



Becoming Naomi León

by Pam Muñoz Ryan

Teacher's Guide

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CLASSROOM FAVORITES

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Synopsis

PART I: A RABBLE OF YESTERDAYS

Naomi Soledad León Outlaw, the first-person narrator, opens the story by saying that she thought that her name was always her biggest problem, but she soon finds that the unraveling of her family is a much bigger problem.

Chapter 1: A Paddling of Ducks

Naomi and her younger brother Owen live with their great-grandmother "Gram" in a trailer park in Lemon Tree, California. The children's father, Santiago, is Mexican; their mother, Terri Lynn, is American. Neither parent has custody or has seen the children in years.

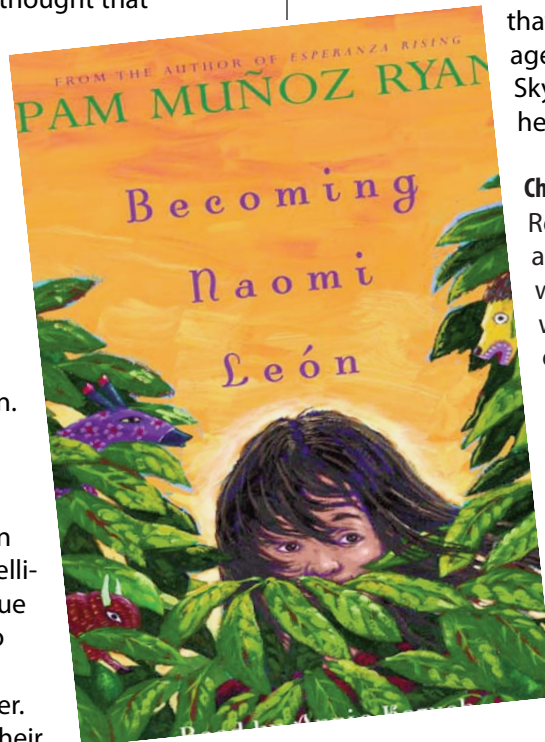
Naomi is in the fifth grade; Owen, in the second grade. Owen is very intelligent but physically handicapped due to birth defects: his head is tilted to one side (resulting in a raspy voice) and one leg is shorter than the other. Fabiola and Bernardo Morales are their neighbors and closest friends. Gram and Fabiola had worked as seamstresses for 35 years in a department store and still sew clothing and do alterations for selected customers. Gram makes most of the children's clothing. An unpopular fifth grader, Naomi spends her free time in the school library with the other outcasts and the kind librarian, Mr. Marble.

Naomi recalls how she shook and refused to talk when she and Owen first came to live with Gram. To help her recover from the trauma of her early childhood, Bernardo had suggested that Naomi carve objects from soap. She enjoys carving very much and has shown unusual talent at it.

Chapter 2: A Skulk of Foxes

After being gone for seven years, Terri Lynn shows up

one day. Always wild and irresponsible, Terri Lynn is also an alcoholic and mentally ill. Terri Lynn announces that she has changed her name to "Skyla" on the advice of her boyfriend Clive. Owen is delighted that their mother has returned, but Naomi—although insecure and thus particularly susceptible to her mother's attention—worries that Skyla will assert her parental rights and take the children away. Gram reminds Skyla that both children were very badly damaged when Skyla deserted them, but Skyla brushes aside Gram's reminders of her past child neglect.



Chapter 3: A Lamentation of Swans

Readers learn that Gram's daughter and son-in-law died in a car crash when Skyla was a teenager. Skyla went to live with her other grandparents, but she defied them so much that they sent her to Gram. Skyla eventually met and married Santiago, and then had Naomi and Owen. The marriage failed and Gram took the children. Fabiola and Bernardo moved next door so they could help with the children, to whom they have always felt close because Santiago came from their hometown in Mexico. Fabiola arrives for a visit and Gram tells

her all about Skyla.

Chapter 4: A Memory of Elephants

They all go to consult with Bernardo. Naomi recalls her one memory of her father, as he rescued the children from a storm.

Chapter 5: A Charm of Hummingbirds

Skyla buys many gifts for Naomi but ignores Owen because of his handicaps. Skyla French braids Naomi's hair, to the child's delight.

Chapter 6: A School of Fish

The next day in school, Naomi's teacher Ms. Morimoto compliments her on her hair. A new student, Blanca Paloma, arrives, and she and Naomi become friends. Like Naomi, Blanca's parents are divorced. Unlike Naomi,

Blanca is outspoken, comfortable with people, and of Mexican heritage on both sides of her family.

Chapter 7: An Unkindness of Ravens

Skyla buys Naomi more gifts and announces that she will attend the teacher conferences. The next day in school, some boys pick on Owen, calling him a “retard.” Skyla does not show up for the conferences, leaving the children waiting for hours until the principal calls Gram. Naomi learns about her mother’s alcohol abuse and mental illness.

Chapter 8: A Burden of Mules

Gram takes the children for a treat to Spray ‘n Play, and tells them about the day of the storm, when Skyla left them alone in a motel room and Santiago rescued them. After, he was stranded for a week, and Skyla took the children and refused him any further contact with them. Nonetheless, Santiago has been sending money for their support for the entire seven years. Later, Skyla arrives with a new bicycle for Owen, which he had wanted very much. The gift is from Skyla’s boyfriend Clive.

Chapter 9: A Shiver of Sharks

The family celebrates Thanksgiving with their friends and neighbors. Clive comes as well, and we see that he is vicious and creepy. He washes his hands with the soap carving Naomi has made. Skyla makes it plain she intends to take only Naomi with her, but Clive thinks he could use Owen’s deformities to make money gambling. Clive has a daughter named Sapphire whom he wants Naomi to baby-sit.

