



Resource Guide  
Autumn 2011

# Berwyn Reads

*Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*

by Victor Martinez



**16<sup>th</sup>**  
**STREET**  
**THEATER**



## Berwyn Reads

The Berwyn Public Library will host the city's second One Book, One Community initiative. Berwyn Reads is a city-wide reading and discussion program that encourages all our residents to read the same book at the same time.

The library will promote the joy of reading, literacy and life-long learning by making available hundreds of copies of the chosen novel, *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida* by Victor Martinez, in both English and Spanish.

The library has partnered with Morton West High School to have all 9th graders reading *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida* in September to concur with the program. Through Berwyn Reads, the Berwyn Public Library challenges the freshmen class to examine important subjects and build community around significant thematic issues. Morton College has added the novel to their basic education and ESL classes, and as a wrap-up, the 16th Street Theater will adapt the novel into a play.

All community members are invited to join their neighbors and friends for book discussions and special events presented during the months of September, October and November. We will kick off Berwyn Reads at the library Saturday, September 10, 2011 at 2:00.

Take part in Berwyn Reads by visiting the library to borrow a copy of *Parrot*, reserve a discussion kit for your next book club and join us for the many related programs being presented throughout the read. Help us build networks and partnerships that strengthen our community's literacy.

## Community Sponsors



Illinois Humanities Council



## Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida

Winner of the 1996 National Book Award in the Young People's Literature category, *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida* deals with the pressures of family and community that Manny Hernandez faces during the fourteenth year of his life. Manny Hernandez's dad is always calling him el perico, or "the parrot," from a Mexican saying about a parrot who complains how hot it is in the shade while all along he's sitting in the oven and doesn't know it. But Manny, wanting to be smarter than the parrot, struggles with the awkwardness of adolescence as he searches for acceptance and becomes a vato firme, a stand-up guy.



Rich imagery in a series of vividly real vignettes guides us around the obstacles in Manny's coming-of-age—pressure to join a gang, awkward crushes, and fitting in with friends. Manny also copes with the characters in his crazy family—a drunk father, a brother who "flips through more jobs than a thumb through a deck of cards," a mother who compulsively scrubs, hoping her troubles will be washed away, and a sister who has a miscarriage.

## Community Support

The Library would like to thank all of our partners that helped make the Big Read possible. We would especially like to thank our two biggest donors:

Friends of the Berwyn Public Library

George Veverka Bequest Fund

Thanks to **Fitzgerald's** for hosting the theatrical adaptation and **Over the Rainbow** for sponsoring Berwyn Read's kickoff.

The adaptation was made possible by the following production partners:

Morton West High School

Berwyn Public Library Wee Wallflowers Writing Group

Berwyn Public Library Poetry Slammers led by Jason Brock

Gallery 16

North Berwyn Park District

## Meet the Author: Victor Martinez, 1954-2011



Victor Martinez died Feb. 18, 2011 of lung cancer. The cancer was related to juvenile papillomavirus, which first struck him as an adolescent. Doctors linked the virus to growing up around pesticides.

The fourth of 12 children of migrant farm laborers, Martinez was born Feb. 21, 1954, in Fresno. As a child, he worked in the fields after school and during summers.

He was taking vocational classes to be a welder when a high school teacher noticed his passion for reading and helped push him to attend Cal State Fresno through an affirmative-action program for Chicano youth.

In college, he discovered poetry, earned a bachelor's degree in English and studied creative writing on a postgraduate fellowship at Stanford University.

For a decade, Martinez drove a truck and worked a variety of jobs before saving enough money to turn to writing full time.

While teaching poetry in junior high schools, Martinez recalled his own struggle at that age

to find his voice, literally and spiritually, and decided to write a coming-of-age novel. He had published a book of poems, "Caring for the House," in 1992.

At 14, he was unable to speak after the virus caused growths on his vocal cords, a condition that plagued him for the rest of his life. When he regained his voice after two years, he spoke with a distinctive rasp.

