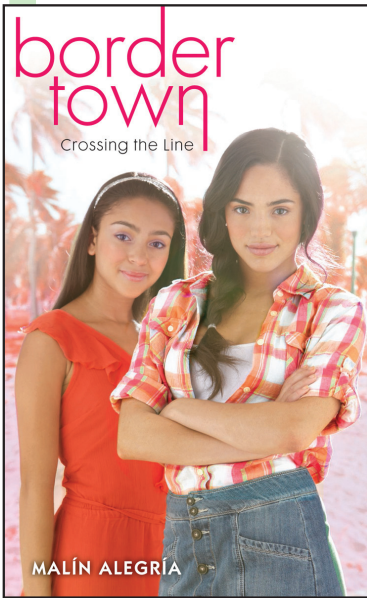
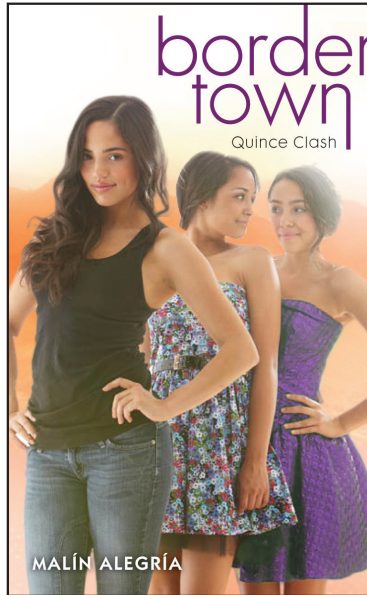


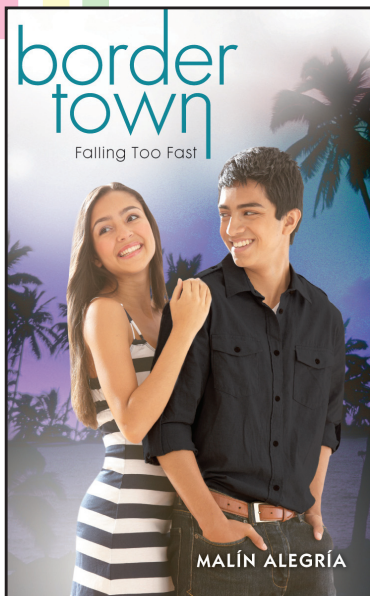
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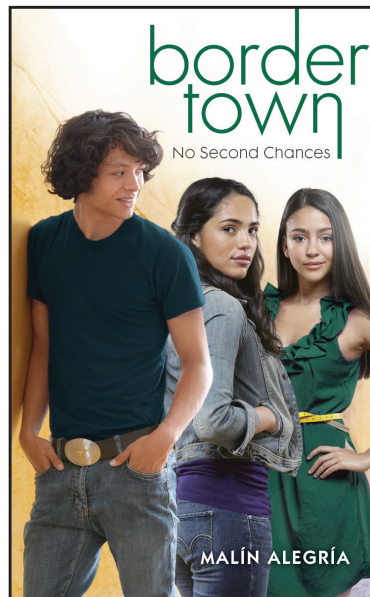
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SET IN FICTIONAL Dos Rios, Texas, the books in the Border Town series center around high school sophomore Fabiola Garza, her younger sister, Alexis, and their cousin, Santiago, as they navigate the often tempestuous waters of life with their close-knit family and their friends.

border town

by MALÍN ALEGRÍA

A new series that explores the physical and social boundaries of life on the border.

"A welcome entry into the teen market, especially for Bluford series fans." —KIRKUS REVIEWS

"A warm, contemporary Latino drama of extended family and friends . . . both suspenseful and touching."

