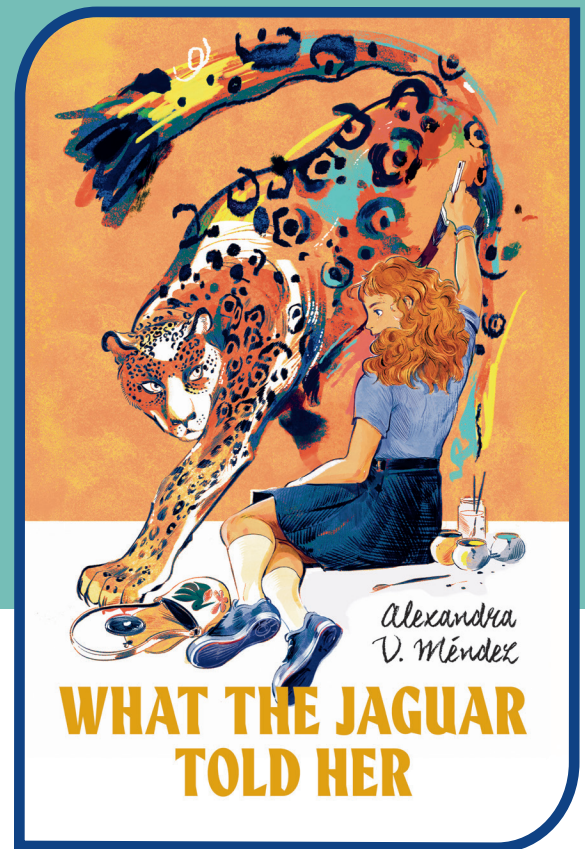


Teaching Guide

What the Jaguar Told Her

Alexandra V. Méndez



Synopsis

Jade is starting eighth grade in a new city—Atlanta. She just wants to go back to Chicago, where her friends are. Where her Abuela lives.

But Jade does like walking to her new school on the trail that winds through the woods behind her house, where lush flowers bloom and soft leaves rustle beneath her feet. In the forest, Jade feels protected. Sometimes, it's as if it's listening to her.

There, Jade meets Itztli, an elderly storyteller who exists between dreams and reality. In the golden afternoons when Itztli appears, he steps out of the forest as a lithe, agile jaguar. But when he speaks to Jade, he is a wise old man who makes intricate works of art and tells her ancestral stories of Mexico.

At first, Itztli's stories feel far removed from Jade's life. But as her Abuela suddenly falls ill, two towers come crashing down in New York City, and Jade becomes someone or something she doesn't yet understand, Itztli's stories take on new meaning. Jade must learn to have patience and strength to become who she was always meant to be, as the stirrings of an ancient power awaken within her.

What the Jaguar Told Her is a lyrical debut about growing up in the midst of change, and a magical cultural homecoming.

About the Author



Alexandra V. Méndez is a writer, teacher, and scholar who grew up bilingual in Decatur, Georgia, with family roots in Mexico and Mississippi. She graduated from Harvard University in History and Literature and has a Ph.D. in Latin American and Iberian Cultures from Columbia University. *What the Jaguar Told Her* is her debut novel.

About the Teaching Guide Writer

Molly Lindberg is an avid reader. She grew up in Seattle where she fell in love with books and the ocean. Now living in Brooklyn, she splits her time between writing her dissertation and sampling all the bakeries.

Pre-Reading Activities

These activities are designed to be completed before reading the novel. All but number 2 could be done in class, and they can be done in any order.

1. Vocabulary

What books have you read that incorporated words from two or more languages? How have authors done this so you can understand the word even if you don't speak that language? As you're reading, pay attention to how multiple languages are used in *What the Jaguar Told Her*. How does this author help you understand what words mean? Why do you think she chose to include other languages?

2. 9/11/01

What do you know about September 11, 2001? If it happened before you were born, where does this information come from? Ask a parent, grandparent, relative, older sibling, or someone else who was alive in 2001 to tell you about that day. Most people have clear memories of where they were when they heard the news. Listen closely and ask questions about how it felt and what changed for them. Then, discuss these stories with your classmates. What do you notice about what people remember?

3. Can you imagine a world without cellphones?

In 2001, when this book is set, you'll notice that none of the characters have cellphones. Is that difficult to imagine? As you read, think about how the characters communicate with their families and friends. How are these methods similar or different to how you talk to your family and friends?