His first novel, "Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida," was about a 14-year-old Mexican American boy growing up in the projects of an unnamed city in the Central Valley. The title refers to a Mexican story about a bird that complains how hot it is in the shade, not realizing that it is sitting in an oven. He often said the book was partly based on his own life.

When he won the National Book Award judges called "Parrot" a "spirited novel of awkward love, ugly schools, neighborhood feuds — the stuff of a scruffy adolescence.... Strikingly authentic literature of poor people."

The award "gave me a career," Martinez told *The Times* in 1997. The \$10,000 prize money was more than he had made the previous year.

Martinez contributed to journals and anthologies, and wrote two more novels that remain unpublished.

In addition to his sister Martha, Martinez is survived by his wife, Tina Alvarez, four other sisters and six brothers.

*The Los Angeles Times*

## Letter to the Community of Berwyn

My brother Victor would be honored that you've chosen to showcase his novel, *Parrot in the Oven*, for your Community Read and Performance. I'm sure the adaptation by the 16th Street Theater will showcase the elements of the book which continuously strike to the heart of everyone who has ever read Victor's book.

It never ceases to amaze me how Victor's book has come into the hands of so many people. One night, I was visiting Victor and his wife Tina in San Francisco, and I was telling him that I searched *Parrot In The Oven* on YouTube, and found numerous small videos done by people from all over the country; little excerpts of his book played out by people living in vastly different worlds, socio-economic settings, and emotional landscapes than the world Manny lived in. As I talked, Victor's dark brown eyes set into me, his brow pursed into almost a frown, and in his honey and gravel voice he asked, "Really?" I was immediately catapulted into the world which gave birth to Manny, when Victor was 8 years old, my father, as a joke, would tell him that he was going to take him to Disneyland; and young Victor would ask, "Really, really, Daddy?!" From that time, Victor may have been disappointed, and maybe he was fooled once or twice; but he never ceased to ask whether there is a lighter side to the darkness this world sometimes holds. This question, "Really?" helped bring a voice and purpose to the characters in his books. This question of hope propped up the cities and towns woven into Victor's stories and poems on the notion that there is something universal about life, and the experience of hardship. The indelible spirit of Victor lives in his young character, Manny, lending him the heart which helped him navigate the difficult world of poverty, gangs, racism, and the often hilariously misguided angst of youth.

"Really?"

"Yes, Vic!" I smiled, knowing that he was asking me to elaborate. "Everybody who reads your book and experiences Manny can relate to him. Manny is every kid in every town." Given my current desire to elaborate wishfully to my brother, I would later add that the themes of youth are universal, whether you are a shirtless kid in Berwyn on a sticky summer afternoon, speeding away on a ten speed through hot and gooey pavement like quicksand; or whether you are a buttoned up altar boy on Sunday in a color drenched Catholic Church in Newark, New Jersey, staring out the windows to catch a sliver of green grass in your eye; or even if you were a bony Chicano kid from Arizona with a head too big for his body, eating his nails to the pulp of his fingers.

Everyone knows what it feels like to long for love so hard that it bubbles out of the corners of your mouth in little breaths, to fear hate and the darkness it swirls in, to let anger seethe into your upper lip and drip onto your tongue like acid. Everyone knows what it feels like to be young; whether those days were crawling with letterman jackets and pom poms; or whether they were stuffed into a library, eyes struck wide with every turn of a page. We all want to thread into a moment and eat it up like an ice cream in summer. This was the world that Victor introduced us to, which we love so much that we want to go back, even if it is sometimes a train wreck.

So when I heard that your community wanted to adapt Victor's novel, *Parrot in the Oven*, into a play, I imagined that my big brother Victor Martinez, who continues to motivate and inspire me, would have read your email, and looked up with eyes that remained youthful even to the darkest hour, and asked the question: "Really?" Yeah, Vic. Really!