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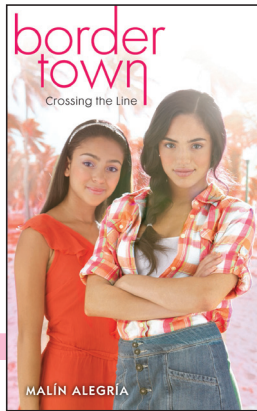
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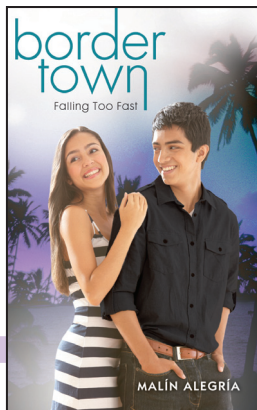
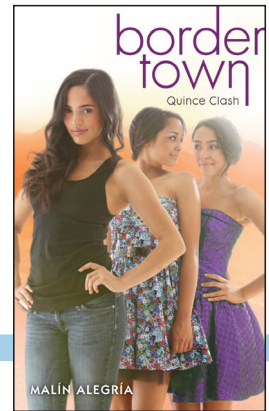
border town

by MALÍN ALEGRÍA



SHY FABI COMES OUT OF HER SHELL when a worker in her family's Tex-Mex restaurant is savagely attacked and her cousin is accused of the crime. Fabi's younger sister, Alexis, starts high school and to Fabi's dismay, immediately falls in with the popular crowd. Can Fabi and Alexis work through their sibling squabbles and look past Santiago's earlier brushes with the law to prove his innocence?

FABI FINDS HERSELF IN COMPETITION with school queen bee Melodee Stanton over who can throw the most lavish quinceañera the valley has ever seen. Fabi's family can't afford a quince like Melodee's, with designer dresses and engraved invitations. Alexis and Grandma Trini team to get Fabi's party featured on the new reality show *Quince Dreams*, but at what cost to Fabi and her relationships with her friends and family?

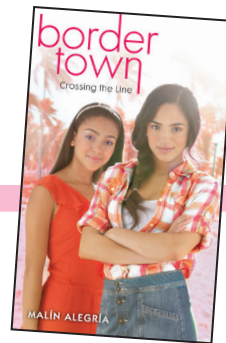


ALEXIS HAS MUSIC in her blood. She's certain that one day she'll be leaving Dos Rios behind for a glamorous life of singing stardom. Until then, however, she'll have to be satisfied with mariachi band practice and helping out at the family restaurant. Alexis's ordinary life takes an interesting turn when she meets the swoon-worthy lead singer of a rival high school's mariachi band. There's one small problem—this suave singer doesn't seem to know that Alexis exists. She's determined to make herself heard—no matter what the cost.

SANTIAGO IS IN TROUBLE—again! When his dad is released from prison and wants to reconnect, Santiago decides to drop out of school and make some money so he can take care of his mom on his own. He and Fabi team up to sell Grandpa Frank's delicious produce and their own healthy smoothies at *la pulga*, a popular flea market in Dos Rios. But an obsessive former flame and her smuggler father threaten to crush Santiago's new business and his lofty dreams.



