



In Perfect Light

By Benjamin Alire Sáenz
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Introduction

After Andres Segovia's parents suddenly die in a car accident when Andres is still a young boy, his older brother decides to steal the family away to Juarez, Mexico. The decision, made with the best intentions, sets into motion the unraveling of an American family. Andres and his brothers and sisters must suddenly come to terms with who they are as American born Hispanics, not fitting into their new Mexican lives.

When Andres, after making his way back to the United States, is arrested and placed under the therapeutic eye of Grace Delgado, the growth of their relationship becomes the epicenter of the novel. Grace has begun to question her life's worth after having been recently diagnosed with cancer. Moving beyond the simple doctor/patient relationship, Grace and Andres begin to learn from one another, and ultimately find the missing sense of direction they both desperately long for. When the secrets

surrounding the death of Andres' parents begin to make themselves known, their relationship is almost irreparably strained, as is their newly found sense of self-worth.

In a haunting look at cultural displacement and the resiliency of our sometimes fragile psyches, *In Perfect Light* centers on the destinies of two very strong-willed people, forever altered by a single tragedy, and the trauma people are forced to live through because of it.

Questions for Discussion

1. Images of and references to light permeate throughout, beginning with the author's dedication. What does light symbolize in this book?
2. What caused the rift between Grace and Mister? What causes it to heal? At the end, Grace "is remembering her dream, how she always stood apart from the love Sam and Mister shared—as if they had never loved her." What does this reveal about Grace?
3. Mister began to call his mother by her given name—Grace—at age four. Why do you think he did this? What does it reveal about their mother-child relationship?
4. Sam died many years ago, but his presence in Grace and Mister's lives is still powerful. How does he continue to influence them? When Grace decides to befriend Liz and care for Vicente, is she renouncing her attachment to Sam? Why does she decide not to die?
5. Andres and Grace develop a relationship that transforms both of them. How do they change? What needs are fulfilled for both of them by their relationship? Discuss how "Grace" is a particularly appropriate name for Andres's therapist. What would have happened to Andres had he not met Grace at the time he did? Why does Grace breach the therapist-patient boundaries with Andres? What is special about Andres to Grace?
6. Why does Dave feel responsible for Andres? As Dave and Andres's relationship unfolds, what do you think the author is saying about forgiveness and acceptance?
7. How are Andres's father and older brother different from him? Compare Andres's relationship with his father to Mister and Sam's. How do Andres's feelings as an outsider shape his life after his family moves to Mexico and throughout adulthood? What kept him from leaving Mexico when he had the opportunity?
8. As a child Andres becomes trapped into prostitution, what keeps him from becoming suicidal? When as an adult Andres runs into one of his childhood abusers, he attacks him and ultimately the man dies. Was Andres's behavior justified? How should child molesters be dealt with in society?
9. What does Mrs. Fernandez symbolize to Andres? When Andres finally goes to Mrs. Fernandez and asks for her forgiveness, whose forgiveness is he actually asking for? What are Mrs. Fernandez's feelings for Andres?
10. What does Vicente's blindness symbolize?
11. In one way or another, the characters in *In Perfect Light* carry heavy emotional burdens, one that saps hope from their lives. What role do secrets play these characters' lives? Whose secret is the most burdensome? Who do you think changes the most? How do each of the characters regain hope?

About the Author

Benjamin Alire Sáenz was born in his grandmother's house in Picacho, New Mexico—a farming village 40 miles north of the border between Mexico and the United States. He is the author of the novels, *Carry Me Like Water* and *House of Forgetting*, and several volumes of

poetry and children's books. Sáenz won the American Book Award for his collection of poetry, *Calendar of Dust*. A former priest, Sáenz teaches Creative Writing at the University of Texas at El Paso.