

Reading the World EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

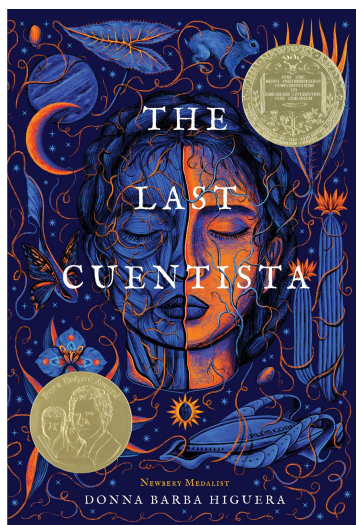
The Last Cuentista

Written by Donna Barba Higuera

Published by Levine Querido, 2021

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Middle Grade Novel (Ages 10+)



BOOK SUMMARY

Había una vez . . .

There lived a girl named Petra Peña, who wanted nothing more than to be a storyteller, like her abuelita.

But Petra's world is ending. Earth has been destroyed by a comet, and only a few hundred scientists and their children – among them Petra and her family – have been chosen to journey to a new planet. They are the ones who must carry on the human race.

Hundreds of years later, Petra wakes to this new planet – and the discovery that she is the only person who remembers Earth. A sinister Collective has taken over the ship during its journey, bent on erasing the sins of humanity's past. They have systematically purged the memories of all aboard – or purged them altogether.

Petra alone now carries the stories of our past, and with them, any hope for our future. Can she make them live again?



AWARDS & RECOGNITIONS

- Winner of the John Newbery Medal
- Winner of the Pura Belpré Award
- TIME's Best Books of the Year
- *Wall Street Journal's* Best of the Year
- *Minneapolis Star Tribune's* Best of the Year
- *Boston Globe's* Best of the Year
- *BookPage's* Best of the Year
- *Publishers Weekly's* Best of the Year
- *School Library Journal's* Best of the Year
- *Kirkus Reviews'* Best of the Year
- Bank Street's Best of the Year
- Chicago Public Library's Best of the Best
- New York Public Library Best of the Year
- A Junior Library Guild Selection
- Cybils Award Finalist
- Américas Award Honor Book

"The brilliance of Higuera's narrative is that it shows rather than tells us the power of story. As Petra shares her tales and they guide her shipmates out of darkness, readers will find corners of their own hearts illuminated as well. This book is gripping in its twists and turns, and moving in its themes — truly a beautiful cuento." —*New York Times*

"This science-fiction story teaches young readers about the danger of dogma and the power of storytelling." —*TIME*

"Life on the ship, made even more claustrophobic by Petra's declining vision from retinitis pigmentosa, and filled with the translucent, drugged Collective, is particularly chilling. Mexican American Petra is a strong, heroic character, fighting incredible odds to survive and protect others. The ending leaves the door wide open for a sequel. A keep-you-up-all-night, compulsively readable science fiction novel that offers much food for thought." —*School Library Journal* (starred)

AUTHOR'S CORNER

About Donna Barba Higuera:

Taken from [Levine Querido](#)

Donna grew up in central California surrounded by agricultural and oil fields. As a child, rather than dealing with the regular dust devils, she preferred spending recess squirreled away in the janitor's closet with a good book. Her favorite hobbies were calling dial-a-story over and over again, and sneaking into a restricted cemetery to weave her own spooky tales using the crumbling headstones as inspiration.



Donna's Young Adult and Middle Grade books feature characters drawn into creepy situations, melding history, folklore, and or her own life experience into reinvented storylines. She still dreams in Spanglish.

Donna lives in Washington State with her family, three dogs and two frogs. Donna's backyard is a haunted 19th century logging camp. (The haunted part may or may not be true—she makes stuff up.) She is a Critique-Group-Coordinator for SCBWI-Western Washington and teaches “The Hero’s Journey for Young Authors” to future writers.

Follow Donna on Twitter at @dbhiguera.