Discussion questions for *Border Town: Crossing the Line*



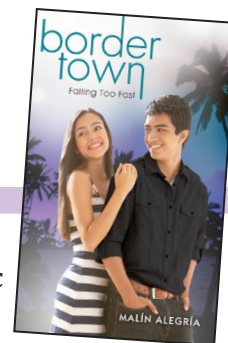
- Author Malín Alegría begins *Crossing the Line* with the main character Fabi, a self-conscious teenager, trapped in an embarrassing situation. Fabi has designed the errand to avoid embarrassment but, through a series of events beyond her control, finds herself humiliated despite her best efforts. What does this scene reveal about the nature of Fabi's character? Why do you think the author chose to open the novel with an awkward predicament for Fabi?
- Fabi and her family live and operate a restaurant in Dos Rios, Texas. The author paints a sad, drab portrait of downtown Dos Rios with its deserted store windows and a meager collection of remaining businesses. In contrast, the walls of the family restaurant are covered with images of the Aztec empire, Pancho Villa, and Cesar Chavez. The restaurant is alive with rich smells and lively sounds. Why do you think the author juxtaposed these two markedly different settings? What is the significance of the display of Mexican heritage in the family restaurant?
- Fabi has a younger sister, Alexis, who echoes the looks of their mother's side of the family with her light-colored skin and petite frame, while Fabi mirrors the strong indigenous roots of their father's side of the family. As Alexis enters high school with her older sister returning to school as a sophomore, the issue of beauty plays a significant role in how each sister experiences high school. Discuss how beauty is defined in Fabi and Alexis's peer group and how looks shape the high school experience for each sister.
- Fabi tries to calm her little sister's jitters about the first day of high school. How does Fabi's high school experience color the way she anticipates having to support Alexis at school? What transpires on the first day of school that makes Fabi's support unnecessary? Did your opinion of Alexis change after reading about her behavior at school?
- Discuss the friendship that Fabi and Georgia Rae develop with outsider Milo after they rescue him next to his broken-down car on the way to the high school football game. Milo dresses differently and listens to different music. Why is Fabi's friendship with Milo important in the turbulent setting of high school?
- The attack on Chuy coupled with unemployed Santiago's sudden income raises doubts in the minds of Fabi's family as to how these two events might be connected. Discuss how the assault on Chuy challenges family loyalty. Do you think that it is possible to be related to someone and still not know his true character?
- At a party, Fabi overhears Dex bragging about the ease of mugging someone, and she assumes he is speaking of the attack on Chuy. On the heels of this discovery, Alexis arrives at the party against her parents' instructions. Fabi tries to do the right thing by forcing Alexis to return home, only to be punished by her father for not taking care of her little sister. Alexis also punishes Fabi with her response to Fabi's guidance. Do you think that it is fair that Fabi's parents place so much responsibility on her to watch Alexis? Discuss how expectations for oldest children differ from those of younger children in a family.
- Do you think that Fabi shows integrity when she names Chuy's attacker to the officer, librarian, and school councilman even though the accused attacker is considered "untouchable" by the town because of his athletic ability and his family's wealth and prominence? Why do you think she was able to point a finger at Dex even when no one believed her and she herself began to have doubts?
- Santiago's choices catch up to him when he is arrested by the police. Fabi teams with her friends, Chuy, and her sister to try and gather evidence that Santiago is not guilty of the attack. Why do you think that Chuy, who was once convinced that Santiago was guilty, and Alexis, who was still enamored with Dex, agreed to the plan to get Dex to admit his role in the mugging?
- Fabi receives information that leads to definitive evidence that Santiago was not involved in Chuy's mugging. What did you feel when the source of the evidence was revealed? Why do you think this character in the story was willing to turn over information that condemned someone she cared about?

Discussion questions for *Border Town: Quince Clash*



- *Quince Clash* begins with Santiago sneaking around in a girlfriend's house late at night trying to avoid being detected by the girlfriend's father. In *Crossing the Line*, Santiago also finds himself in a dangerous situation. A short time has passed between Santiago's brush with the law in *Crossing the Line* and his altercation with an irate and alleged criminal father of a beautiful girl in *Quince Clash*. What do these two events reveal about Santiago's character and his willingness and ability to change? Why do you think he turns to Fabi in both circumstances for help in extricating himself from dicey predicaments?
- Author Malín Alegría offers a quick but informative sketch of the story's characters in the high school cafeteria. From the food Alexis, Milo, and Fabi order to their clothing and conversation, essential truths about each character's personality are presented. What do you know to be true about Alexis, Milo, Fabi, and their nemesis Melodee after reading the scene set in the school lunchroom?
- Given that Melodee was an integral part of clearing Santiago's name in *Crossing the Line*, why do you think that she still bears a grudge against Fabi and her sister? Why does she continue to be a bully toward Fabi?
- The contest between Fabi and Melodee over who can create the most fabulous quinceañera seems unfair from the start. Why do you think that Fabi and Alexis get drawn into competing with Melodee when Melodee obviously has more financial resources? What does the proposed consequence for the loser show about the conflict between Fabi and Melodee?
- Big milestone celebrations in a person's life like communions, birthdays, weddings, and bar/bat mitzvahs often have to expand to include the vision and desires of family members beyond the person being celebrated. Why do you think that Fabi's family is so passionate about giving her a wonderful quinceañera?
- Alexis is quick to devise a plan to generate resources to create a quinceañera for Fabi. Both Grandma Trini and Alexis seem confident that a television show on quinceañeras will provide the answer to their dilemma. Do you think it's a good idea to contact the show?
- Fabi is quite impressed with the poise and professionalism of Grace, the production manager of the television show. A quinceañera is a celebration of a girl's transition from childhood to young adulthood. How is Grace important to Fabi as Fabi makes this transition into young adulthood? What type of mentor is Grace?
- Fabi is smitten by Daniel when she visits the mall with Georgia Rae. Daniel seems to return Fabi's interest when he finds her in the school library and when he accepts Fabi's offer to be her *chambelán*. How did your thoughts change about Daniel from the scene in the mall to the scene at Melodee's quinceañera when Daniel is revealed to be Melodee's boyfriend? Could someone really have that much sway over another's actions like Melodee seemed to have over Daniel? Do you think that Daniel was truly cruel?
- After leaving Melodee's quinceañera in tears, Fabi finds herself in an orange grove talking to her grandmother about her grandmother's memories of being bullied when she was younger. Why was this scene important in understanding why Fabi's grandmother went to such great lengths to make a beautiful quinceañera happen for Fabi?
- Fabi becomes swept up in the moment of the attention from the television show and all of the sparkle and excitement of planning a big celebration. Amidst all of the hoopla, Milo is somewhat forgotten. What are your thoughts about Milo and how Fabi treats him during the planning of the party? What type of friend does Milo turn out to be for Fabi?
- There is a rich tradition of magical realism in Latin American literature where magical elements blend with the real world. Orlando seems to embody this idea of magical realism. What are your thoughts about Orlando and Abuelita Alpha's reaction to him? What does Orlando's character add to a story based firmly in reality?

