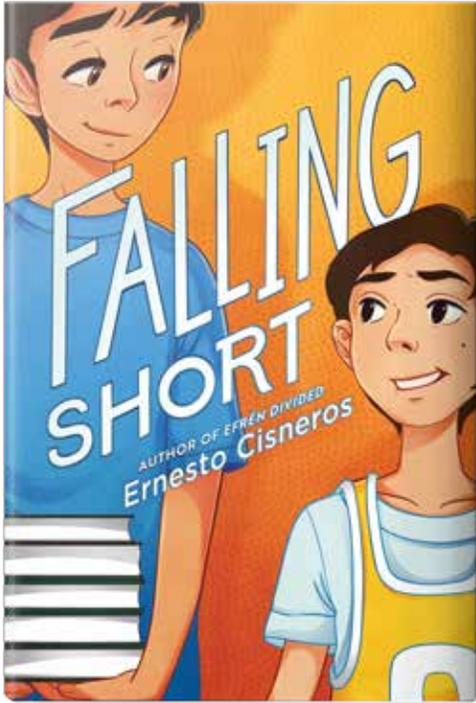


# Discussion Guide for **ERNESTO CISNEROS'S**



**INCLUDES**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS** and **EXTENSION ACTIVITIES**  
for reading and engaging with young readers



# FALLING SHORT

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Life-long friends Isaac Castillo and Marco Honeyman are entering middle school and (mostly) ready for new changes and challenges. Isaac wants to show his mom he can be as responsible and committed in school as he is on the basketball court. Marco wants to continue excelling academically while finding a sport that a “community kid” like him can play, too. Both Isaac and Marco are driven by their desire to make their parents proud and be the best versions of themselves. Together, these friends support and show up for each other in school and life.

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Isaac hopes that middle school will be a fresh start for him. Isaac wants to show his Amá that he can be “más responsable” and finally make his parents proud. What is Isaac’s plan to be “más responsable”? How does he hope this will make his parents proud?
2. Isaac and Marco deeply admire each other as life-long friends and chosen family. What are some of the traits and characteristics they admire about each other? How do you think these traits and characteristics strengthen their bond and support each other in school and life?
3. Friendship is at the heart of Isaac and Marco’s story. What are some words and/or phrases you would use to describe Isaac and Marco’s friendship?
4. Marco wants to join a sport that “community kids can play too” (p. 15). His classmates talk him into trying out for the basketball team. How do you think his book smarts help him learn to play the game? Do you believe his book smarts give him an advantage or disadvantage?
5. Isaac and Marco’s relationships with their fathers are full of tension. Both boys long to have father-son relationships that are loving, healthy, and safe. How do you think they feel when their fathers break promises? How do their fathers’ words and actions impact their lives? Do you think their fathers realize their words and actions affect their sons’ view of themselves?
6. Isaac and Marco are true friends who support each other through panic attacks, family secrets, absent fathers, and the daily challenges of middle school. They listen, understand, and truly care for each other. Discuss the ways their friendship breaks gender and cultural stereotypes. What can we learn from them about male friendship and companionship?
7. Family is critical in Isaac and Marco’s lives. What role do Isaac’s mother, his abuelita, and Marco’s mother play in the story? What lessons do they teach the boys through their actions and words?

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (continued)

- Abuelita and Isaac have a conversation about Apá's relationship with his own father. Isaac learns more about the pain and trauma that his Apá endured because of their silences. Discuss what they might do to begin to heal from this intergenerational trauma.
- Basketball is a team sport, and every single player matters to the team's success. Discuss what Isaac and Marco learned from playing basketball, on and off the court.
- After Issac's Apá is hospitalized, Abuelita gives Isaac these consejos (words of advice): "A veces no hay próxima vez. Tenemos que aprovechar nuestras oportunidades ahorita" (p. 249). ["Sometimes there is no next time. We have to make the most of the opportunities we have now."] Describe what these consejos mean to you. How might you draw on this advice in your own life?

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## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

### The Real Me

Think about how you see yourself. This may be different from how you think other people see you. On a piece of paper, or in your writer's notebook, draw a large heart. On the inside of the heart, write words and phrases that describe how you see yourself and your talents. On the outside of the heart, write words and phrases that describe how others see you and your talents. Write about the similarities and differences between how you see yourself and how others see you.

### Inspiration On and Off the Court

Several basketball players are mentioned throughout the story. Specifically, Marco finds inspiration in the on-court playing of Muggsy Bogues. Research different athletes and create a collage that highlights the ways that they inspire you and others to be the best version of yourself, on and off the court.

