

Reading Group Guide

The Enchanted Life of Valentina Mejía

By Alexandra Alessandri



About the Book

In this portal fantasy inspired by Colombian folklore, two siblings, twelve-year-old Valentina and ten-year-old Julián, enter a magic cave and find a forgotten land that mirrors their home in Colombia. It all begins during a hike in the Andes with their papi, a scholar of mythical creatures and legends. An earthquake separates the family, leaving Papi stranded in an unstable ditch. Valentina and Julián find the cave, and the tunnel at the back of it, while in search of help. On the other end of the tunnel, they stumble upon a witch's cottage and are shocked to discover that all the stories their father told them are real! Madremonte, the queen of the magical land, is tortured by the memory of her son, whose kidnapping she blames on humans. Valentina and Julián must face a dangerous journey and beg Madremonte for mercy. Can the mother and protector of the earth put aside her fury and grief, and help reunite a family?

Discussion Questions

1. A recurring message in the book is “the earth is not happy.” What does this mean, and can you think of a real-life example?
2. How did Madremonte keep the world in balance? Use examples from the text. What is one way you practice balance in your life?
3. Valentina called Tierra de los Olvidados “the ghost of Colombia.” Describe the similarities and differences between the land of “reality” and Tierra de los Olvidados.
4. What are the purposes of folktales and myths? Use examples from the book and your own experiences to build on your answer.
5. Empathy can be defined as the capacity to put oneself in another person’s shoes and understand where they are coming from. What are specific examples of how empathy is displayed in the book?
6. Because empathy plays an important role in the story, practice your empathy by connecting with another person. Pair up with someone in your class or club, preferably someone you don’t know very well. Brainstorm six to eight things you have in common, and think outside the box. Do not focus on obvious things like physical appearance, your age, or that you’re both participating in this exercise!

7. How do Julián's character and attitude change as his journey goes on, and why? Use examples from the text.
8. Valentina makes assumptions and is called out by Doña Ruth, who reminds Valentina that humans "do not have a good reputation here either." (Chapter twenty-three) This causes Valentina to reflect on her behavior. Take a few minutes to reflect on a situation where you have made assumptions about someone. What is something you can do to not repeat that action?
9. Papi always tells his children, "We have a responsibility to help those around us." (Chapter twenty-four) Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.
10. List at least two examples of how the earth/ land is a character of its own throughout the story.
11. While many beings in the magical land distrust humans, Valentina manages to change their minds. Give examples from the book of how she gains their trust.
12. Valentina is upset that an Elder in the duende forest sees her as an enemy for the crimes of her ancestors. If we take a moment to reflect, there may be crimes and acts of violence our ancestors committed against the earth, animals, and other humans. Are we to blame for our ancestors' decisions? Partner up and discuss what you think. Be prepared to share with the rest of the class.
13. Papi says, "Between being kind and being right, choose kind." (Chapter twenty-seven) How do you know the difference between right and wrong? Is there ever a situation where it is more important to be right? Can you be right AND kind? Give examples either from the book or from your own experiences.
14. Valentina asks herself how she can be kind to a monster. What is your answer for her?
15. Was Doña Ruth justified in her decision to call Madremonte's guards on the human children? What would you have done in her place? Think about other characters' choices, like la patasola's. Were they justified? How are Doña Ruth's and la patasola's decisions similar and different?
16. In the Tierra de los Olvidados, many rumors float around about who kidnapped Madremonte's son, human behavior, what the queen does to traitors, and more. Who started the rumors and why? What is the purpose of a rumor?
17. Valentina remembers a saying from her mami: "Memories shift and blur the more time passes." (Chapter forty) Do you have a family story that changes as time goes on? Share with the group if you'd like.
18. [Spoiler Alert] Abuelito shares his experience arriving in Colombia as a small child without family, friends, a way to return home, or an understanding of the human world. He notes that over time his memories faded and he recognized that "surviving means blending in." (Epilogue) Perhaps you have experienced something similar because you immigrated to the US, moved to a different state, are starting middle school after being in elementary school, or something else. Have you had to change a part of your identity to fit in? Share if you would like. Do you think people should have to do this in order to survive? What is the danger of "blending in?" Please explain your answers.

Extension Activities

1. Valentina and Julián learn that the Tierra de los Olvidados is endangered because humans no longer believe in the magical world and don't share their stories. Valentina connects this to endangered animals in her world who are losing their habitats due to humans' decisions to cut down forests and pollute the environment. Choose an endangered animal and create an informational resource that educates people on the animal, its home, why it is endangered, and what people can do to help.
2. As Valentina notes, Colombia and Madremonte's kingdom are mirror images of each other and are thus affected by similar issues. She mentions learning about "La Violencia" in history class. As a class, research some information about this ten-year civil war in Colombia, along with events happening in the United States at the same time. Were they connected in any way? Why is it important to learn about our country's and our world's history? Discuss your findings as a class.
3. Valentina, Julián, and their dad go on many hikes, and their hiking experience and the emergency supplies in their packs help the siblings during their trip through the mountains, rivers, and forests of the magical land. In pairs, research and plan out a hike. You can choose a trail or park where you live or somewhere far away—including Colombia! What materials would you need, including clothing and food? How long would it take you to complete the hike? Would you need to camp? Create a spread of what your nature journal would look like. Even if you don't go on your planned hike, take just ten minutes to step outside, walk around the playground or block, and quickly sketch what you see.
4. Throughout the book, Valentina struggles with her values of being caring, responsible, honest, and courageous, especially when she doesn't know the outcomes of her risks. One example is when she puts herself in el silbón's path to save the baby duende, Felipe. On a sheet of paper, take five minutes to make a list of your values and the different responsibilities you have. How do those responsibilities line up with your values? Circle the responsibility that is the most difficult for you to accomplish. Why do you think that is? Make a plan for steps you can take to make this responsibility more manageable.
5. Madremonte gives examples of what humans did to the land, and in the beginning chapter Valentina discusses the problems humans have created, including deforestation, pollution, and the disruption of ecosystems. Split into small groups and investigate an environmental issue affecting your community. Write a letter to your local government officials about the issue and ask what their responsibility is to their community and what they plan to do to make a difference.
6. Choosing kindness is a main theme in the book, even when Valentina wonders if it makes a difference. Valentina chooses to empathize with the villains and monsters in the book and understand where they are coming from. As a class, brainstorm different acts of kindness you can do in your classroom, school, community, and beyond, along with acts of kindness you would like to receive. Be sure to complete at least one of those acts of kindness. As you continue your day, week, month, and year, take time to notice your surroundings and choose kindness!

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