Thank you for continuing to bring life to my brother's legacy. I know in my heart that you will capture the themes in Victor's book; because you have lived them yourself, in some small way.

Sincerely,

Abel Martinez

## Berwyn Reads Kickoff

*Saturday, September 10 at 2:00 - 4:00 p.m.*

Join us in celebrating the kickoff of Berwyn Reads! Stop by the library tent on Riverside Drive to listen to mariachis music and eat an ice cream cone from Over the Rainbow. The first 100 people will receive a free copy of *Parrot in the Oven* and be entered into a drawing for an original piece of artwork by local artist Fran Gregory.

## Related Programs

Unless otherwise indicated, please register in advance for all programs by calling Readers' Advisory at 708-795-8000 x3005 or email: [programs@berwynlibrary.net](mailto:programs@berwynlibrary.net). Programs are held in the Community Room. Please give at least one week's notification if you need ADA accommodations.

### Mexican Chicago - A Story in Pictures

*Thursday, September 29 at 7p.m.*



Join Rita Arias Jirasek as she presents the stories of the Mexican experience in the Midwest through photographs. Rita examines local Mexican history in first voice—the voices of those who have lived, and are living, this history. Come learn about the important place of the Chicago Mexican community in Chicago's rich and diverse history.

Rita Arias Jirasek is the co-author of the photographic history, *Mexican Chicago*, and has curated the companion permanent exhibit *Huellas Fotográficas* at the National Museum of Mexican Art. Rita has presented at numerous conferences and workshops and has directed the Golden Apple Summer Story Telling workshop. She can present in English or Spanish.

### The Immigration Debate

*Wednesday, November 2 at 7:00 p.m.*



Some people believe that the US has too many recent immigrants, and others don't think we have enough. Some feel that recent immigrants are a tax burden, that they drive down the wages of the working poor, and that new immigrants do not assimilate quickly into the American way of life. Some feel that we need increasing numbers of immigrants in key industries, such as agriculture, garment manufacture, and child care. Join Peter Wenz as he examines both sides of this contentious debate.

Peter Wenz holds a PhD from the University of Wisconsin in Madison and is an Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Illinois. He is the author of *Environmental Justice*, *Nature's Keeper*, *Political Philosophies in Moral Conflict*, and the newly-released *Beyond Red and Blue: How Twelve Political Philosophies Shape American Debates*. Outside of teaching, Peter has spoken at a number of conferences and programs around the US.

## 16th Street Theater Presents a Theatrical Adaptation of *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*

*Saturday, November 5 at 12:00 p.m.*  
Performance at Fitzgerald's

## Film Series and Discussions

Join us at the library for screenings of two movies and then engage with other community members in a moderated discussion about the important themes addressed in the film as well as *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*.

### ...And the Earth Did Not Swallow Him

*Saturday, October 15 at 2:00 p.m.*

Discussion led by Esther Chase

A moving and powerful portrait of the life of a poor Mexican American boy and his migrant farm worker family as they struggle to adjust to life in American society. Adapted from the novel written by Tomas Rivera and published in 1971, the film is a feature-length drama produced for American Playhouse, PBS's weekly drama series. Told through the eyes of Marcos, a twelve-year-old boy, the film emphasizes Marcos' desire to educate himself. Through its many human stories of growing up as a Mexican American, the story exposes the rich cultural traditions which have given shape to life in the American Southwest.

### Papers: Stories of Undocumented Youth

*Thursday, October 13 at 7:00 p.m.*

Discussion led by Elizabeth Ojeda

Papers is the story of undocumented youth and the challenges they face as they turn 18 without legal status. There are approximately two million undocumented children who were born outside the U.S. and raised in this country. These are young people who were educated in American schools, hold American values, know only the U.S. as home and who, upon high school graduation, find the door to their future slammed shut. It is against the law to work or drive. It is difficult, if not impossible in some states, to attend college. They live at risk of arrest, detention and deportation to countries they may not even remember. currently there is no path to citizenship for these young people.