Chapter 10: A Schizophrenia of Hawks

Skyla takes Owen for his hospital check-up, but gets drunk and does not interact well with the doctors. She makes it plain that she does not want any part of her son because of his deformities, but she does intend to take Naomi with her to live. Skyla threatens Naomi that she and Clive will harm Gram if Naomi does not do what they want.

Chapter 11: A Flight of Swallows

Naomi and Owen tell Gram that Skyla threatened them and her. Gram confronts Skyla, but Skyla is defiant, claiming that the court will give her custody because she is the birth parent. The children wake up the next day to discover the trailer is moving: Gram is taking them across the border to Oaxaca to search for Santiago, as she is determined that Skyla will not get custody. Bernardo and Fabiola have come along,

Bernardo pulling the trailer with his truck.

PART II: A PASSEL OF TODAYS

Naomi hopes that she can find her father.

Chapter 12: A Drey of Squirrels

After four days of travel, they arrive at Oaxaca. They park the trailer at the house of Fabiola’s sister, Flora, and Flora’s husband, Pedro. They are greeted warmly. Graciela, Flora’s and Pedro’s daughter, has a seven-year-old son named Ruben, who quickly becomes friends with Owen.

Chapter 13: A Sleuth of Bears

The next day, Naomi accompanies the women to the market, where they ask the cheese seller about Santiago, as she is married to a León, but she has no information about Santiago. That night, Bernardo’s cousin Beni comes for dinner so the men can decide what scene to carve from radishes for the upcoming Festival. Longing to find Santiago, Naomi has Ruben call all the Leóns in the telephone book, pages of names.

Chapter 14: A Leap of Leopards

The next day the adults discover what Naomi has done and the large phone bills she has incurred. Gram works out a repayment plan. The family visits great-aunt Teresa in an attempt to get news of Santiago. Teresa shares a picture of Santiago as a child, and his resemblance to Naomi is striking. She explains that Santiago carves figures and she paints them for him. The family believes that Santiago will be in town within a few days for the Festival, as he has never missed the Festival before.

Chapter 15: A Piteousness of Doves

The family celebrates Las Posadas, the night before Christmas, by parading through town and singing. They have a fiesta, too, and much merriment. Later that night, seeing Naomi’s carving and display on the table, Beni gets the idea for the family’s display at the Festival.

Chapter 16: A Team of Horses

They decide to carve all sorts of animals climbing up a branch, all made of radishes. They carve the huge radishes all day, giving the honor of carving the lion to Naomi. The next day, they set up the display and everyone visits all the other displays. Tourists mob the streets as well, marveling at the beautiful carvings.

Chapter 17: An Exaltation of Starlings

The family—Bernardo Morales, Beni Morales, and Pedro Martinez—win second place, to their utter delight. As is

tradition, they give away all the radish carvings, reserving the lion for Naomi. Santiago shows up, but runs away when he sees Gram and the kids. Naomi chases him but she cannot catch him. Back home, Naomi senses something odd.

Chapter 18: A Pride of Lions

Sure enough, Santiago is in the yard. He embraces the children warmly, explaining that he ran away because he needed time to compose himself at the shock of seeing them after seven years. Santiago explains how he supports himself by carving small figures and fishing. Naomi gives Santiago the lion that she carved. He is extremely impressed by her skill and touched by her gesture.

Chapter 19: A Cry of Hounds

The children awaken on Christmas morning to discover that Santiago has festooned the jacaranda tree with his carved animals. As they carve together, Naomi learns that her talent for soap carving is inherited from her father. Santiago has decided to stay in Mexico, but the children will return to San Diego with Gram. They leave, showered with hugs, kisses, and tears.

Chapter 20: A Crash of Hippopotami

The day before school starts, the children and Gram appear in court for the custody hearing. The mediator has suggested that Skyla be given full custody, but when Naomi tells the judge the truth about Skyla’s alcohol abuse, cruelty, and desire to leave Owen behind, the judge rules in Gram’s favor.

Chapter 21: A Brood of Chicks

Naomi returns to school and is greeted warmly by Blanca. Mr. Marble is going to display Naomi’s carvings on open school night, to her delight.

Timeline of Modern Mexican-American History

1910 Epic Revolution, led by Emiliano Zapata.
1911 Dictator Porfirio Diaz overthrown. Political unrest continues; Zapata leads a peasant revolt in the south.
1916 U.S. forces cross the border in pursuit of guerrilla leader Francisco “Pancho” Villa.
1917 U.S. forces withdraw, having failed to kill Villa. A new constitution is adopted
1920 Carranza is murdered; civil war follows.
1929 National Revolutionary Party is formed.
1934 President Lazaro Cardenas begins oil nationalization, land reform, and indus