4. *What the Jaguar Told Her*

What does the title of this book make you think about? Have you ever talked to an animal? Have you ever felt like an animal was talking to you? Do you think the book will have a real jaguar in it? What would you say to a jaguar if you met one? What do you hope it would say to you?

Reading Comprehension Questions

Students could be asked to answer these questions while they read as homework, or they could be used to guide discussion in class.

1. What is the setting of this book? Do you think it's important that Jade just moved to Atlanta? (Ch. 1)

2. Describe Jade's mom, Sol. What do you think are her most important character traits? (Ch. 1)
3. What does Jade's family talk about at breakfast? What do you think that shows about their family life? (Ch. 1)
4. Do you think Jade found the black mirror in her box of clothes by accident? Why do you think the mirror is important? (Ch. 1)
5. Why does Jade prefer to draw in notebooks rather than on good paper? (Ch. 1)
6. What are some things Jade misses about Chicago? (Ch. 1)
7. How do you think Jade feels when she realizes the other students aren't wearing the uniform options she picked? Use evidence from the chapter to justify your answer. (Ch. 1)
8. What annoys Jade about Chloe's reaction to her sister, Katarina? Why? (Ch. 1)
9. Do you think there's "nothing" in the woods, as Jade says at the end of Chapter 1? Or what do you think is there? (Ch. 1)
10. Do you agree with Jade that everyone has some kind of special ability like her ease around cats? Why or why not? (Ch. 2)
11. What does Jade's mom do to show Jade that she trusts her to be responsible? (Ch. 2)
12. Were you surprised by the end of Chapter 2? What do you think will happen next? (Ch. 2)
13. Describe the jaguar/old man, Itztli (EATS-tee), in your own words. Why does Jade decide to trust him? (Ch. 3)
14. Does the story Itztli tells Jade remind you of anything? (Ch. 3)
15. What do you think the "watery hills" looked like? Draw a picture of how you imagine a watery hill. Add what you remember from the story Itztli told Jade. (Ch. 3)
16. What other name does Itztli call the Aztecs? Why is this name important? (Ch. 3)
17. What special name does Itztli call Jade at the end of their conversation? (Ch. 3)
18. Why do you think no one has told Jade the whole story of Tío Efraín? (Ch. 4)
19. What does Jade learn about Chloe when she visits her house? How does this bring them closer? (Ch. 5)
20. What does Ms. Jackson ask Jade? How do you think this will change her transition to Atlanta? (Ch. 6)
21. How does Jade help make a celebratory dinner for her dad? (Ch. 7)
22. What happens to Abuela? What does Sol need to do? (Ch. 8)
23. What animal was Sol's guide? Why is this conversation important to Jade? (Ch. 9)
24. Describe Jade's first day of cross-country. How would you feel on the first day of a new activity? (Ch. 10)
25. Why does seeing Samantha with her dad prompt Jade to think about her own appearance? (Ch. 11)
26. What does Jade learn at the museum and gardens? (Ch. 12)

27. How do things change for Jade and her family when Abuela arrives? (Ch. 13)
28. What does Itztli tell Jade about Abuela's jade bracelet? (Ch. 14)
29. In your own words, explain what a tlacuilo (Tlah-KWEE-loh) is. Why is it an important term? Do we have one word that means this in English? (Ch. 14)
30. Describe the colors Itztli shows Jade and where they come from. (Ch. 14)
31. What emotions do you notice in this chapter? Make a list of feelings the characters experience as they find out what happened in New York. (Ch. 15)
32. Why was Abuelo's story-telling for himself as well as for Jade? (Ch. 16)
33. What is the significance of Jade's mom giving her a purse? (Ch. 17)
34. What do you think it means to Jade to be compared to her Tía Flor? (Ch. 18)
35. Make a list of all the important things Jade learns from Abuela in this chapter. (Ch. 18)
36. How would you explain the change Jade notices in the way the newspeople talk about 9/11 on TV? (Ch. 19)
37. Why is the oak tree important to Itztli? (Ch. 19)
38. What promise does Jade make to Itztli? (Ch. 19)
39. Describe the cross-country race in as much detail as possible. What do Jade's actions tell you about who she is? (Ch. 20)
40. What do the ribbons on the trees mean? (Ch. 21)
41. Think about the symbolic meaning of Itztli's gift to Jade. What do you think it means to her? (Ch. 21)
42. What do you think Abuela is telling Jade through her saying on page 385? (Ch. 22)
43. Summarize what happens with the forest at the end. How does this make Jade feel? (Ch. 22)
44. What does the obsidian mirror show Jade at the end of the novel? (Ch. 22)
45. How do you feel about the ending of the novel? Did it give you closure for the story? (Ch. 22)
46. What did you learn by reading "A Note on Research"? Do you feel inspired to look up any of these sources?