Donna Barba Higuera creció evitando los molestos polvos de los campos de petróleo del centro de California. Ha pasado toda su vida mezclando fábulas con sus experiencias para crear historias que llenan su imaginación. Ahora las combina escribiendo libros para niños y jóvenes. Finalmente, Donna cambió el polvo del centro de California por las nieblas del noreste del Pacífico. Ella vive allí con su esposo, cuatro hijos, tres perros y dos ranas.

USING *The Last Cuentista* IN THE CLASSROOM

As we've seen with the success of *Blue Beetle*, DC's newest superhero movie, narratives that include call backs to well-known cultural referents are powerful, particularly when they're not explicitly explained. If you've seen *Blue Beetle*, then you know the scene where the familiar blue jar with a green lid makes an appearance. No label is provided, but my guess is most audience members familiar with Latine culture know exactly what it is and the significance of Vicks Vaporub. When I saw the film in Tucson, AZ, the entire theater broke out in laughter at this scene. With *The Last Cuentista*, Donna Barba Higuera offers our students something similar. Between the untranslated Spanish phrases and the various references to

Mexican and Mexican-American culture, many of our students will find a comforting familiarity in the novel.

This speculative fiction novel centers around the story of Petra Peña, a young Mexican American girl who discovers her unique storytelling abilities and embarks on a journey to reconnect with her cultural heritage and help to salvage what remains of the cultures and history of Earth. Petra discovers the power of *cientistas*, individuals who possess the gift of weaving magical stories. By exploring these cultural elements, students not only gain an appreciation for the richness of Mexican culture but also develop a broader understanding of the importance of preserving and celebrating their own cultural heritages. The novel is an excellent way to guide students in considering the importance of stories and storytelling for society.

Teachers can use *The Last Cuentista* as a launching pad for discussions on cultural identity, intergenerational connections, and the importance of preserving and sharing cultural traditions. It provides an excellent context within which students can interrogate the impact of cultural assimilation and the dogmas founded on the belief that equality and sameness are synonymous. *The Last Cuentista* allows middle grade students (and older) to consider the ways in which literature can help us to explore how more abstract philosophical ideals, when applied to lived experience, can greatly impact society for better or worse. *The Last Cuentista* seamlessly integrates literary elements with thought-provoking social issues. The book's suspenseful and emotionally resonant moments provide ample opportunities for classroom discussions and activities that enhance students' comprehension and analytical skills such as interpretation of character motive and making inferences.

Hopefully, *The Last Cuentista* will help students to understand that there are no easy answers to creating a just and equitable society. If we were to find a magic wand that could erase race, class, and gender differences, the resulting society would still be plagued with issues of oppression.

LESSON PLANS & ACTIVITIES

The following lesson plans include guided reading questions organized by parts of the book and extended response writing prompts. These questions have been written to support the development of original thinking and textual analysis that moves beyond the superficial. This guide asks students to engage in the types of reading and critical thinking skills required in standardized reading comprehension tests. The following keywords and skills are highlighted: analyze, infer, evaluate, describe, support, explain, summarize, compare, contrast, and predict.

In addition to the resources in this guide, the publisher, LevineQuerido, created a [Teaching Guide](#) to accompany the novel.

Donna Barba Higuera discusses the novel in the YouTube Video, "[Can the stories of the past, save the future?](#)"

Common Core Standards Addressed:

K-12

Reading

Key Ideas and Details

- Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
- Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure

- Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
- Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

- Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Writing

Text Types and Purposes

- Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Production and Distribution of Writing

- Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

Notes before beginning *The Last Cuentista*

1. Higuera uses a number of Spanish words. As you read, if there is a word or phrase in Spanish that you are unfamiliar with, look it up and make note of its meaning.
2. There will be opportunities throughout the book and after finishing it to discuss what form of fiction you think *The Last Cuentista* best fits into (fantasy, speculative fiction, science fiction). As you read, take note of the realistic elements of the story and those that are more fantastical to use as text evidence to determine the best category of fiction for the novel.

Choose a system to track these—create a table to note page numbers and passages; use color coded sticky notes; or color coded highlighting (if you own the book).