trial expansion.
1937 The CIO organizes shed workers in Salinas, California. Auto worker strikes lead to a contract at General Motors in Detroit.
1942 The Bracero program begins, authorizing the importation of Mexican workers for agricultural and railroad work.
1946 The National Revolutionary Party is renamed the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI.
1960s The government suppresses peasant and labor unrest.
1965 Delano grape strike begins. The mostly Mexican NFWA joins mostly Filipino Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC).
1966 Farm workers walk 300 miles from Delano to Sacramento in a pilgrimage that ends on Easter Sunday. NFWA and AWOC merge to become the United Farmworkers Organizing Committee (UFWOC).
1967 Striking farm workers and supporters begin a national boycott of California table grapes.
1968 Police fire on student demonstrators in Tlatelolco, Mexico City. Hundreds of protesters are killed or wounded.
1970 UFWOC signs three-year contracts with the Delano growers, ending the grape strike and boycott.
1973 Growers sign with the Teamsters Union. Major UFW strikes spread throughout California, with thousands arrested and two dead.
1975 California passes the Agricultural Labor Relations Act (ALRA), the first law recognizing the rights of farm workers to organize and bargain collectively.
1993 Parliament ratifies the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the U.S. and Canada.
1994 Government troops suppress guerrilla rebellion in Chiapas. The rebels oppose NAFTA and want greater recognition for Indian rights. The government recognizes the Zapatista National Liberation Front (EZLN).
 The Mexican stock market plunges; the peso loses a third of its value.
1996 Under President Clinton’s direction, U.S. Border Patrols are bolstered, sensors

are installed, and 40 miles of 14-foot fence are built to deter the flow of illegal immigrants.



- 1997** PRI suffers heavy losses in elections and loses its overall majority in the lower house of parliament for the first time since 1929.
- 1998** The governor of Chiapas resigns. Peace talks with the rebels are reactivated, but break down at the end of the year.
- 2000** Vicente Fox wins presidential elections, the first opposition candidate ever to do so.
- 2001** Zapatista guerrillas march from Chiapas to Mexico City to highlight their demands. President Fox appoints a prosecutor to investigate the disappearance of left-wing activists during the 1970s and 1980s.
- 2002** Roberto Madrazo wins leadership of the PRI. Many secret security files are released, shedding light on the torture and killing by security forces of hundreds of political activists in the 1960s and 1970s.
- 2004** An investigator rules that the 1971 shooting of student protesters by government forces was genocide; judge refuses to order the arrest of former President Luis Echeverría on charges that he ordered the attack.
- 2005** Six prison officers are murdered and top-security jails are put on high alert amid escalating tension between the authorities and drug gangs.
- 2006** A special prosecutor is created to tackle violent crime against women, in response to U.N. criticism over the unsolved murders of more than 300 women over twelve years in the border city of Ciudad Juárez.

Author Sketch

Pam Muñoz Ryan, born and raised in California's San Joaquin Valley, considers herself truly American because her cultural background is an ethnic smorgasbord: she is Spanish, Mexican, Basque, and Italian.

During many long, hot valley summers, Ryan spent most of her time riding her bike to the library. It became her favorite hangout because her family didn't have a swimming pool and the library was air-conditioned. That's how she came to love reading and books. After college, Ryan knew that she wanted to work in a profession that had something to do with books, and she thought that would be teaching. Ryan earned bachelor's and master's degrees from San Diego State University and became a teacher and an administrator; then, at the encouragement of a friend who thought she could write, she began her first book.

Today, she is a full-time writer, having published books for adults, picture books for young children, and novels for older students. Ryan explains her writing process this way: "When I actually start writing, I sit at my computer and I just type a first draft. My first draft isn't very well written, but it gives me a jumping off place. By the time one of my stories becomes a book, I have usually rewritten it somewhere between 20-30 times."

Ryan lives north of San Diego, California, with her husband and four children.

Critic's Corner

Becoming Naomi León was greeted with positive reviews. For instance, writing in *Booklist*, veteran book critic Hazel Rochman said: "In true mythic tradition, Ryan, the author of the award-winning *Esperanza Rising* (2000), makes Naomi's search for her dad a search for identity, and both are exciting. Mom is demonized, but the other characters are more complex, and the quest is heartbreaking. The dense factual detail about the Festival sometimes slows the story, but it's an effective tool for dramatizing Naomi's discovery of her Mexican roots and the artist inside herself"

Other Books by Pam Muñoz Ryan

- Amelia and Eleanor Go for a Ride*, 1999
- Armadillos Sleep in Dugouts: And Other Places Animals Live*, 1997
- A Box of Friends*, 2002
- California Here We Come!*, 1997
- The Crayon Counting Book*, 1996 (With Jerry Pallotta)
- Doug Counts Down*, 1998
- Doug's Treasure Hunt*, 1999
- Doug Chronicles: Funnie Family Vacation, Enchiladas, Mice, and Beans*, 2001
- Esperanza Rising*, 2000

The Flag We Love, 1996
Funnie Family Vacation, 1999
Hello Ocean, 2001
How Do You Raise a Raisin?, 2002
Mice and Beans, 2001
Mud is Cake, 2002
Nacho and Lolita, 2005
One Hundred Is a Family, 1994
Paint the Wind, 2007
A Pinky Is a Baby Mouse: And Other Baby Animal Names, 1997
Riding Freedom, 1998
There was No Snow on Christmas Eve, 2005
When Marian Sang: The True Recital of Marian Anderson, 2002
Yo, Naomi León, 2005