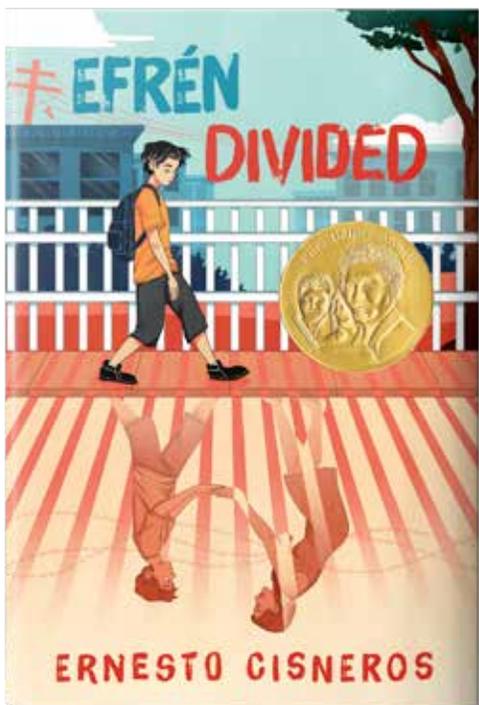
### My True Friend

In the book, Isaac writes a list of Marco's qualities. Think about your best friend, special relative, favorite teacher, or fun neighbor. Create a list of all their best qualities and what makes them special and unique. Using the list, write a poem celebrating this person.

### Community Fish

Marco categorizes kids the way that fish are categorized in a pet store. He is always looking for community fish, "those who get along with everyone—regardless of type, color, or size" (pp. 23-24). In your class, how can you create a sea of "community fish?" Brainstorm a list of qualities that would make a good community fish (classmate). Create a class anchor chart that you agree upon for how you will all be community fish, together.





# EFRÉN DIVIDED

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Efrén Nava is a 12-year-old boy living in Highland, California, with his Amá, Apá, and younger siblings, Max and Mía. His “soperparents” have created a loving home for their family: Amá works and cares for the family at home, creating milagros in the kitchen with all her resources, and Apá works long hours to make ends. One day, Efrén returns home from school to find that his mother has been arrested and deported to Tijuana, México. Amá’s deportation impacts the entire family. Efrén begins to care for his younger siblings’ daily needs, and his Apá works more hours to secure money to bring Amá back home. Together Apá and Efrén make a plan to drive to México and for Efrén to cross alone and give

his mother the money. In Tijuana, Efrén meets Lalo, a taxi driver, who helps him find his mother and shares his own immigration story along the way. *Efrén Divided* highlights the love of a family, the choices families must make due to a failing immigration system, and the strength that young Efrén finds in himself, surrounded by family and friends.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Efrén lovingly refers to his Amá as his “Soperwoman” because of the many milagros she performs on a daily basis (p. 6). Describe the many ways that Amá is a “Soperwoman.”
2. At the beginning of the book, Jennifer Huerta shares this dicho with Efrén: “Nos quisieron enterrar, pero no sabían que éramos semillas” (p. 30). Why does Jennifer share this dicho with Efrén? What does it mean to Jennifer and her family? What does it come to mean for Efrén and his family? How does Efrén draw upon this dicho as a source of strength throughout the story?
3. Efrén’s neighborhood is an essential part of the story. Describe the different people and places that help you understand Efrén and his family and the events that unfold in their lives.
4. Efrén has grown up hearing stories of neighbors and distant relatives being deported by ICE and separated from their families: “He’d heard the word ‘ICE’ whenever someone brought up immigration—usually in the same way kids talked about El Cucuy, the Latino version of the boogeyman. He’d grown up hearing about it, fearing it” (p. 43). Describe Efrén’s emotions throughout the story as he tries to process Amá’s deportation. How does he try to protect his siblings? How does he try to support his Apá?
5. Amá’s deportation impacts the entire family. Describe the different ways that each family member is affected by Amá’s deportation. How does each character continue to push forward each day?

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (continued)

- Describe Efrén's relationship with his younger siblings, Max and Mía. Give examples of words and actions that convey their relationship throughout the book.
- Efrén's best friend David is campaigning for ASB president throughout the story. What are his motives for running for president? How does Efrén feel about David's decision to run for president? Are his campaign promises realistic or unrealistic? Why does Efrén finally decide to run for president? Do you think he can make real change within his school?
- Apá decides to let Efrén cross into México alone to get Amá the money she needs to come back to the United States. Why do you think that Apá finally decided to let Efrén go alone? What are the risks for Apá? What are the risks for Efrén? Explain the systemic issues that impact their decisions and create these risks.
- Lalo helps Efrén to navigate his brief time in México. Why was Efrén hesitant at first to get in Lalo's taxi? What do Lalo and Efrén discuss while they are together? What is Lalo's story? Where does Lalo take Efrén while he is in México? What do you think Lalo means when he says, "But you don't have to worry about me. I'll make do. Sadly, it's what our people are best at—making do" (pp. 194-195).
- When Efrén is in México to meet his mom, it is the first time he has ever been there. He witnesses an entirely different world. He thinks: "Amá and Apá didn't like to talk too much about why they left their homes so long ago. 'For a better life,' seemed to be their only answer. Only now, Efrén was beginning to understand what they'd left behind" (p. 181). Discuss what Efrén experiences when he is in México. What does he begin to understand about his parents and family? What does he begin to understand about his culture and community? What does he learn about himself?

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

### DICHOS/WORDS OF WISDOM.

Jennifer Huerta shares the dicho, "Nos quisieron enterrar, pero no sabían que éramos semillas" (p. 30) with Efrén. Throughout the story, he draws on these words to help him through difficult times. Think about dichos/words of wisdom your parents, elders, or ancestors have passed along to you. Select one dicho and create a poster that illustrates what it means to you. Share these as a class and discuss.