Post-Reading Exercises

After students have read the book, they will engage in an extended assignment and thematic activities. This extended assignment could be done partially in class if students have access to computers, or it could be used as a homework assignment.

Research/Writing Extended Assignment

Before you start researching, respond to these questions: What did you find most interesting about the paints used in the novel? What did you learn about where certain colors come from?

Watch the “Painting With Bugs: Where Does Color Come From?” video from Met Kids. How does this relate to the dyes and colors in the novel?

Visit the “Mesoamerican Objects” page of the Dumbarton Oaks website. Take some time to explore this section of the website, looking at the different objects. Then answer these questions:

1. What colors do you notice in these objects?
2. Look at the dates of a few of the objects. How do you think colors might change over time?
3. What object are you most drawn to? Why?

Then, pick one object, and, without reading the object description on the website, choose to write either a short story in which someone from the present encounters your object (like Jade does in *What the Jaguar Told Her*) or a myth that includes your object and explains its significance (like the stories Itztli told Jade). Include a detailed description of your object (imagine describing it to someone who has never seen it before and can't look at the picture), and pay special attention to any colors you notice. After you have written your story, read the object description. How does the object description change what you think about your object?

Read the first section, “Writing with images,” of Haley Woodward’s article, “Painting Aztec History.” What did you learn about the tradition that Itztli is part of? Have you ever tried to tell a story with pictures? Look at the story you wrote about your object. Now try to represent that story in images instead of words. You can draw or create a collage. Think about how you need to represent different parts of the story and how to show your reader/viewer the order and importance of events in an image.

Thematic Activities

These activities draw on important themes in the novel. They could be used as writing prompts for homework or in-class, or the questions could prompt discussion in small groups.

1. **Telling Different Stories.**

In Chapter 3, Itztli tells Jade, “That is just one way to tell the story. Others will remember it differently. I may even tell it differently myself” (p. 63). Have you ever thought about how different people might remember the same event differently? Have you ever told the same story different ways? How would you tell your parents or caregivers about how school was today? Do you think your classmates would say exactly the same thing? How would you tell your best friend about school? Would you tell the same story in both of these contexts? Why or why not?

2. **The Natural World.**

Connection to nature is very important in this book. Look at the descriptions of the oak tree where Itztli talks to Jade and the indigenous plants in the museum garden where her dad works. What are some plants that grow where you live? Look up a tree that grows near your house or school. What kind of tree is it? How can you tell? Does it have distinctive leaves, cones, seeds, or bark? Can you estimate how old it is? What kind of changes do you think that tree has witnessed during its life?

3. **Reflecting Identity.**

Look carefully at the many scenes when Jade looks in mirrors. What does she see? Does her reflection change over the course of the book? Do you think that’s because she changes or because she looks at things differently, including herself? What do you see when you look in the mirror?

4. **Comfort Foods.**

Think about the importance of food in this novel. Which food scenes do you remember most clearly? Do you have any comfort foods that make you feel at-home and safe like Jade does when she eats Chocolate Abuelita (Chapter 8)? Think about one or more of these foods and write a paragraph describing your senses as you eat it.

Resources

- **Met Kids Video, “Painting With Bugs: Where Does Color Come From?”**
<https://youtu.be/Zwox4zk7rmo>
- **Dumbarton Oaks - Pre-Columbian Mesoamerican Catalog**
<http://museum.doaks.org/index-tree/tree/1036>

- Haley Woodward, “Painting Aztec History,” Khan Academy
<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-americas/early-cultures/aztec-mexica/a/painting-aztec-history>
- Carlos Museum Americas Collections
<https://collections.carlos.emory.edu/collections/2440/art-of-the-americas>
- Diana Magaloni Kerpel, *The Colors of the New World: Artists, Materials, and the Creation of the Florentine Codex* (Getty Research Institute: 2014)