Bibliography

Booklist, November 1, 1994, Annie Ayres, review of *One Hundred Is a Family*, p. 509; January 1, 1996, Carolyn Phelan, review of *The Flag We Love*, p. 841; January 1, 1998, Hazel Rochman, review of *Riding Freedom*, pp. 814-815; October 15, 1999, Ilene Cooper, review of *Amelia and Eleanor Go for a Ride*, p. 447; December 1, 2000, Gillian Engberg, review of *Esperanza Rising*, p. 708; September 15, 2001, Kelly Milner Halls, review of *Mice and Beans*, p. 233; November 1, 2001, p. 493; February 15, 2002, p. 1022.
Childhood Education, spring, 2002, pp. 173-174.
Horn Book, January-February, 2001, review of *Esperanza Rising*, p. 96; November-December, 2001, pp. 778-779.
Instructor, October, 2001, p. 318.
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, December, 2001, pp. 334-335.
Kirkus Reviews, August 1, 2001, review of *Mice and Beans*, p. 1131.
New York Times Book Review, January 1, 1995, p. 15.
Publishers Weekly, November 7, 1994, review of *One Hundred Is a Family*, p. 78; February 5, 1996, review of *The Flag We Love*, p. 88; August 26, 1996, review of *The Crayon Counting Book*, p. 96; February 2, 1998, review of *Riding Freedom*, p. 91; September 20, 1999, p. 90; September 27, 1999, review of *Amelia and Eleanor Go for a Ride*, p. 105; October 9, 2000, review of *Esperanza Rising*, p. 88; January 8, 2001, review of *Hello, Ocean*, p. 65; February 18, 2002, review of *Mud Is Cake*, p. 94.
Reading Today, October, 2000, Lynne T. Burke, review of *Esperanza Rising*, p. 32.
School Library Journal, October, 2000, Francisca Goldsmith, review of *Esperanza Rising*, p. 171; May, 2001, Sally R. Dow, review of *Hello, Ocean*, p. 133; October,

2001, Mary Elam, review of *Mice and Beans*, p. 130.

General Objectives

1. To probe the importance of family
2. To assess each character's personality
3. To trace the novel's plot, its sequence of events
4. To appreciate the novel's suspense
5. To assess the importance of love and constancy in parenting
6. To find examples of cruelty
7. To find examples of compassion
8. To understand the novel's title
9. To recognize the significance of setting
10. To describe the author's theme or message

Specific Objectives

1. To understand how Naomi and Owen came to be living with their great-grandmother
2. To analyze how it often "takes a village to raise a family" by discussing why Gram chose to live next door to Fabiola and Bernardo
3. To appreciate Gram's loving parenting, especially when contrasted to Skyla's neglect
4. To analyze why Skyla wants Naomi back now after Skyla abandoned her seven years ago
5. To explore the relationship between Naomi and Skyla
6. To understand why Santiago abandoned his children
7. To understand the effects of substance abuse on the individual and the family
8. To enjoy the colorful descriptions of the two different settings
9. To appreciate Naomi's talent as a carver and what it means to her
10. To debate the issue of child custody, especially when blended families are involved

Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Pam Muñoz Ryan's style, present the following terms and applications to the novel:

Suspense: the feeling of tension or anticipation an author creates in a work. Authors create suspense by unexpected plot twists. This keeps readers interested in the story and makes them want to read on to find out what will happen. *Becoming Naomi León* is rich in suspense, as Skyla returns to her children after seven years and readers want to find out if Skyla will succeed in getting Naomi to come with her and Clive to live in Las Vegas. Further, Ryan creates suspense by including the children's quest for Santiago. If they do find him, will he

want to take custody of his children? These twists and turns make the story exciting and fun to read.

First-person narrator: the point of view in which the narrator is one of the characters in the story. The narrator explains the events through his or her own eyes, using the pronouns *I* and *me*. *Becoming Naomi León* is narrated through the first-person, through Naomi's eyes. This point of view gives the story an immediacy and freshness, as readers see events unfold through Naomi's eyes.

Description: a word picture of what something or someone is like. Description is made up of sensory details that help readers form pictures in their minds. Ryan uses a great deal of description to make her characters and setting come to life. For instance, readers can visualize Gram through this description: "Dripping wet, Gram didn't weigh a hundred pounds, and even wearing her running shoes she didn't reach five feet tall. Now, sitting down with her skinny neck drooping over the table, she looked like a swan peering into a lake." (page 26)

The Importance of Setting

Becoming Naomi León has two primary settings: Lemon Tree, California, located in San Diego; and Oaxaca, Mexico. Lemon Tree is fictional, but Oaxaca is real. Both settings are integral to the story because they mirror the two halves of Naomi's heritage: her Anglo heritage (California) and her Latino heritage (Mexico). The former came from her mother; the latter, from her father.

The Mexican setting is especially interesting because of the detail that Ryan uses to help readers visualize the spectacle of Radish Night (*La Noche de Rábanos*), a real festival. Just as it is described in the novel, the Festival is held on December 23rd in the town square and has been a focal point of Christmas celebrations there for more than a century. The Festival does indeed blend folk art and agriculture. The giant radishes used are not to be eaten, as they are heavily treated with chemicals.

Any fictional setting includes the time as well as the place, and it is highly symbolic that Ryan set the reunion between Santiago and his children during Christmas. Of course, the reunion is the best gift that any of the participants could have received, and it marks the birth of a new chapter in the family's relationship.