### NEIGHBORHOOD POETRY.

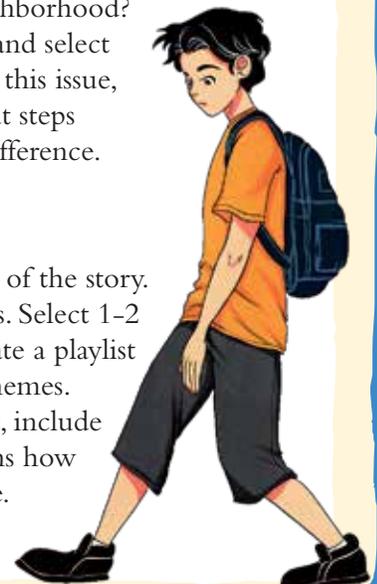
Efrén finds the book, *The House on Mango Street* written by Sandra Cisneros and sees many similarities between the neighborhood depicted in the book and his own. Think about a neighborhood where you have lived or spent a lot of time. This neighborhood holds many of your memories and stories. Select one of these neighborhoods and write a poem about it as you remember it.

### WRITING FOR CHANGE.

At the end of the story, Efrén decides to run for ASB president. He wants to raise awareness about immigration and educate parents about their rights. What social justice issues are important to you? In your school? In your neighborhood? In your world? Create a list and select one to research. Write about this issue, why it is important, and what steps would you take to make a difference.

### CREATE A PLAY LIST.

As a class, discuss the themes of the story. Create a list of all the themes. Select 1-2 themes from the list and create a playlist of songs that highlight the themes. For each song on the playlist, include a short summary that explains how the song relates to the theme. Listen to all the playlists.



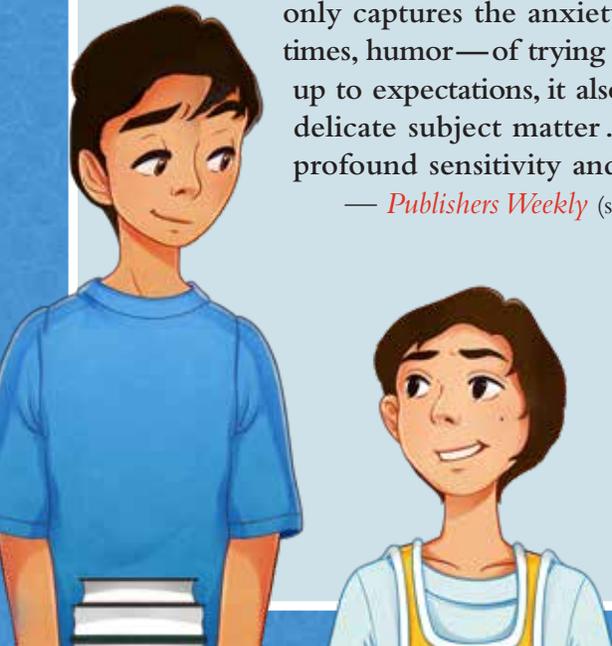


## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ernesto Cisneros** was born and raised in Santa Ana, California, where he still teaches. His first novel, *Efrén Divided*, won the Pura Belpré Children’s Author Award. He holds an English degree from the University of California, Irvine; a teaching credential from California State University, Long Beach; as well as a Masters in Fine Arts in Creative Writing from National University. As an author, he believes in providing today’s youth with an honest depiction of characters with whom they can identify. The real world is filled with amazing people with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. His work strives to reflect that. You can visit him online at [www.ernestocisneros.com](http://www.ernestocisneros.com).

### Praise for Falling Short

- ★ “Cisneros’ touching sophomore novel is an ideal pick for sports fans and will reel in reluctant readers.”  
— *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)
- ★ “At every turn, Isaac and Marco support each other in this affirming story of basketball, middle school, friendship, and family, and choosing kindness and determination over easy cowardice or cruelty.”  
— *School Library Journal* (starred review)
- ★ “Told through animated alternating first-person chapters, Cisneros’s story not only captures the anxiety—and at times, humor—of trying to measure up to expectations, it also tackles delicate subject matter ... with profound sensitivity and nuance.”  
— *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)



### Praise for Efrén Divided

- ★ “Even as Efrén’s world seems to be crashing around him, Cisneros celebrates the kindness of the Mexican American community and its richness of food, culture, and resilient spirit. Honest and tender: a must-read.”  
— *Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)
- ★ “As affecting as it is timely... Cisneros tells this urgent story with focus and heart-wrenching realism, especially concerning the ripple effects of family separation, not just at the border but also among those in the U.S.”  
— *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)
- ★ “This timely middle-grade novel will not only open dialogue with children on the issue of immigration but also encourage conversations on the subjects of kindness, empathy, and activism. A moving novel perfectly pitched to its audience.”  
— *Booklist* (starred review)
- ★ “[Cisneros] tells a story of resilience, strength, and love... this resonant title will inspire young readers to make a difference, no matter the hardships they face.”  
— *School Library Journal* (starred review)