EDUCATION

Taking Sides By Gary Soto Study Guide

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An In-Depth Taking Sides By Gary Soto Study Guide

Navigating the tumultuous years of middle school is a challenge for any young person, but for the protagonist of Gary Soto's beloved novel, the struggle extends far beyond the classroom. **Taking Sides** tells the story of Lincoln Mendoza, a Mexican-American teenager who must grapple with questions of identity, belonging, and loyalty after moving from a predominantly Latino neighborhood in San Francisco to a mostly white suburb. This comprehensive **Taking Sides By Gary Soto Study Guide**is designed to help students, educators, and casual readers alike unlock the deeper meanings within this poignant coming-of-age story. Whether you are preparing for a test, writing an essay, or simply looking to appreciate the novel on a deeper level, this guide will provide the analysis, character insights, and thematic discussions you need.

About the Author: Gary Soto

Before diving into the plot, it is essential to understand the voice behind the story. Gary Soto is one of the most prominent figures in contemporary Chicano literature. Born in Fresno, California, in 1952, Soto grew up in a Mexican-American community that would later serve as the rich backdrop for many of his works. He is known for his poetry, short stories, and novels that authentically capture the experiences of working-class Latino youth. Soto's writing is celebrated for its vivid imagery, realistic dialogue, and gentle humor. In **Taking Sides**, he draws from his own understanding of cultural duality and economic hardship, creating a narrative that feels both specific to the Latino experience and universally relatable. Reading this **Taking Sides By Gary Soto Study Guide** will help you see how Soto's background directly informs the authenticity of Lincoln's internal conflict.

Plot Overview of Taking Sides

The novel opens with Lincoln Mendoza, a talented eighth-grade basketball player, who has recently moved from San Francisco's Mission District to the suburban town of Sycamore. The move was a result of his mother's desire for a safer, quieter life. However, Lincoln is deeply unhappy. He misses his old neighborhood, his best friend Tony, and the familiar rhythms of his former life. His new school, Sycamore Middle School, is predominantly white, and Lincoln feels like an outsider. He is the only Mexican-American on the basketball team, and he constantly feels the pressure to prove himself while also staying true to his roots.

The central conflict of the novel revolves around a basketball game between Lincoln's new school and his old school, Franklin Middle School. This upcoming game forces Lincoln to confront his divided loyalties. Does he want to beat his old friends, or does he secretly hope his old school wins? As the game approaches, Lincoln navigates bullying from a teammate named James, financial pressures at home, and the push-and-pull of wanting to fit in while honoring where he came from. This **Taking Sides By Gary Soto Study Guide**will walk you through each of these conflicts and show how they build toward the novel's climax.

Character Analysis: The Heart of the Story

Lincoln Mendoza

Lincoln is the protagonist and the lens through which we experience the story. He is a thoughtful, sensitive young man who is caught between two worlds. He is proud of his Mexican heritage but feels self-conscious about the stereotypes that others project onto him. On the basketball court, he is confident and agile, but off the court, he struggles with insecurity. Throughout the novel, Lincoln learns that true strength comes not from choosing one side over another, but from embracing the complexity of his identity.

Tony

Tony is Lincoln's best friend from his old neighborhood in San Francisco. He represents Lincoln's past and his cultural roots. Tony is funny, loyal, and a little mischievous. When the two friends reunite before the big game, Tony serves as a mirror for Lincoln, reminding him of the person he used to be. Their friendship is a key element in any **Taking Sides By Gary Soto Study Guide**, as it highlights the theme of loyalty and change.

Mama and Roy

Lincoln's mother, Mama, is a hardworking single parent who wants the best for her son. She is practical and supportive, but she is also struggling with the financial aftermath of the move. Roy is Mama's boyfriend, a kind and steady presence who tries to connect with Lincoln but is often met with resistance. Roy represents a potential new family structure, but Lincoln is not ready to accept it. These family dynamics add depth to the story and show that "taking sides" is not just a sports metaphor but a real-life dilemma.

James

James is a teammate at Sycamore Middle School who initially bullies Lincoln. He makes racist remarks and tries to undermine Lincoln's confidence. However, Soto does not paint James as a one-dimensional villain. As the story progresses, we see glimpses of insecurity and peer pressure that drive James's behavior. This nuanced portrayal makes the novel a valuable tool for discussing prejudice and empathy in the classroom.

Major Themes in Taking Sides

No **Taking Sides By Gary Soto Study Guide**would be complete without a thorough exploration of the novel's central themes. Soto masterfully weaves several important ideas into this short but powerful book.

Identity and Belonging

This is the most prominent theme in the novel. Lincoln is constantly asking himself: "Who am I?" He is a Mexican-American who no longer lives in a Mexican-American neighborhood. He is a basketball player who loves the sport but hates the politics surrounding it. He is a son who wants to be loyal to his past but must also navigate his present. Soto shows that identity is not a single label but a collection of experiences, choices, and relationships. Lincoln's journey is about accepting that he does not have to choose one side of himself over another.

Loyalty and Friendship

The title **Taking Sides**is a direct reference to the idea of choosing allegiances. Lincoln feels torn between his old friend Tony and his new teammates. He wonders if it is possible to be loyal to both. Soto explores the idea that true friendship can withstand change and distance. Lincoln learns that loyalty does not mean blind agreement; it means honesty, respect, and mutual support, even when friends are on different paths.

