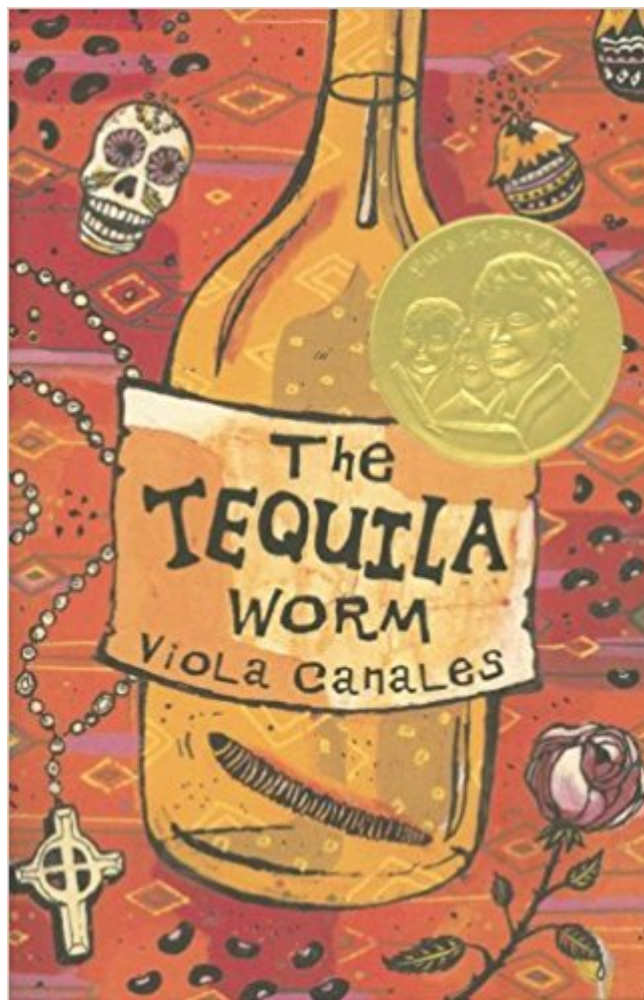


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The Tequila Worm



Synopsis

Sofia comes from a family of storytellers. Here are her tales of growing up in the barrio, full of the magic and mystery of family traditions: making Easter cascarones, celebrating el Dia de los Muertos, preparing for quinceañera, rejoicing in the Christmas nacimiento, and curing homesickness by eating the tequila worm. When Sofia is singled out to receive a scholarship to an elite boarding school, she longs to explore life beyond the barrio, even though it means leaving her family to navigate a strange world of rich, privileged kids. It's a different mundo, but one where Sofia's traditions take on new meaning and illuminate her path.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Grade 5-8 Sofia, 14, lives in McAllen, TX. What she lacks in material possessions, she makes up for in personality and intelligence. When she is called a taco head by a student at her school, she decides to kick that girl by getting better grades and being a better soccer player than her tormentor. As a result of this determination, Sofia is offered a scholarship to the elite Saint Lukes school in Austin. Now she must convince her family and herself that she is up to the challenge. Canales includes vivid descriptions of life in a Mexican-American community. Her prose is engaging and easy to read, making this novel a good choice for reluctant readers. The momentum slows a bit after Sofias arrival in Austin in contrast to the portion of the book set in McAllen. Still, the story is a good addition to most collections. Melissa Christy Buron, Epps Island Elementary, Houston, TX Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed

Starred Review Gr. 6-9. From an early age, Sofia has watched the comadres in her close-knit barrio community, in a small Texas town, and she dreams of becoming "someone who makes people into a family," as the comadres do. The secret, her young self observes, seems to lie in telling stories and "being brave enough to eat a whole tequila worm." In this warm, entertaining debut novel, Canales follows Sofia from early childhood through her teen years, when she receives a scholarship to attend an exclusive boarding school. Each chapter centers on the vivid particulars of Mexican American traditions--celebrating the Day of the Dead, preparing for a cousin's quinceanera. The explanations of cultural traditions never feel too purposeful; they are always rooted in immediate, authentic family emotions, and in Canales' exuberant storytelling, which, like a good anecdote shared between friends, finds both humor and absurdity in sharply observed, painful situations--from weathering slurs and other blatant harassment to learning what it means to leave her community for a privileged, predominately white school. Readers of all backgrounds will easily connect with Sofia as she grows up, becomes a comadre, and helps rebuild the powerful, affectionate community that raised her. Gillian Engberg Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

