

Pocho

by
José Antonio Villareal

StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 12

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Discussion questions

When people move to another country, how much should they be expected to change to fit the norms of their new environment? What might immigrant families gain by resisting change?

Some Mexican families did not come to this country so much as the country came to them when lands that once belonged to Mexico became American soil. Should these families be expected to assimilate?

Was the disintegration of the Rubio family inevitable? What might have helped the family to weather assimilation? Is anyone to blame? Why is change easier for some people than for others?

Additional readings

Arturo Islas. *The Rain God: A Desert Tale*, 1984.

Alejandro Morales. *The Brick People*, 1989.

Gary Soto. *Living Up the Street: Narrative Recollections*, 1985.

Victor Villasenor. *Rain of Gold*, 1991.

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Richard Rubio, the protagonist of this novel, is a “Pocho,” an American-born child whose parents have immigrated to the United States from Mexico. Richard’s father, Juan, fought in the Mexican Revolution with Pancho Villa, and crossed the border from Mexico into the United States to hide after he realized the tide of the revolution had turned against him.

The story of immigration is the story of great struggle. In Mexico, Juan Rubio had been a man of stature as a “vaquero,” a horseman of great skill who had lived the rough and independent life of a strong-willed man on the frontier. In Texas, Juan, like other immigrants, made a meager living picking cotton or sharecropping. A proud man, Juan eventually makes his way to California, seeking the promise of a better life elsewhere. He is joined there by his wife, Consuelo, who soon gives birth to their first and only son, Richard.

Richard grows up in the difficult position of straddling two worlds: the Mexican heritage of his parents and the American ways of his playmates at school. Juan Rubio holds firmly to his dream of someday returning to Mexico; he wants his son to become a vaquero. Consuelo wants her son to become a priest. Both parents pressure the child accordingly, and disagreements over the child’s future underscore and exacerbate a widening rift in the marriage.

The Mexico of his parents seems only a fictional place in the distant past; Richard does not see himself as Mexican. He does not want to be a priest or a vaquero. As he matures, he openly questions the tenets of the church and challenges the priests to reason with him. He also challenges his parents’ way of life in general, considering their ways backward and foolish.

Education is Richard’s key to his own identity and maturation. He is an avid reader, devouring a book a day and five or six each weekend until he has exhausted the shelves in his school’s library. He learns English and, importantly, he learns to read and write in Spanish also. Gradually Juan sees that his son’s talents are not the same as his own. By now Juan dreams that if his son cannot be a vaquero in Mexico, he will one day be a lawyer or a doctor in Mexico.

Understanding the language of both cultures, Richard brings to his parents’ home a bridge between the two worlds. He reads for his parents at night and translates the ways of American culture to them. Repeatedly, he tries to prompt his parents into change; equally often he is fearful of the consequences of the very changes he has set in motion. It is difficult for his father, especially, to watch the destruction of his family’s old way of life as changes in his home move inevitably forward and out of his control. When Richard speaks English in the home, Juan roars, “Silence! We will not speak the dog language in my house!” Richard replies, “But this is America, Father. If we live in this country, we must live like Americans.”

The immigrants eventually purchase a home, but just when it appears they finally have found a firm foothold in their new land, their family falls apart. In buying the home, Juan concedes that his dream of returning to the homeland will never be realized. He drinks more often and begins, as he had openly done in Mexico, to consort with women. Consuelo rebels. She has learned that women in America are not as powerless as women in her homeland. There are laws that protect women in America, and she challenges her husband’s extramarital affairs and asserts her right to assume some authority in the household.

Richard is painfully aware that his family is undergoing a “strange metamorphosis” in assimilating the new culture:

One day Juan Rubio cooked his own breakfast, and soon after he moved into another room. Now there was no semblance of discipline whatever, and even the smallest child screamed at either parent, and came and went as she pleased. The house was unkempt and the father complained, but Consuelo, who had always been proud of her talents for housekeeping, now took the dirty house as a symbol of her emancipation, and it was to remain that way until her death.

That day, Richard saw clearly what he had helped create, and sought to repair the damage, but it was too late. What was done was beyond repair.

Richard will not deny his Mexican heritage like some of his friends who talk of changing their name when they grow older to hide their families’ origins. On the other hand, although he befriends the “pachucos,” who in their counterculture manner of dress and language have rejected both Mexican and American cultures, he is boldly able to declare, “I am a Pocho, and we speak like this because here in California we make Castilian words out of English words.”

At the close of the novel, World War II is bringing even greater changes into the lives of Americans from many different backgrounds and orientations. Consuelo tells Richard he is the man of the house; she expects him to care for and support the family now that the father has moved out and wants to marry another woman. Richard decides to enlist, thus entering farther into the tides of change, and he knows “that for him there would never be a coming back.”

About the author

José Antonio Villarreal was born in California, the son of a Mexican migrant worker. He graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1950, after serving four years in the Navy. He lived and taught in Mexico, California, Colorado and Texas. His other novels include *The Fifth Horseman* (1974) and *Clemente Chacon* (1984).