Cross-Curricular Sources

Nonfiction

Alexandra Bandon, *Mexican Americans*

Julie Catalano, *The Mexican Americans*
Carlos M Fernandez-Shaw, *The Hispanic Presence in North America From 1492 to Today*
John Fisher, *The Rough Guide to Mexico*
Carl Franz, *The People's Guide to Mexico*
Susan Garver and Paula McGuire, *Coming to North America: From Mexico, Cuba, and Puerto Rico*
Gilbert Joseph, *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics*
Miles Harvey, *Look What Came from Mexico*
Nicolas Kanellos, *The Hispanic-American Almanac: A Reference Work on Hispanics in the United States.*
Mary D. Lankerford, *Quinceañera: A Latina's Journey to Womanhood*
Paula Lannert, *Mexican Americans*
Anna Strieffert, *Mexico*

Fiction

Rudolfo A. Anaya, *Tortuga*
Joan Bauer, *Hope Was Here*
James Berry, *The Future-Telling Lady and Other Stories*
Lori M. Carlson and Cynthia L. Ventura, *When Angels Glide at Dawn: New Stories from Latin America*
Ana Castillo, *So Far From God*
Denise Chavez, *The Flying Tortilla Man*
Sandra Cisneros, *Caramelo*
Kate Dicamillo, *Because of Winn-Dixie*
Ernesto Galarza, *Barrio Boy*
Lorraine Lopez, *Soy la Avon Lady and Other Stories*
Patricia Reilly Giff, *Pictures of Hollis Wood*
Carl Hiaasen, *Hoot*
Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, *Fair Gentlemen of Belken County*
E. L. Konigsburg, *Silent to the Bone*
Kevin McColley, *The Walls of Pedro Garcia*
Pat Mora, *Agua Santa: Holy Water*
Tomas Rivera, *and the earth did not devour him*
Charles Tatum, *Mexican American Literature*
Jerry Spinelli, *Loser*
Sergio Troncoso, *The Last Tortillia and Other Stories*
Beatriz Vida, *A Library for Juana*
Helena Maria Viramontes, *The Moths and Other Stories*
Jacqueline Woodson, *If You Come Softly*
Richard Yañez, *El Paso del Norte: Stories on the Border*

Videos/Films

Bandido, 1956
Big Night, 1996
Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands, 1978
Erendira, 1983
Far and Away, 1992
Juarez, 1939

The Left-Handed Gun, 1958
The Legends of the Fall, 1994
The Mask of Zorro, 1998
Old Gringo, 1989
One True Thing, 1998
Perdita Durango, 1997
Viva Villa!, 1934
Viva Zapata!, 1952

AudioBooks

Becoming Naomi León
Esperanza Rising
When Marian Sang

Internet

Pam Munoz Ryan: Children's Author
< <http://pammunozryan.com> >
"Meet Pam Munoz Ryan." *Scholastic Authors Online*,
<<http://teacher.scholastic.com>>

Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Becoming Naomi León* include these aspects:

Themes

- courage
- devotion
- discovering your true talents
- family
- finding your heritage
- friendship
- identify
- justice
- love
- strength

Motifs

- being optimistic
- coping with bullying
- dealing with substance abuse
- experiencing cultural dislocation
- exploring a completely new way of life
- finding solace and friendship in books and the library
- having artistic abilities
- living with a disability
- overcoming abandonment, anxiety, and disappointment
- understanding the affects of divorce

Meaning Study

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in the book. Explain the meaning of each. Page numbers indicate the context from which the item is taken.

1. "I always thought that the biggest trial in my life was my name, Naomi Guadalupe Zamora Outlaw, but little did I know that it was the least of my problems, or that someday I would live up to it." (p. 1)
(This is the first line in the novel. Thus, it suggests from the start the importance of names in the novel because they represent identity. Naomi's name shows her blended heritage: Anglo and Mexican. It also hints that she stands outside society—the "Outlaw"—and indeed, she is not accepted by many of her classmates because of her poverty. Later we see that Naomi's mother, Terri Lynn, has changed her name to Skyla, showing that she is not comfortable with who she is and where she came from. The name change also suggests her weak will, as she allows her boyfriend to rename her.)
2. "I imagine what's inside and take away what I don't need," I said, not looking up. (p. 14)
(In this scene, Naomi describes how she knows what to carve. Her answer is a metaphor for the process whereby she becomes an adult: she focuses on her essence, what is important, and disregards the distracting elements of her life. Naomi learns that she cannot remake her mother into the dream mother she wants, the idealized PTA mother or the idealized career woman mother. To mature, Naomi must step back from her mother as well as the other upsetting elements of her life and concentrate on what matters to her, including her Gram, her brother, and her artistic talent. This metaphor of carving fits the process that any artist follows, of course. Perhaps the author is using it as metaphor for her own life and art as well.)
3. Owen put his head back down over his chicken. (p. 62)
(In this wrenching scene, Skyla ignores Owen because he is not physically perfect. We feel the little boy's pain and realize that Skyla is not a fit parent. This scene also foreshadows the end, where Skyla rejects Owen in the courtroom during the custody hearing.)
4. He had taken my bluebird of happiness from the Thanksgiving table and used it to wash the turkey grease from his hands. (p.100)
(Here, Clive has washed his hands with the soap carving that Naomi made. As he destroys the bird in his huge hands, so he will crush her happiness if she

goes to live with him, his daughter, and Skyla.)