The Tequila Worm begins as vignettes and then moves into a more traditional narrative when Sofia, the Mexican-American protagonist, is a fourteen-year-old high school freshman. In the beginning, a younger Sofia relays special family-centered moments--some downright hysterical and others more poignant--such as her First Communion, making cascarones for Easter, and celebrating both Halloween and Día de los Muertos. Throughout these moments, Sofia learns about her culture and, at times, is torn between her tight-knit community and the "American" world beyond her barrio in McAllen, Texas. After trick-or-treating in her neighborhood and then in another, wealthier part of town, Sofia has this conversation with her father: "I wish I lived on the other side of town," I said, looking out the window at the darkness. "Why, mi cija?" "Because they live in nice houses, and they're warm." "Ah, but there's warmth on this side, too." "But it's really cold at home, and most of the houses around us are falling apart." "Yes, but we have our music, our foods, our traditions. And

the warm hearts of our families. Another example is when Sofia is verbally bullied, called a “Taco Head” by students when she eats her homemade lunch at school. First, she is embarrassed and avoids the cafeteria entirely, spending that time on the playground or eating inside a stall in the girls’ bathroom to avoid ridicule. With the help of a P.E. teacher, Sofia returns to the lunch room, proudly eats her tacos in public, and is given the advice to get even, not by kicking the bully (which Sofia wants to do) but by kicking her butt at school. Sofia, indeed, excels in academics and is offered a scholarship to St. Luke’s Episcopal School, a prestigious boarding school in Austin.

Sofia’s family doesn’t understand why she wants to leave her home. When her mother asks, “But what’s wrong with here?” Sofia responds, “Nothing. But the Valley is not the whole world. I just want to see what’s out there.” Eventually, Sofia’s family allows her to attend St. Luke’s, as long as she promises to remain connected and learn how to be a good comadre to her sister Lucy and cousin Berta. In the place she calls “Another Mundo,” Sofia learns to appreciate her family’s stories and traditions, understanding how they have shaped her and connected her to a community rich in other ways. The young girl who once hid after being called a “Taco Head,” grows into a young adult who is “brave enough to eat a whole tequila worm” and who confronts a classmate who writes a note telling Sofia to “wiggle back across the border.” Sofia responds by saying, “My family didn’t cross the border; it crossed us. We’ve been here for over three hundred years, before the U.S. drew those lines.”

The novel’s end leaps ahead in time, with Sofia as an adult, a civil rights lawyer living in San Francisco, who fights to preserve her changing neighborhood and who often visits to happily participate in the traditions she questioned as a child. The novel’s main events are closely connected to the author’s life, as she, too, was raised in McAllen and attended a prestigious boarding school before attending Harvard University. Many of Canales’s own experiences, portrayed through Sofia, would be easily recognizable to younger Latinx readers who straddle two cultures and find value in each as they come of age.

Viola Canales was born in McAllen, Texas in 1957 and grew up in a traditional Mexican-American

border household. She knew no English when she entered the 1st grade but by the 3rd grade she was reading and writing in a language she had just learned. Viola excelled in her studies and by the age of 15 she was accepted into a prestigious boarding school in Austin called St. Stephen's Episcopal in Austin. She used her love for writing stories as a way to cure her homesickness. She went on to attend Harvard and then obtained her law degree. Viola has held many different jobs from U.S. Army Captain to a litigator, but the one that has held her heart since childhood is now her full-time job being a story teller. Passing stories on to the next generation and bringing awareness to life on the border. The Tequila Worm is a semi-biographical fiction work that Viola has poured her heart and soul into. The Tequila Worm begins with the colorful stories hidden in exuberant Dona Clara's traveling bag. As all the children from the colonia gather around to listen to the stories of donkey teeth and lockets of hair said to belong to each child's distant relatives. And so begins the story of native Sofia's journey into discovering herself, her culture, and what being a comadre is all about. The book depicts a lot of valuable life lessons that the little Sofia along with her cousin Berta and little sister Lucy learn along the way into Sofia's teenager-hood. All the while Sofia learns to "kick with her brain" in school. When Sofia is just 15, she is offered the opportunity to apply to a predominately white boarding school in Austin, Texas. The book depicts the struggle Sofia faces when her family discovers this news. And how family can lift you up but may sometimes hold you back. The Tequila Worm is filled to the brim with characters you love, hate, and maybe even love-hate. Viola has details scattered across the pages of each and every character. From the head-strong Sofia to the loving and supportive Papa Viola has excellently executed giving life to all her characters with their actions, speech, and appearance. This has been the first time a book has related so much to me. I caught myself reveling in the cultural significance reflected in the book. It brought me back to my childhood. Back to a time when cascarones were handmade every Easter season. The tradition of saving up the eggshells to decorate and fill with the most colorful confetti and that one egg that held the super-secret special stuff that the other kids and cousins would cower away from. The book deserves to be read in schools across the RGV. It provides the connection to books that so many students are not experiencing at the moment. It reminds us of all the traditions that our culture as border folk has developed for hundreds of years. This book is a must read for any and all Valley native. It's also an important book for other cultures to read to learn more about what it is like to live in a border city. The Tequila Worm has a well-deserved 10 out of 10 from this valley native.

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