Discussion questions for *Border Town: Falling Too Fast*



- Author Malín Alegría paints Alexis as a character who has “always been drawn to magic and mystery.” How does this description early in the story support the magical events that transpire with Alexis later in the story?
- The old woman who works in the *botánica* tells Alexis that two men will come into her life—one dark and the other light. How does Christian, “El Charro Negro,” fit into this prediction? Does Justin fit into this prediction as well?
- Alexis envisions a life of fame and celebrity as she fulfills her dream of becoming an acclaimed singer. She is described as being “tired of living on the sidelines.” What role do these desires play in Alexis’s attraction to Christian and in her risky behavior with her cousin Santiago?
- Assistant Principal Castillo says mariachi music is “all about taking pride in one’s culture.” Discuss the role of struggle in building a sense of pride. Alexis’s mariachi group confronts many obstacles—lack of members, poor rehearsal space, and theft of their costumes. Do these obstacles play an important part in their feelings of pride in their music and culture?
- Alexis loves being in the school mariachi group and is inspired to be a professional singer, but her band-mates are often less than enthusiastic about being in the group. Discuss the various ways in which Alexis takes a leadership role with the group and brings them back together from several breaking points.
- Two diametrically opposed styles of music are interwoven through the novel: mariachi and *narcocorrido*. Mariachi music is described as “show(ing) us our potential—who we can become if we believe in ourselves and work hard.” This essential element of mariachi is echoed by the teens who describe mariachi as being “in their veins.” In contrast, the *narcocorridos* that the Salinas brothers listen to glorify the exploits of drug dealers. How do the two distinct styles of music symbolize the two worlds in which the teens of Dos Rios live?
- The two grandmothers, Alpha and Trini, have different approaches to courtship—one is dictated by prayers and propriety and the other is shaped by flirtation and lyrics from romantic songs. Both grandmothers do agree on the power of a *serenata* in Alexis’s plan to win Christian’s heart. Discuss the different approaches to courtship presented in the novel. How do these approaches compare to other methods teens employ to find a boyfriend/girlfriend?
- Owls, old women, and magic become important elements of mystery as the mariachi band tries to travel via bus to their big performance. How did this section of the story, when the legend of *La Lechuza* seems to spring to life, affect the mood of the story for you as a reader?
- Christian is forced to pay the ultimate price when he is deported to Mexico. This very realistic outcome follows on the heels of the magical realism of the *La Lechuza* episode. How do these contrasting events capture the culture of the people of Dos Rios?
- The competition event is not what Alexis and her band mates expect. They’re playing against children’s groups! How do the other bands react to the team from Dos Rios? What stereotypes of border town life are exposed? How has their involvement in mariachi moved the players in the Dos Rios band beyond stereotypes?