5. "As if I don't have enough problems! This is ... is ... embarrassing!" (p. 114)
(The doctors tell Skyla that Owen is fine medically but he will be what they call an FLK, a "funny looking kid." Rather than feeling relief that her son has made a remarkable recovery from his disabilities, or sorrow for all the pain he has undergone on the path to good health, Skyla focuses completely on herself. We see how completely selfish she is, which shows again that she is unfit to be a mother, a role that calls for selflessness.)
6. Even I could see it was true. Same hair, same eyes, same skin, same expression. I couldn't stop smiling. (p. 175)
(Naomi is delighted to discover that she very closely resembles her father. Ironically, her mother had claimed that she and Naomi are "two peas in a pod." Nothing could be further from the truth: not only do they not look alike at all, but they also have completely different personalities. Skyla is selfish and grasping; Naomi is selfless and generous.)
7. "No, Naomi. You see, I am looking for my own life right here, with Ruben." (p. 181)
(Naomi had asked Graciela if she had ever wanted to leave her child, as Skyla had done, to "look for her life." Graciela explains that her child is her life. While this is a highly idealized view of motherhood, suggesting that mothers have no life aside from their children, it does serve to contrast the immature Skyla with the mature Graciela. They are the same chronological age, but vastly different in their level of maturity.)
8. "Mis niños, mis niños," he said, burying his face in our hair. (p. 213)
(This scene shows that Santiago loves his children deeply. It also suggests that families get torn apart for many reasons, and the reasons and results are often out of our control.)
9. I handed it to Santiago. "For you." (p. 216)
(In this emotional scene, Naomi gives the lion she has carved from a radish to her father. He was sad that for the first time ever a León did not carve in the contest, but she tells him that she carved the lion herself so that a León did indeed participate in the contest. This scene affirms their shared artistic talent and their heritage.)
10. "...Before you were a mouse, but now you have the countenance of a lion." (p. 243)
(Blanca has noticed the change in Naomi after Naomi returns from Mexico. Now, Naomi is no longer meek and frightened, an easy target for the school bullies. Instead, she has gained an appreciable

measure of confidence. This comes from finding her heritage, knowing her father loves her, and standing up for herself and her brother in court.)

Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

1. With whom do Owen and Naomi live? Why do they have these living arrangements?
(They live with their great-grandmother Mary ("Gram") because their mother is off "finding her life" and their father lives in Mexico. Their maternal grandparents died in a car crash.)
2. Why does Skyla really return to Gram's?
(She needs a place to stay while her new boyfriend Clive is training to be a tattoo artist. Initially, she has no intention of taking either child to live with her.)
3. In what ways is Owen different from other children?
(First, Owen is handicapped as the result of birth defects. His head tilts to one side, his voice is raspy, and one leg is shorter than the other. Second, he wears long strips of tape on his shirt. It calms and soothes him, as a teddy bear soothes other children.)
4. How would you describe Gram's parenting?
(She is an excellent parent. She takes very good care of the children and loves them very much. She is warm, kind, and tolerant, but firm when needed.)
5. Why does Gram take the children to Mexico?
(She wants to find their father, Santiago, and prevent their mother, Skyla, from getting custody.)

Questions 6-8 (Interpretative Level)

6. Why did Skyla give up custody of her children?
(Possible responses: She was too young and immature to be a parent; she could not cope with Owen's handicaps; she is selfish and self-centered.)
7. Why are Naomi and Owen so happy to see Skyla? Why do they want to find Santiago so badly?
(The author suggests that children want to be loved by their parents, even when the parents are weak, abusive, or unfit to be parents.)
8. How does Naomi change as a result of her experiences?
(She becomes self-confident and proud of her talents and accomplishments. She is far happier.)

Questions 9 and 10 (Critical Level)

9. Did you think that Skyla is portrayed as too brutal? Is she demonized? Why or why not?
(Students are likely to say no because Skyla physically abuses Naomi, striking her hard across the face,

threatens to harm Gram, and rejects Owen outright. She had abandoned her children in a motel, echoed when she promises to come to the parent-teacher conferences and then fails to show up. Once again, she abandons the children.)

10. What does the title mean?

(The title refers to Naomi's maturity, as she becomes the person she will be as an adult as a result of her experiences over the time described in the book.)

Questions 11-12 (Creative Level)

11. Describe what you think Naomi's life will be like 10 years in the future, when she is about 21 years old.
12. Working with some classmates, act out the scene in which Naomi and Owen are reunited with their father.

Across the Curriculum

Art/Music

1. Naomi and her father make beautiful carvings. Create your own soap carving, just as Naomi does. Display your carving with others from the class to create a Festival.
2. Draw the flag of Mexico. How is it similar and different from the flag of the United States? Explain in a speech or essay.
3. Owen plays with a piñata during the Festival. Make a piñata of your own and use it as the basis for a party.
4. Create a three-dimensional diorama of the family's house in Mexico. Label each part of the display with an appropriate quote from the novel.
5. Write a song about the events in this novel. Your song can be any form you wish, such as a ballad or rap song.
6. Using scenes from the novel, create a mural that shows its main events.

Language Arts

1. Pam Muñoz Ryan dedicates this book to several different people. Imagine that you wrote a book. Write a dedication for the book in which you honor one or more special people in your life.
2. Create a glossary of commonly-used Spanish words. Include at least 25 words and their English translations.
3. As Naomi does, list at least ten things that make you feel grateful.
4. Explain the symbolism of Clive's tattoo, the tape that Owen wears, and lions, as used in the novel.
5. In an essay, compare and contrast Skyla and Graciela to show how they are the same and different from

each other.

Geography and History

1. Report on Mexico. Include information about the country's history, geography, climate, population, and main exports, for instance.
2. Create a web page showing the history of Thanksgiving. Include pictures as well as text.
3. Owen and Naomi must go to court to settle the custody dispute. Prepare a bulletin board display about the American court system. Explain the different levels of courts and what types of cases are tried in each one.
4. Skyla wants to take Naomi to Las Vegas. Explain the symbolism of Las Vegas, using information you have researched about it. Why did the author chose Las Vegas as their destination rather than another town?

Science

1. Santiago and many other artists in Oaxaca do indeed carve radishes. Make a chart showing at least five other vegetables or fruits that can be carved because of their texture.
2. Report on the avocado, including its history in the US, its growth cycle, and its nutritional value.
3. Make some tapioca, as Fabiola does.
4. Owen is seen by many different doctors, including pediatricians. Make a glossary of different doctors, briefly explaining what conditions are treated by the doctors in each medical specialty.

