here either, the magic and lore, the homerun, and those bits that capture our imagination. The story starts with Izzy finding an old baseball she is certain belonged to her father. Every stitch in that baseball is a thread of her story, of her *cuento*. In that story there is healing and forgiveness; it is one of the pieces that stayed with me long after the first read.

Finally, I didn’t expect to come away craving empanadas. When Izzy took her first bite my mouth started watering. Cervantes is expert at describing the smells of cooking and giving us the taste for many Mexican-American dishes through Izzy’s first experience with them. She even includes at the end a recipe for her own Nana’s tortillas, a recipe pulled from her own family history.

Jennifer Cervantes creates characters in *Tortilla Sun* that move into your heart and stay there. I want to go to Nana’s. I want to run my fingers over the *Saltillo* mosaic tiled floors and smell the snap and sizzle of the tortillas cooking. I want to run down the same path that Izzy and Mateo took, and then I want to come back and sleep in that hammock. It is hard to believe this is a debut novel. Nana, Izzy’s

grandmother tells her at one point, *Sometimes you can't see the magic; you just know it's there because you can feel it.* That is the way I feel about this MG novel. Each time I see it on my shelf I remember the characters, the sounds, and the smells. You can feel the magic in this story, that certain something that brings it all to life. I look forward to reading Jennifer Cervantes' next novel, and I hope there will be many more.

In the classroom:

I see mostly social studies connections here and opportunities for interdisciplinary learning.

Geography. Any teacher who is not from the southwest may use portions of the text to teach about the southwest. Why are hot air balloons popular in New Mexico? Where is the Rio Grande River? What is the terrain like? What does it mean to live in a desert? Simply learning that a desert does not only consist of drifting sand dunes would be a good use here.

Study of culture and the family unit. There are two grandmothers in the story who play vital roles in the lives of young people. A study of the nuclear family and extended family and role of grandmothers and grandparents in societies today would also be a good fit. In *Tortilla Sun* there are both multigenerational households and nuclear families: Izzy, her grandmother and mother, Mateo and his parents, and then Maggie and her grandmother, Gip. Unlike some novels, the family unit, although broken at the beginning (Izzy and her mother live alone), becomes the mainstay of the whole story.

Study of Mexican-American culture. Izzy rediscovers her roots and forms her identity in this story. She does not come to New Mexico with a strong sense of who she is. It's her grandmother, Nana, who teaches her about the religion, the Saltillo tiles, the food, and even a bit of the history. A historian at heart, I was fascinated about why the doorways were so low and narrow in Nana's house. Izzy even discovers there is more to her name than she first thought.

In Language Arts there are a variety of lessons that could be drawn from the novel from close reading particular passages. Foreshadowing, figurative language, and story structure can be a focus of these reads. In addition, advice on how to start and finish writing a story using practical strategies can be found. Izzy begins her own stories by using index cards. Soon the index cards can be laid out together and she has a full story with a beginning, middle, and end.

Author bio:

Jennifer Cervantes currently resides in New Mexico with her family, which she calls *The Land of Enchantment*. *Tortilla Sun* is her first novel. For more information about Jennifer and her upcoming works please visit her website:

<http://www.jennifercervantes.com/index.html>