Discussion questions for *Border Town: No Second Chances*



- Santiago faces many crossroads in his life and is often uncertain about which path to take. Early in the story, Santiago must decide to stay in school or quit in order to make money to provide for his mother. Discuss the pros and cons of Santiago's decision to leave school and to get a job.
- Santiago dreams that work will help make him into a man. What realities and temptations thwart Santiago's good intentions as he begins his project to help Grandpa Frank on the ranch? How does his ultimate reaction to Chubs's request to play hooky from the ranch signal a change in Santiago?
- *La pulga* is described as dilapidated in its surroundings, but festive—a place “where fortunes were just waiting to be made.” *La pulga* represents opportunities for Grandpa Frank, Santiago, Fabi, and even Alexis. What challenges does the family encounter as they embark on their new enterprise? How do these challenges affect the hopes they had at the beginning of the new venture to sell produce and smoothies?
- One of the factors coloring Santiago's decision to leave school is the reappearance of his father. Santiago remembers him as an abusive, alcoholic parent. Santiago bristles when his father says to him, upon learning that Santiago is working at Grandpa Frank's ranch, “That's my boy. Entrepreneur, just like his old man.” Santiago states that he is nothing like his father. How do the negative memories of his father affect Santiago as he tries to become a self-sufficient adult?
- The family restaurant is the hub for all generations of the family—it's where advice is served alongside the delicious food. The arrival in Dos Rios of Mr. Taco Man, a fast food shop, rattles the security Fabi feels about her family's restaurant. Discuss the lengths to which Fabi and her friend, DJ Milo, go to protect their restaurant from the encroaching Mr. Taco Man. Do you feel that Fabi's actions are justified?
- Santiago has a backup plan to boost sales of their healthy smoothies at *la pulga*—he'll wrestle at *la lucha libre*. Santiago's grandmother Trini describes the wrestler, or *luchador*, as “a people's hero. In the ring, every man was a fighter, no matter his class, education, or background. On the mat, every man was equal.” How does Trini's quote relate to Santiago's struggles to show everyone that he is a man able to take care of himself?
- Santiago manages to catch the sticky-fingered thief who makes off with some of Santiago's finest produce at *la pulga*. Angel inspires some strong thoughts about mature choices for Santiago: “He wanted to show his mom and his teachers that he could take care of himself. He wanted his dad to see that he didn't need him. He also wanted to do something about hungry kids like Angel.” How is the character of Angel important in Santiago's metamorphosis from unruly teen to responsible adult?
- Even with his focus on making the right choices, Santiago is still forced to deal with the poor choices of others. When his cousin, Chubs, borrows Santiago's truck to make a delivery for the Salinas brothers, Santiago finds himself right smack in the middle of another mess involving drugs and a carjacking. Santiago's father, Eddy, is also caught in the swirl of this dismal situation. Through the chaos, Santiago's father's true character comes into sharp focus. What do Eddy's actions in the face of trouble reveal about his character?
- Santiago experiences many false starts in his journey to become a more responsible person. Do you feel that there will be a lasting change in Santiago? What gives the reader hope at the end of the tale? How does Assistant Principal Castillo's mother's favorite saying, “*Caras vemos, corazones no sabemos*” relate to Santiago as the story concludes?



An interview with Malín Alegría

Can you describe your high school years? Are there echoes of Fabiola's experiences in your past?

In high school I was a rebel—a tame, respectful, nice rebel. I was a late bloomer and utterly uncomfortable with my developing body and relationships with boys. In my junior and senior years, I was voted most creative and class clown. I was definitely on a mission to be different, to not suck up to the cool rich crowd, and to start my own trends. My hair color and identity changed every couple of months. I struggled with self-acceptance. There were no role models on TV or in magazines I could look up to and try to emulate. Many times I felt alone and misunderstood.

When developing Fabiola's character, I reflected and used a lot of my own personal adolescent dreams, emotions, and experiences. Fabi and I are both older sisters. We both share the same outlook of taking care of and being responsible for our siblings. We both dream of leaving our communities, running off to the big city, and making our dreams come true. We are both dark skinned with fair skinned younger sisters. Fabi is uncomfortable with her body and hates her family's intrusive comments. We both share a love/hate relationship with our big crazy families.

Did you know you wanted to become a writer when you were in high school?

In high school I loved to act. I enjoyed breaking down characters and figuring out what motivated and made them tick. I wanted to play roles and hear stories that reflected my culture. I knew that these stories didn't exist so I decided soon after high school that I needed to write stories I wanted to see.

Did you have a quinceañera? Did you attend friends' quinces growing up?

