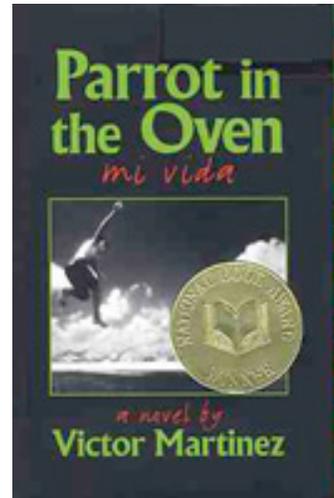


"Perico, or parrot, was what Dad called me sometimes. It was from a Mexican saying about a parrot that complains how hot it is in the shade, while all along he's sitting inside an oven and doesn't know it..."

Victor Martinez



### **Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida**

Victor Martinez  
HarperCollins 1996

#### **Grade Levels**

9-12

#### **Curriculum Area**

Language Arts • Social Studies

#### **National Language Arts Standards**

##### **NL-ENG.K-12.8**

##### **DEVELOPING RESEARCH SKILLS**

Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

#### **Objectives**

To provide a range of culturally diverse literature meeting students' needs to understand themselves, understand worldviews and other cultures.

To provide meaningful, authentic opportunities to read vocabulary in a variety of contexts; language in a cultural context.

#### **Overview**

Perico, or parrot, was what Dad called me sometimes. It was from a Mexican saying about a parrot that complains how hot it is in the shade, while all along he's sitting inside an oven and doesn't know it....

For Manuel Hernandez, the year leading up to his test of courage, his initiation into a gang, is a time filled with the pain and tension, awkwardness and excitement of growing up in a crazy world. His dad spends most of his time and money at the local pool hall; his brother

flips through jobs like a thumb through a deck of cards; and his mom never stops cleaning the house, as though one day the rooms will be so spotless they'll disappear into a sparkle, and she'll be free.

Manny's dad is always saying that people are like money--there are million- and thousand- and hundred-dollar people out there, and to him, Manny is just a penny. But Manny wants to be more than a penny, smarter than the parrot in the oven. He wants to find out what it means to be a *vato firme*, a guy to respect.

In this beautifully written novel, Victor Martinez gives readers a vivid portrait of one Mexican-American boy's life. Manny's story is like a full-color home movie--sometimes funny, sometimes sad, but always intensely original. For Manuel Hernandez, the year leading up to his test of courage, his initiation into a gang, is a time filled with the pain and tension, awkwardness and excitement of growing up in a mixed-up, crazy world. Manny's dad is always calling him *el perico*, or parrot. It's from a Mexican saying about a parrot that complains how hot it is in the shade while all along he's sitting inside the oven and doesn't know it. But Manny wants to be smarter than the parrot in the oven—he wants to find out what it means to be a *vato firme*, a guy to respect. From an exciting new voice in Chicano literature, this is a beautifully written, vivid portrait of one Mexican-American boy's life.

## Activity

### Author's Background

Victor Martinez grew up in California in a family of twelve children. His parents were migrant laborers from Mexico. Their experiences inspired his writings. Victor Martinez says that his background "makes up the stuff of his work." Mr. Martinez has also worked as a field laborer, welder, truck driver, firefighter, teacher, and office clerk.

Victor Martinez's poems, short stories, and essays have appeared in such prestigious publications as *Si*, *El Andar*, *The Bloomsbury Review*, and the *High Plains Literary Review*.

Victor Martinez lives with his wife in San Francisco. *Parrot in the Oven: mi vida*, winner of the National Book Award and the Pura Belpré Award, is his first novel.

## Activity

Reviewed as a "brilliant, witty memoir of a Mexican-American adolescence" (*U. S. News and World Report*), *Parrot in the Oven* is clearly a story highly influenced by the race and culture of its protagonist. But the crises and problems that Manny experiences -- love, violence, sibling conflicts, and gangs -- are universal obstacles in teenage life. How do Manny's experiences speak to readers of all genders, races, and socioeconomic levels? How is Manny's story specific to the Hispanic-American barrio life that the author introduces? Are there certain experiences that are more applicable to urban communities? Males?

## Activity

In Chapter One and throughout the novel, we get to know Nardo as Manny's strong older brother who knows how to have a good time, but doesn't necessarily know how to hold down a job. Manny and Nardo are clearly different, and Manny occasionally points these instances out. Identify things that describe the character of Nardo. For each description find an example from the story that supports each descriptive word. Now connect his character to yourself. Name 5 descriptive words that apply to you. List an event or incident from your own life that supports your description. How are Manny and Nardo alike? And what, specifically, is so different about the brothers? Is each of the brothers more like one of their parents?

## Activity

In Chapter Four: "The Bullet," we discover the meaning of the book's title. Is *el perico* an accurate description of Manny? Is it ironic that

Manny's father calls him this? In what ways is Manny trusting or not trusting? How does Manny become wiser in the course of the novel? What light does the title's significance shed on Manny's relationship with his father and on his father's personality?

## Activity

Readers of *Parrot in the Oven* plunge into Manny's world through a series of chapter-length vignettes, each detailing a specific episode in Manny's critical fourteenth year of life. Before he wrote *Parrot in the Oven*, Victor Martinez was primarily a short-story writer and poet. Do you think that the format of this novel is influenced by Martinez's work as a poet? Can the vignettes be appreciated as separate entities? What links each episode to the others in the novel?

## Activity

Overflowing with figurative language, *Parrot in the Oven* is "a whirlwind of surprising similes and inventive turns of phrase". How does Martinez's rich language make Manny's story more poignant? Did the language enrich your reading of this novel? What are some of the most memorable metaphors and images in the novel? Do you notice any recurring metaphors?

## Activity

Whom do you see as the head of the Hernandez household? In discussing this, consider episodes described in Chapters 4 and 5, when Mrs. Hernandez allows her abusive husband to be taken to jail but anxiously awaits his return. Is there a bread-winner in this family? Does the Hispanic culture have an influence on who assumes the role of the family figurehead? How does this affect Manny and his relationship with each of his parents? Keeping in mind all the situations in the year that the novel spans, who is the family's decision-maker?

## Activity

Are you surprised by Mr. Hernandez's compassion at the conclusion of the "Family Affair" chapter, which details Magda's miscarriage? Why or why not? Do you think that Mrs. Hernandez and Manny's worry was necessary?

## Activity

Victor Martinez is a native Californian who worked a variety of odd jobs and believes he was steered in the right direction by a couple of good teachers. How do you think that Martinez's life both influences and enhances

Manny's tender story? Discuss the way Manny narrates the situation in "The Rifle," when Pedi is almost shot. Who, if anyone, is blamed for the shooting?

### **Activity**

Several of the characters idealize specific material possessions. Manny's wants a baseball glove "so bad a sweet hurt blossomed in his stomach whenever he thought about it" (page 7). Magda "lived and breathed to caress her records" (page 90). Mother has her movies and statues, and Father has his rifle. Why do the characters value these possessions? Is there any common characteristic among these desired items? Can you think of any other items that characters seek in this novel?

### **Resources**

Martinez, Victor. *Loro En El Horno: Mi Vida*. New York: Lectorum Publications, Inc. 1997.

Martinez, Victor. *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*. New York: Harper Collins. 1996.

### **Internet Websites**

Parrot in the Oven Lesson Plan  
<http://urbandreams.ousd.k12.ca.us/lessonplans/parrot/>

Farnsworth, Elizabeth. National Book Award-Victor Martinez Online Newshour Transcript #7  
[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/november96/martinez\\_11-7.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/november96/martinez_11-7.html)