3. Higuera references the children’s book *Dreamers* written by Yuyi Morales’ numerous times throughout the novel. It is recommended that at some point (either during or after completing *The Last Cuentista*) students read Morales’ book and discuss why Higuera chose to include this text. The first reference is in Chapter 3.
4. *The Last Cuentista* provides an excellent opportunity for students to practice tracking topics or themes, character development, and/or use of figurative language. Included below are suggestions for how this could be done if a process is not already in place. Once students have completed the novel, they can use the information they’ve tracked to craft an essay (in-class, extended response writing, or formal/structured writing) on the theme, author’s purpose, character development, or use of figurative language.

First, determine what you would like students to track—topic/theme, character development, or the use of figurative language. Students can track these things individually, in small groups, or this can be a modeling exercise done as a whole class if this activity requires skills that are new to students. If students will be focusing on themes it may be best to have them track topics as they read. You will likely need to provide a list of topics for them and let them choose which they would like to track. Once they have completed the novel, they can look at the topics they’ve tracked and develop a theme statement.

Second, determine how students should track this information as they read—by hand in a notebook/binder or digitally in a document or using a program like Jamboard or Google Slides. The latter may work best if this is a whole class activity. Regardless of how students will track the information, create a template. This can be as simple as a three column table with three headings for page number, quote, and significance of quote. Be sure to explain to students how they will be applying or using this information once they have completed the novel (i.e. essay, small group discussion, whole group discussion, visual presentation, etc.).

Guided Reading Questions

Chapters 1-6 | Pages 1-50

1. Read pages 1-4. What cultural referents does Higuera weave into her narrative that provide the reader clues as to the geographic, racial, cultural and/or ethnic background of our main characters? (p. 1-4)
2. **Writer’s Craft:** How does Higuera model the writing technique of “showing” the reader instead of “telling” the reader? Provide examples. (p. 1-2)
3. What is a nagual? Research the term to learn more about its history and significance.
4. **Summarize** the story of the fire snake that Lita tells Petra. **Make an inference**—Why do you think Lita chooses this story to tell Petra at this moment? Explain your answer. (p. 3-4)

5. Lita references the Yucatecos. Research this people group. Who are they? Where do they live? What languages do they speak?
6. How did the government determine who would get a place on the three ships leaving Earth? (p. 7-8)
7. **Figurative Language:** Higuera uses a metaphor and a simile on pages 9-10 to describe the scene. Identify each. What mood do these convey? (p. 9-10)
8. Where will the ship take Petra's family and the other passengers? (p. 10)
9. How long will they be asleep on the ship? (p. 13)
10. Based on chapters 1-2, what form of fiction is the novel? Use text evidence to explain. (p. 1-12)
11. What details in Chapter 3 let the reader know that the book takes place in the future? (p. 15)
12. Describe what Petra hears and sees on the news when eavesdropping on her parents' conversation.
13. What is En Cognito? (p. 21-22)
14. What "genetic defect" does Petra have? Why are her parents worried about the organizers learning about it? What clues has Higuera given us leading up to chapter 4? (p. 22)
15. Describe the stasis pods that Petra and her family will be in for the journey to Sagan. (p. 31-43)
16. Imagine you are Petra. How would you feel if you were her in the stasis pod? (p. 43-50)
17. Characterize Ben. What type of person does he seem to be? Would you trust him? Why? (p. 22-50)
18. Imagine yourself in Ben's place. You can either die when Earth is destroyed or apply to be a Monitor. As a Monitor, you won't live long enough to make it to Sagan, but you will ensure that some of the human race does survive and make it to a new planet. Which would you choose? Explain your answer.
19. Consider the words of the Lead Monitor at the end of Chapter 6: "Without the politicians, the president. . . Ben, this is an opportunity to start over. A consensus." The Lead Monitor clears her throat. "From this moment on, we can create a new history" (p. 50). Where have we heard language like this before? **Make a prediction:** What do you think is really happening on ship 2? Is The Collective involved? What will be the ramifications for Petra and her family? Do you think they'll make it to Sagan? Explain your answer.
20. Identify the realistic elements of the story in the first 50 pages.