Math

1. On a map of the United States, show where San Diego and Mexico are located. Then calculate the distance between them.
2. Find the percentage of first marriages that end in divorce now and ten years ago. Have the numbers gone up or down in the past decade?
3. Naomi, her brother Owen, and their great-grandmother live in a trailer. Make a chart showing at least five different trailers and their prices. What features do the most expensive ones have? How much do you think Gram's trailer cost, based on its description in the novel?
4. The judge refers to Gram's age. How long do men and women live, on average, in the US today? Show the results on a chart or graph. Based on these numbers, how old will Owen and Naomi be when Gram dies?

Drama

1. Working with your classmates, debate whether or not it's better for divorced parents to share custody of their children or to have one parent be the primary caretaker. Include the advantages and disadvantages of each custody arrangement.
2. In a speech, explain what life lessons Naomi and Owen learn from their Gram.
3. Choose one chapter in the novel and present it as a Reader's Theatre.
4. Improvise a scene in which you and a group of classmates show what Naomi's life would have been like if she had gone to live with Skyla and Clive in Las Vegas.
5. Create some skits to show ways that people make new friends when they move to a new place, as Owen and Naomi do.
6. Imagine that you could interview Santiago about his life. Write ten questions that you would ask him. Then work with a partner to enact the interview. Answer the questions as you think Santiago would, based on what you learned about him from this novel.

Alternate Assessment

1. Design a poster for a movie version of *Becoming Naomi León*.
2. Write a critical review of the novel for publication in the school newspaper.
3. In a speech, describe how you would "plant sunshine in your brain," as Gram advises Naomi to do.
4. Create word or number games to play on long trips.

Vocabulary Test

Write at least one synonym and one antonym for each word from *Becoming Naomi León*. Try to write as many synonyms and antonyms for each word as you can.

<u>Word</u>	<u>Synonym</u>	<u>Antonym</u>
1. iota	_____	_____
2. dapper	_____	_____
3. lopsided	_____	_____
4. unruly	_____	_____
5. queasy	_____	_____
6. flimsy	_____	_____
7. abomination	_____	_____
8. nimble	_____	_____
9. ecstatic	_____	_____
10. haven	_____	_____

Comprehension Test A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

Match each description with a name or word from the list. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left.

- | | |
|-----------------|---------------|
| A. Skyla | F. Gram |
| B. Clive | G. Naomi |
| C. Sapphire | H. Mr. Marble |
| D. Ms. Morimoto | I. Santiago |
| E. Owen | J. Teresa |

- _____ 1. Clive's daughter; her real name is Elizabeth
- _____ 2. the kindly school librarian
- _____ 3. Skyla's boyfriend
- _____ 4. the seamstress Mary
- _____ 5. Naomi's fifth-grade teacher
- _____ 6. Terri Lynn, an alcoholic who has been in rehab centers
- _____ 7. Naomi and Owen's father
- _____ 8. the bright but crippled little boy
- _____ 9. the novel's narrator, a skilled carver
- _____ 10. Naomi's great aunt

Part II: Sentence Completion (20 points)

Circle the term that best completes each of the following statements.

- 1. The children live in a trailer that Gram has nicknamed (**Big Guy, Baby Beluga**).
- 2. After being gone for (**two, seven**) years, Naomi's mother shows up one day.
- 3. Gram takes the children for a treat to (**Spray 'n Play, the bowling alley**) and tells them about their parents.
- 4. Clive buys a new (**skateboard, bicycle**) for Owen, which Owen had wanted very much
- 5. Clive has a tattoo of a (**shark, heart**) on his arm.
- 6. Gram takes the children to (**New York City, Mexico**).
- 7. Santiago (**makes clay statues, carves figures**), which Teresa paints for him.
- 8. The family celebrates Las Posadas, the night before (**Easter, Christmas**), by parading through town and singing.
- 9. The family wins (**first, second**) prize at the Festival.
- 10. Naomi learns that the word "León" means (**lonely, lion**).

Part III: Motivation (20 points)

Complete each phrase with a reason or justification.

- 1. The author titles each chapter with the name of a group of animals to
- 2. Naomi started carving animals from soap to
- 3. Fabiola and Bernardo moved next door to Gram because
- 4. Skyla buys many gifts for Naomi but ignores Owen because
- 5. Clive is glad that Owen has physical deformities because he wants to
- 6. Gram takes the children across the border to Oaxaca to
- 7. Naomi has Ruben call all the Leóns in the telephone book because
- 8. The family goes to see Teresa in an attempt to
- 9. The family believes that Santiago will be in town within a few days for the Festival, because
- 10. Santiago ran away from the children at the Festival because

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

- 1. Which character in the book did you admire the most? Why?
- 2. Naomi Soledad León Outlaw has a lot to contend with, starting with her name. Her homemade clothes, her difficulty

speaking up, and her status at school as “nobody special” are just the tip of the iceberg. Which of Naomi’s problems do you think are most serious? Consider additional problems from the novel as well as the handful listed here. Support your conclusions with details from the book and where applicable, your own life as well.

3. Compare and contrast Skyla and Graciela. How are they similar and different?
4. Naomi’s last name means “lion.” Explain how she is like a lion.

Comprehension Test B

Part I: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either **T** for true or **F** if a part is false.