At fifteen I did not want a quinceañera. I was kind of a rocker at that point with purple hair, anarchists' T-shirts, black nail polish, etc. There was no way I would be caught dead in a princess puffy dress. Fast-forward fifteen years and I wear froufrou dresses every chance I get—life is funny. Growing up in San Francisco, I grew up with an ethnically diverse group of friends. None of them had quinces. However, I have cousins—lots of cousins—who had quinceañeras. It was a part of my culture I couldn't deny or hide from.

Fabiola's extended family—especially her grandparents and cousins—play a large role in her life. Did you grow up close to your extended family?

Yeah, but I wouldn't refer to them as extended. The word "extended" connotes a sense of "in addition to"—which they are not. I grew up in a big, loud family with tons of aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. My dad and mom both came from big families (eight siblings on each side). My family lived next door, downstairs, or they were always dropping in unannounced. It's a cultural thing, I guess. We were always in each other's business, giving unsolicited advice, and arguing. As a child I felt like I was suffocating; now as an adult I love them dearly.

What are your fondest memories of high school? Were there experiences you'd rather forget?

All my memories were important in shaping me into the person I am today. I wouldn't change or want to forget any of them. A painful memory that motivated me to go to college involved my English teacher. I remember the first time AP English was being offered at my school. All my friends were being "invited" to this college prep course, and I asked to be included. My English teacher told me that this course wasn't for me because I wasn't going to go to college anyway. Ha! I had to prove her wrong.

Another memorable moment came in my junior year when my drama teacher sparked a passion for performing in me. She exposed me to another way of living—an alternative to the traditional marriage-and-kids story. She was young and hip—a New York City Jewish actress who always had a packed suitcase by her door just in case she decided to take a last-minute trip around the world. My first acting role was an illegal Latina activist. For the first time in my life, I played the protagonist of a story and I didn't have to change my hair, skin color, or accent. It was a liberating experience.

Your two previous novels, *Estrella's Quinceañera* and *Sofi Mendoza's Guide to Getting Lost in Mexico*, also feature strong Latinas and themes of discovery and identity. What did you learn from writing those books that led you to create the Border Town series?

I believe that in my first two novels I was trying to understand and heal from childhood wounds of not fitting in and being different. I was trying to present a road map for bicultural youth trying to navigate their identities while being true to their cultural history and present reality.

With the Border Town series, I feel much more comfortable in my storytelling craft. I am exploring new identities and realities. I am having a lot more fun and challenging myself to perceive different realities. It's so much fun and liberating.

In what ways do you find writing series fiction liberating and restrictive?

Latinos have lived in the United States for over 500 years. However, mainstream literature rarely portrays strong brown characters as the protagonists. It's liberating to have the opportunity to write a teen drama that teens across the world can relate to because they speak to typical experiences. Teen stories where the protagonists just so happen to be brown.

As a fiction writer, I find the opportunities to branch out into other genres a bit restrictive—for now. I find myself wanting to grow and dabble in mysteries, science fiction, and horror with a bicultural twist. That is my next challenge!

What advice would you give high schoolers interested in writing?

Lesson One: It's cool to be a wannabe.

- Hang out with people who are smarter than you. They do rub off.
- Become a stalker. Not in the illegal sense of the word, but study your favorite authors. Hang out where authors hang out. Join their clubs. Study their work habits.

Lesson Two: You gotta practice.

- Writing is like a muscle. You have to put in the time if you want abs of steel. A great book to help build discipline is Julie Cameron's *The Artist's Way*.
- Find opportunities to write. Join the school newspaper. My first gig was as the horoscope writer of my high school paper. I created a pseudonym and made up crazy predictions. It was tons of fun. Start a blog or join someone else's. Most libraries have a youth book group. Get involved. Fight your shyness. It's so worth it.

Malín Alegría was raised in San Francisco, California. She is a graduate of U.C. Santa Barbara and has a master's degree in education. In addition to writing the Border Town series, she's published two previous young adult novels, *Estrella's Quinceañera* and *Sofi Mendoza's Guide to Getting Lost in Mexico*. Learn more about her life and work at www.malinallegria.com.

The discussion questions in this guide were written by Leigh Courtney, PhD. She teaches in the Global Education program at a public school in San Diego, California. She holds both master's and doctoral degrees in education, with an emphasis on curriculum and instruction.