Chapters 7-13 | Pages 51-103

1. Make an inference: Why do you think Ben chooses to read *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. If you're unfamiliar with this text, briefly research it. Think about Ben's situation, what he's just learned, and who he has just lost. (p. 51-53)
2. What does Ben do for Petra on her birthday? What unexpected effect does this have on Petra? (p. 54-56)
3. What does Petra awake to? **Make an inference:** What has transpired on the ship since Petra has been asleep? What is Ben trying to do? (p. 57-59)
4. What last memory does Petra hold onto as her pod is being reactivated? **Make a prediction:** Why might this be important for Petra's future? (p. 59-60)
5. What will the rocks become that Petra and her father are collecting? (p.

- 63-65).
6. Describe what it is like for Petra to come out of stasis. (p. 67-71)
 7. Before reading on, **make a prediction**: What do you think has transpired on the ship since Petra was last conscious?
 8. Higuera uses a simile to describe Suma being resubmerged in the stasis pod. Identify the simile. What does it convey? (p. 72)
 9. Describe the Chancellor's appearance. What does Petra compare her to? (p. 73-74)
 10. What is the Chancellor's response to Petra's eye disease? (p. 80-81)
 11. What seem to be the effects of the different drinks the Zetas are given? (p. 78-84)
 12. Research the story of Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl and read other versions. Where does the story come from? What other famous stories are similar? **Make an inference**: Why do you think Petra thinks of this story her first night awake on the ship? (p. 87-90)
 13. How has the ship changed since Petra and her family boarded hundreds of years ago? What do these changes communicate about the Chancellor and the other in charge now? (p. 94-96)
 14. What has the Collective destroyed in its pursuit of harmony and unanimity? (p. 94-96)
 15. What is the significance of interspersing the story of the Fox and the Crow with the Chancellor's announcements? (p. 98-100)
 16. Who will deboard the ship and conduct research on Sagan to determine if it is inhabitable for the Collective? If it is not safe for the Collective, how will the Zeta team spend the rest of their lives? (p. 102-103)

Chapters 14-18 | Pages 104-153

1. How does the Chancellor's vision of a better future differ from that of people like Petra's father? (p. 110-111).
2. What does Petra find when she goes searching for her parents' pods? (p. 112-117)
3. What has happened to Petra's parents? Is Petra able to push the button for Javier's pod the way she is for her parents? (p. 115-116)
4. What does Zeta-4's dream reveal about the success of the memory erasure? (p. 119)
5. What does Petra do to help Zeta-4 get back to sleep? (p. 120-125)
6. What name does Petra give to Zeta-4? Why? (p. 123)
7. Summarize the story of Blancaflor. How does it connect to the Zetas current situation? (p. 120-127)
8. In what way has the Collective broken with the original plans around the food and rations? Did the Collective ever plan to keep all of the passengers? (p. 130-131).
9. What is work like on the ship with the Collective in charge? How is this different from what was intended? (p. 131-132)
10. What is Petra's task during the trip to Sagan? (p 135-136)
11. Why is Len hesitant to leave the ship? (p. 140)
12. What happens when Feathers and Len take off their masks? What does this reveal about the Chancellor and the Collective? (p. 144-145)
13. What types of plants and animals does Petra encounter on Sagan? (p. 145-150)