## 16th Street Theater's Community Project

Throughout the month of October, 16th Street Theater leads five classes at Morton High School, in addition to six other community groups, in bringing each chapter of *Parrot in the Oven* to life on stage.

Led by a professional teaching artist, each group is assigned one of the chapters in *Parrot in the Oven* from which to create their own original 10-minute scene. The culmination of the project is a community performance of all the chapters on Saturday, November 5th at noon at FitzGerald's. There will also be a student performance at Morton High School on Thursday, November 10th.

This project is led by 16th Street Theater Associate Artist Jessica Mondres. Community Partners include North Berwyn Park District and Gallery 16.

Get involved! To be a part of this community project, as a partner, participant, or a volunteer, please contact Jessica Mondres at [outreach@16thstreettheater.org](mailto:outreach@16thstreettheater.org) or (708)795-6704.

## Questions for Group Discussion

**1** 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, 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?

**2** In Chapter 4, “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?

**3** 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?

**4** Overflowing with figurative language, *Parrot in the Oven* is “a whirlwind of surprising similes and inventive turns of phrase” (*Kirkus Reviews*). 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?

**5** Whom do you see as the head of the Hernandez? In discussing this, consider the 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?

**6** 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?

**7** 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?

**8** 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. But 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?

**9** Discuss the way Manny narrates the situation in “The Rifle,” when *Pedi* is almost shot. Who, if anyone, is blamed for the shooting?

**10** Several of the characters in *Parrot in the Oven* idealize specific material possessions. Manny wants a baseball glove “so bad a sweet hurt blossomed in his stomach whenever he thought about it” (p.7). Magda “lived and breathed to caress her records” (p.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?

## Read-a-Likes

### Young Children, fiction

*A Day's Work* by Eve Bunting (Gr. K-3)

*The Dog Who Loved Tortillas | La Perrita Que le Encantaban las Tortillas* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz (Gr. K-3)

\**First Day in Grapes* by L. King Perez (Gr. 1-3)

*From North to South* by Rene Calato-Lainez (Gr. K-3)

\**Too Many Tamales* by Gary Soto (Gr. K-3)

\**America is Her Name* by Luis J. Rodriguez (Gr. K-3)

\**Tomás and the Library Lady* by Pat Mora (Gr. K-3)

### Young Children, non-fiction

*Calling the Doves | Canto Por las Palomas* by Juan Felipe Herrera (Gr. 1-3)

*Mi Casa | My House* by George Ancona (Gr. 1-3)

*A Picture Book of Cesar Chavez* by David A. Adler (Gr. 1-3)

*Tomás Rivera* by Jane Medina (Grade 1-3)

### Older Children & Teens, fiction

*Any Small Goodness* by Tony Johnston (Gr. 4+)

\**Breaking Through* by Francisco Jimenez (Teens)

*Buried Onions* by Gary Soto (Teens)

\**Esperanza Rising* by Pam Munoz Ryan (Gr. 6+)

*Going Home* by Eve Bunting (Gr. 4+)

\**How Tia Lola Came to (Visit) Stay* by Julia Alvarez (Gr. 4+)

*Lush* by Natasha Friend (Gr. 7+)

*Muchacho* by LouAnne Johnson (Teens)

\**Return to Sender* by Julia Alvarez (Gr. 6+)

*The Secret Story of Sonia Rodriguez* by Alan Lawrence Sitomer (Teens)

### Older Children & Teens, non-fiction

*The Circuit: Stories From the Life of a Migrant Child* by Francisco Jiménez (Teens)

*In My Family | En Mi Familia* by Carmen Lomas Garza (Gr. 4+)

*Migrant Worker: A Boy From the Rio Grande Valley* by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith (Gr. 4+)

\**My Bloody Life: The Making of a Latin King* by Reymundo Sanchez (Teens)