- ___ 1. Always wild and irresponsible, Skyla is also an alcoholic and mentally ill.
- ___ 2. Naomi has one memory of her mother, when she rescued the children from a storm after their father had abandoned them in a motel.
- ___ 3. Like Naomi, Blanca's parents are divorced. Unlike Naomi, Blanca is outspoken and comfortable with people.
- ___ 4. Skyla does not show up for the teacher conferences, leaving the children waiting for hours until the principal calls Gram.
- ___ 5. Santiago never sends support money for the children; indeed, he has severed all contact with them.
- ___ 6. At Thanksgiving, Clive washes his hands with the soap carving Naomi has made.
- ___ 7. Skyla threatens Naomi that she will harm Owen if Naomi does not do what she wants.
- ___ 8. Seeing Naomi's carving and display on the table, Beni gets the idea for the family's display at the Festival.
- ___ 9. Naomi gives Santiago the lion that she carved. He rejects it because of its poor quality.
- ___ 10. The mediator has suggested that Skyla be given full custody of her children, but when Naomi tells the judge the truth about Skyla's alcohol abuse, cruelty, and desire to leave Owen behind, the judge rules in Gram's favor.

Part II: Identification (20 points)

Briefly describe each person, place, or thing and explain why it is important in the story.

- 1. Baby Beluga

- 2. tape

- 3. Clive's tattoo

- 4. radishes

- 5. lions

Part III: Matching (20 points)

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left. Use each name only once.

- | | |
|---|--------------------|
| ___ 1. Fabiola's husband | A. Gram |
| ___ 2. a seamstress who is Gram's best friend | B. Naomi |
| ___ 3. Naomi's and Owen's guardian | C. Owen |
| ___ 4. the kindly school librarian | D. Fabiola Morales |
| ___ 5. Skyla | E. Bernardo |
| ___ 6. Naomi's brother | F. Terri Lynn |
| ___ 7. Naomi's closest friend in school | G. Santiago |
| ___ 8. the fifth grade teacher | H. Ms. Morimoto |
| ___ 9. the girl who carves the lion | I. Blanca Paloma |
| ___ 10. Owen and Naomi's father | J. Mr. Marble |

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

1. What is the author's message about family in this novel?
2. Naomi's last name means "lion." Explain how she is and is not like a lion.
3. Create the back story, explaining how Skyla and Santiago fell in love and how their marriage disintegrated. Use details from the novel in your narrative.
4. Write a review of *Becoming Naomi León* for the school newspaper, explaining why you would or would not recommend it for other people your age.

Answer Key

VOCABULARY TEST

Word	Synonym	Antonym
1. iota	jot, scrap, speck	lot, abundance, pile, heap
2. dapper	elegant, well-dressed, spruce, debonair	scruffy, grubby, messy
3. lopsided	crooked	symmetrical, even
4. unruly	rowdy, disorderly, wild, disobedient	obedient, well-behaved, polite
5. queasy	nauseous	well
6. flimsy	delicate, insubstantial	sturdy
7. abomination	outrage, disgrace	love, adore, worship
8. nimble	lively, quick, agile	awkward
9. ecstatic	overjoyed, delighted, thrilled	miserable, depressed, unhappy
10. haven	shelter, retreat, sanctuary	dangerous place

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. A |
| 2. H | 7. I |
| 3. B | 8. E |
| 4. F | 9. G |
| 5. D | 10. J |

Part II: Sentence Completion (20 points)

- | | |
|------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Baby Beluga | 6. Mexico |
| 2. seven | 7. carves figures |
| 3. Spray 'n Play | 8. Christmas |
| 4. bicycle | 9. second |
| 5. shark | 10. lion |

Part III: Motivation (20 points)

- carry out the motif of animal groups and families, which climaxes in the prize-winning radish carving display the family prepares.
- help her recover from the trauma of her early childhood.
- they wanted to help with the children, to whom they had always felt close because Santiago came from their hometown in Mexico.
- of his handicaps.
- use Owen's deformities to make money gambling.
- search for the children's father, as she is determined that Skyla will not get custody.
- she wants to find her father, Santiago León.
- get news of Santiago's whereabouts.
- he has never missed the Festival before.
- he needed time to compose himself at the shock of seeing them after seven years.

Part IV. Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: True/False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. T |
| 2. F | 7. F |
| 3. T | 8. T |
| 4. T | 9. F |
| 5. F | 10. T |

Part II: Identification (20 points)

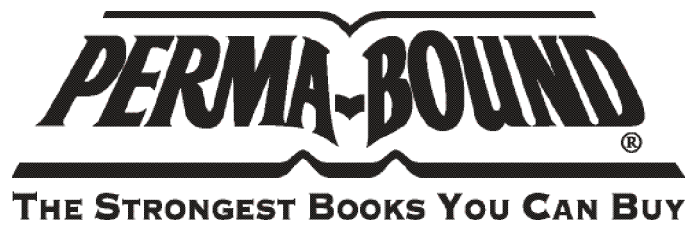
- Baby Beluga is the trailer that is home to Naomi, Owen, and Gram, their great-grandmother. Gram gave the Airstream trailer this name because of its appearance.
- Owen wears strips of tape on his clothing as a security blanket. This appalls Skyla, who tries to remove the tape, but Gram and Naomi understand that this practice is harmless.
- Clive's tattoo shows a shark, "teeth barred and dripping blood." It suggests his predatory nature.
- The artists carve giant radishes at the Festival. The carvings represent art and the family's artist spirit.
- Lions are the symbol of the León family. They represent heroism and bravery.

Part III: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. E | 6. C |
| 2. D | 7. I |
| 3. A | 8. H |
| 4. J | 9. B |
| 5. F | 10. G |

Part IV. Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.



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