14. As the Chancellor calls the Zetas back to the ship, Petra has an important realization. What is it? (p. 151-152)

Chapters 19-22 | Pages 154-206

1. Len is reacting to something on Sagan. What's happening to him at the beginning of the chapter? (p. 154-157)
2. What does Chancellor Nyla say to Petra about helping Len? What does this reveal about the Collective? (p. 158)
3. Summarize the story of Quetzalcoatl and el Conejo. (p. 160-161)
4. What does the rabbit offer Petra in her dream? What advice does Lita offer Petra? (p. 161-162)
5. How does Petra's dream end? What do you think it means? (p. 162-163)
6. Who do you think was in the room? Why could this be dangerous for Petra? (p. 163)
7. Hammerhead explains what he believes the benefits of the collective to be. What are they? Do you agree? Why? (p. 165)
8. Why do you think the Prawn has come to take Glish away? What is the significance of "Unity" and "Camaraderie" flashing across the screen as Glish leaves? (p. 165)
9. What does Voxy do when he discovers Petra taking the boxes of bioleaf? (p. 167)
10. Characterize Voxy based on what you've read so far. Do you think he's different from the rest of the Collective? Should Petra trust him? Explain.
11. Who do the Zetas find on their return to their room? (p. 170)
12. What does Rubio ask for to help them sleep? What does Petra hope this will remind the rest of the Zetas of? (p. 171)
13. What is the purpose of telling the story of Los Viejos? What idea or lesson do you think Petra hopes the other Zetas will take away from it? (p. 172-175)
14. Who does Petra encounter on her search of the ship? What does she learn? (p. 177-183)
15. Describe Epsilon-5. (p. 177-183)
16. What happens in Petra's dream? Who wakes her up? (p. 185-187)
17. What deal do Voxy and Petra make? (p. 188-189)
18. What book does Petra realize that Voxy has read? Why is it important to her? (p. 195)
19. Where do Petra and Voxy find the Earth relics? (p. 196-197)
20. What does Petra recover from her belongings? (p. 200)
21. What does Petra learn when she listens in on Voxy's conversation with Nyla? (p. 201-203)
22. What is dangerous about Chancellor Nyla's beliefs? Will what she says really keep everyone safe? At what cost? (p. 201-203)
23. Who does Petra realize may already be on the planet Sagan? Is this good or bad? Why? (p. 205-206)

Chapters 23-25 | Pages 207-253

1. What do Rubio and Feathers reveal to Petra when they talk about the Los Viejos cuento? Why is this important? (p. 209)
2. What does Petra use to create a less harmful defoliant? (p. 215-216)
3. What did the Chancellor ask Epsilon-5 to create with the poisonous plant?

- (p. 218-219)
4. What does Petra realize that the Collective plans to use the poison for? (p. 219)
 5. Who does Petra realize that Epsilon-5 is? (p. 220)
 6. What was Petra's father right about? What does this reveal about the Collective? (p. 225)
 7. How does Petra cover for Javier (Epsilon-5) and protect him from the Collective? (p. 226-229)
 8. Why can't the Collective set up a settlement on Sagan? What is the new plan? (p. 234-236)
 9. How does the Chancellor's announcement change Petra's plan? (p. 237)
 10. What do we learn that the rock beads Petra's father made were for? (p. 239)
 11. Who discovers Petra while she's searching through the relics? (p. 242)
 12. What cuento does Petra tell Voxy to appease him? What effect does it have? (p. 242-243)
 13. What does Voxy do when Nyla enters their rooms? What does this tell the reader about his character? (p. 244-245)
 14. How does Petra explain to Epsilon-5 that he's really her brother Javier? Does it work? (p. 246-250)
 15. Who discovers Voxy and Petra reading *Dreamers*? **Make a prediction:** Do you think Javier betrayed Petra? Explain. (p. 253)

Chapters 26-30 | Pages 254-314

1. What does Chancellor Nyla threaten Petra with when she resists being reprogrammed? (p. 255-256)
2. Explain Nyla and Crick's arguments for the superiority of the Collective. What counter-arguments does Petra provide? (p. 265-259)
3. Describe what Petra encounters in the dream world as she begins to be reprogrammed. (p. 260-266)
4. Who does Petra encounter in the room with Librex? (p. 265-266)
5. How does Petra avoid being reprogrammed? What do you think would've happened if Petra hadn't woken up? (p. 268-270)
6. What does Javier do to save the Zetas? (p. 271-280)
7. Who snuck onto the ship with the Zetas? (p. 280)
8. Why did Voxy come to Sagan with Petra? What does this say about his character? (p. 282)
9. Why can Voxy take his helmet off in the cave but not outside? (p. 285)
10. How does Petra convince Suma/Zeta-2 not to contact the Collective? (p. 288-290)
11. How does Petra know that Javier is gone? (p. 292-294)
12. What are the drones from the Collective carrying? Where are they heading? Why? (p. 296-300)
13. What doubts start to overtake Petra as she comes to terms with their situation on Sagan? (p. 304-309)
14. What does Petra realize about stories? (p. 311)
15. What did Javier do to ensure the safety of the Zetas and the First Arrivers? (p. 313-314)

Reflective Writing Questions

1. In Chapter 3, Petra's father says "Equality's good. But equality and sameness are two different things. Sometimes those who say things without really contemplating what it truly means. . . .That dogma runs a

thinline" (p. 19). Think about what this statement means. What is the difference between equality and sameness? The Collective sees the concepts as synonymous. Why is that dangerous? How does this play out when the Collective has the opportunity to re-create society based on their ideals?