*Lady Q: The Rise and Fall of a Latin Queen* by Reymundo Sanchez (Teens)

*Neighborhood Odes* by Gary Soto (Gr. 5+)

*North Across the Border: The Story of Mexican Americans* by Lila Perl (Teens)

### Adults, fiction

*Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya

\**Caramelo* by Sandra Cisneros

*Fragile Night* by Stella Pope Duarte

\**The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros

\**How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* by Julia Alvarez

*Music of the Mill* by Luis J. Rodriguez

## Awards for

### Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida

•**1998** Pura Belpre Author Award

•**1996** Americas Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature

•**1997** Books for the Teen Age (NY Public Library)

•**1996** National Book Award for Young People's Literature

### Book Discussions

Please register for all Book Discussions by calling 708-795-8000, x 3005.

#### Adult/Young Adult Discussion

*Wednesday, September 28 at 7:00 p.m.*  
*Library Board Room*

*Sponsored by the Berwyn Library*

#### Adult/Young Adult Discussion

*Saturday, October 8 at 2:00 p.m.*  
*Library Board Room*

*Sponsored by the Berwyn Library*

#### Junior Book Club - Grade School

*Monday, September 19 at 4:00 p.m.*  
*Youth Services Program Room*

This group will be reading an age appropriate read-a-like, *How Tia Lola Came to (Visit) Stay* by Julia Alvarez.

### ESL Book Discussion

*Saturdays, September 10th, 17th, and 24th at 12:00 p.m.*  
*Library Board Room*

Join the ESL Discussion Group as they read *Parrot in the Oven* over the course of three weeks, four chapters at a time.

*Sponsored by the Berwyn Public Library*

### Adults, non-fiction

*Almost a Woman* by Esmeralda Santiago

\**Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in L.A.* by Luis J. Rodriguez

*Butterfly Boy: Memories of a Chicano Mariposa* by Rigoberto Gonzalez

*Everyday Ruptures: Children, Youth, and Migration in Global Perspective* by Cati Coe, et al.

*Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Takes to the Streets* by Sudhir Venkatesh

\**Rain of Gold* by Victor Villaseñor

### Movies, fiction

*Under the Same Moon* (DVD, 2008, immigration)

*Sin Nombre* (DVD, 2009, Central American youth: gang violence, immigration)

*El Norte* (DVD, 1983, Immigration)

*Stand and Deliver* (DVD, 1988, Latino students, educational gap, Latinos achieving true potential)

*And the Earth did not swallow him* (DVD, 1994, migrant farm workers)

### Movies, non-fiction

*Mojados through the night* (DVD, 2005, documentary, illegal border-crossing)

*American Me* (DVD, 1991, Chicano gang life, family values, race issues)

*Coming to America: The Story of Immigration* (DVD, 1998, Immigration)

*Papers: Stories of Undocumented Youth* (DVD, 2008, Latino students, immigration)

\**Available in Spanish*

# Evaluation

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name (optional)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Phone (optional)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Email (optional)

How did you hear about *Berwyn Reads*?

How did you participate?

*(check all that apply.)*

- Read the book
- Attended a book Discussion
- Attended a special program
- Other

Share why you would or would not participate in *Berwyn Reads* in the future.

Share your thoughts on the selection of *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida* for *Berwyn Reads*.

Share your suggestion(s) for future titles for *Berwyn Reads*.

*Turn in your evaluation form at the Readers Advisory Desk.*

Funding was made possible in part by the George Veverka Bequest Fund. We wish to honor Mr. Veverka, a life-long Berwyn resident, who was committed to the education of our youth. It is in his memory that we celebrate a love of reading and community-wide literacy.

A special thank you to Mr. Martinez's family; his wife, Tina Alvarez, for her support and permission for performance rights and his brother, Abel Martinez, for being gracious with his time and writing a letter to the participating Berwyn community.

Bookjacket photo and book discussion questions used with permission from HarperCollins.

Graphic design by Fran Gregory.