Prejudice and Stereotyping

Soto does not shy away from showing the racism that Lincoln faces. From the subtle microaggressions of his coach to the overt bullying of James, Lincoln encounters prejudice in many forms. The novel teaches readers

that stereotypes are harmful because they reduce people to a single story. Lincoln constantly has to prove that he is not the "angry Latino" or the "poor kid from the bad neighborhood." He just wants to be seen as Lincoln.

Economic Hardship

Another important theme in this **Taking Sides By Gary Soto Study Guide** is the impact of poverty. Lincoln's family struggles financially. Mama works long hours, and there is little money for extras. Lincoln is acutely aware of this, and it affects his self-esteem. He feels embarrassed when he cannot afford the same things as his new classmates. Soto treats these struggles with sensitivity, showing that economic hardship is not a character flaw but a societal issue.

Symbolism and Literary Devices

Basketball as a Metaphor

Basketball is not just a sport in this novel; it is a metaphor for life. The basketball court is a space where Lincoln feels powerful and in control. It is also a space where he must make split-second decisions, just as he must navigate the complexities of his social life. The game itself—with its rules, teams, and referees—mirrors the societal structures that Lincoln is learning to navigate.

The Setting Shift

The move from the Mission District to Sycamore is a powerful symbol of cultural dislocation. The Mission represents community, familiarity, and cultural pride. Sycamore represents opportunity, safety, but also alienation. Lincoln's physical journey between these two places mirrors his internal journey between two parts of his identity.

Key Chapters and Scenes to Analyze

For students using this **Taking Sides By Gary Soto Study Guide**, focusing on specific scenes can be very helpful for essay writing and exam preparation.

The First Day at Sycamore

This scene establishes all of Lincoln's anxieties. He walks into a school where he knows no one, and he immediately feels judged. This is a powerful moment for discussing the theme of belonging.

The Argument with James

The scene where James makes a racist comment about Lincoln's ability to play basketball because of his ethnicity is a turning point. Lincoln must decide whether to fight back physically or walk away. This scene is excellent for character analysis and theme discussion.

The Reunion with Tony

When Lincoln returns to the Mission District to see Tony, he feels a mix of joy and sadness. Tony has stayed the same, but Lincoln has changed. This bittersweet reunion highlights the theme of growing up and moving on.

The Big Game

The climax of the novel is the basketball game between Sycamore and Franklin. This is where Lincoln must confront his divided loyalties head-on. The outcome of the game is less important than what Lincoln learns about himself in the process.

Discussion Questions for Classroom or Study Groups

If you are using this **Taking Sides By Gary Soto Study Guide** for a class or book club, here are some questions to spark meaningful conversation.

- Why does Lincoln feel so conflicted about the basketball game against his old school? Is it just about sports, or is something deeper going on?
- How does Lincoln's relationship with his mother change throughout the novel? What does he learn about her struggles?
- Do you think Lincoln made the right decision in how he handled James's bullying? What would you have done differently?
- How does Gary Soto use basketball as a way to explore deeper themes of identity and belonging?
- What does the novel suggest about the nature of true friendship? Is it possible to have loyalty to more than one group at a time?
- How does the setting of the novel influence Lincoln's sense of self? Would the story be different if it took place in a different city or time period?

Study Tips for Mastering Taking Sides

To get the most out of this **Taking Sides By Gary Soto Study Guide**, here are some practical tips for students and educators.

1. Read actively: Highlight passages that deal with identity, loyalty, and prejudice. Take notes in the margins about how Lincoln feels in different situations.
2. Create a character map: Draw connections between Lincoln and the other characters. This will help you see the web of relationships that influence his decisions.
3. Track the basketball metaphor: Every time basketball is mentioned, ask yourself: What is this really about? How does this game reflect Lincoln's inner conflict?
4. Write a journal from Lincoln's perspective: This is an excellent way to deepen your empathy for the protagonist and understand his motivations on a personal level.
5. Discuss with peers: The themes in this novel are best understood through conversation. Talk about how Lincoln's struggles relate to your own experiences or to broader social issues.
6. Watch the film adaptation: There is a 2002 film adaptation of Taking Sides. Watching it after reading the book can provide a fresh perspective and help you visualize the characters and settings.

Connecting Taking Sides to the Real World

One of the reasons this novel remains so popular in middle school curricula is its relevance to contemporary issues. Even though **Taking Sides** was published in 1991, the themes of cultural displacement, economic inequality, and racial prejudice are still very much alive today. Students reading this novel can connect Lincoln's story to current conversations about immigration, diversity, and inclusion. This **Taking Sides By Gary Soto Study Guide**encourages readers to think beyond the page and consider how Lincoln's experiences mirror those of real people navigating similar challenges.

Furthermore, the novel offers a valuable lesson in empathy. By stepping into Lincoln's shoes, readers from all backgrounds can gain a better understanding of what it feels like to be the "other." This is a crucial skill in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

Final Thoughts on This Study Guide

Taking Sidesis a deceptively simple novel. On the surface, it is a story about a boy and a basketball game. But beneath that surface lies

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