2. Explore the concept of dogma. How would you define dogma? What are historical examples of dogma? Does dogma always have a negative impact on society? Are there examples where it has been used to positive effect? What statement do you think Higuera is making about the concept of dogma through *The Last Cuentista*.
3. Higuera references *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales a number of times throughout the novel. Read Morales' children's book. After reading it, consider why Higuera chose this book to incorporate into *The Last Cuentista*. What is the significance of *Dreamers* for *The Last Cuentista*? Explain using evidence from both texts. Consider how one text helps us understand or interpret the other text. What are the similarities or differences between the two? Think about the author's purpose in writing each text.
4. Early in the novel, during a flashback, Petra and her father go to Rockhound State Park to look for jasper. When Petra says that the rocks won't match, her father responds, "They're not meant to be identical; they're meant to complement one another. Differences make things beautiful as a whole" (p. 63). What is the significance of this statement in terms of the purpose of the novel as a whole? It's important beyond just this interaction between Petra and her father. How does it connect to or reflect the purpose of the story?
5. Harmony and Unanimity are frequently used by the Collective. Harmony is often considered a positive word, but in the context of the dogma of the Collective and their new society it seems that it can be dangerous. Explain how when the Collective employs Harmony and Unanimity together it becomes harmful and oppressive.
6. Reflect on the significance of storytelling. Where would we be as a society without stories? How do stories shape our society?

Extension Activities

1. **Social Studies/History:** Research the Yucatan and the Maya of the Yucatan. Describe this Indigenous group. Explore questions such as—What is their history? What languages do they speak? What is their mythology? Have they remained in the Yucatan? What are the current issues the community faces?
2. **English Language Arts:** Think about Higuera's purpose in writing *The Last Cuentista*. We often think of the purpose of fiction in terms of entertainment. Fantasy and speculative fiction can certainly be entertaining, but these forms of fiction can also be used to persuade or inform. Moving beyond entertainment, what do you think Higuera's purpose was in writing this novel? Use evidence from the text to support

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your answer.

3. **English Language Arts:** Higuera covers a number of topics in her novel. Choose the topic that you think is the most important. Based on that topic, create a theme statement for the novel. Remember, a theme statement is not just one word (that's a topic). A theme statement is a very specific sentence. It conveys a central, unifying idea of the text. Its relevance moves beyond the novel and is applicable to life or the "real world." Someone once explained it to me in these terms: A theme statement should not sound like a hallmark card or a fortune cookie. It is a specific argument about the significance of the book that can be applied outside the context of the book alone. Write an essay using your theme statement as your thesis. Use evidence from the novel to support your answer.

The Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS) receives resources from the U.S. Department of Education to support K-12 teaching about Latin America. Our goal is to provide a supportive environment for teaching across grade levels and subject areas so educators can bring regional and linguistic knowledge of Latin America into their classrooms. For more information and materials that support teaching about Latin America in the classroom, visit our website at <https://clas.arizona.edu/k-12-educators>

Written by staff at CLAS, Reading the World Educator's Guides provide an excellent way to teach about Latin America through literacy. Each guide is based upon a book featured in the **Reading the World** Book Group. This programming is created specifically for k12 educators and is a collaborative project facilitated by the the Centers for East Asian Studies (CEAS); Latin American Studies (CLAS); and Middle Eastern Studies (CMES) at the University of Arizona. For more on Reading the World, visit https://linktr.ee/reading_the_world. This guide was prepared by Dr. Katrina Dillon, CLAS Assistant Director for Outreach Programs.