

Miss Chihuahua

by **Montserrat Fontes**

Illustration by **Hugh Steffy**

Curriculum developed by **Léna Garcia**

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OVERVIEW

Quick Glance 10 Points for Usage Guide

Student Population	
Age/Grade Level Appropriateness	* Ages 14+ * Grades 9+
Genre/s	Fiction
Length	4,666 words
Content Advisories	A character suffers a medical emergency.
One Sentence Summary	Two children confront the serious consequences of a seemingly innocent act: hiding their baby cousin--the child of beauty pageant winner Miss Chihuahua--in the neighbor's closet.

Lesson Planning	
Topics & Key Themes Overview	Topics * Family honor * Idolization of beauty * Luxury of childhood * Innocence vs. knowledge * Sin vs. redemption * Loss vs. recovery * Ability vs. disability
Topics & Key Themes Overview	Themes * Borderlands * Privilege * Obsession with image * Coping with guilt * Being a caregiver
Historic Events / Time Periods for Study	* WWII: atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (August 6 & 9, 1945) * Post-WWII economic expansion in the United States (the Golden Age of Capitalism) * The Texas-Mexico border in 1947 * Los Angeles in the late 1940s and 1950s

Lesson Planning	
Complementary Classic and Historic Texts	* Poem: “To Live in the Borderlands” by Gloria E. Anzaldúa * Article: “It was Spain’s ‘national fiesta.’ Now bullfighting divides its people” by Duncan Wheeler: http://bit.ly/2fRcJWn (http://bit.ly/2fRcJWn)
Author and Artists Information	<p>Montserrat Fontes is a distinguished contributor to Chicana fiction, an educator, and a Glendale, CA, resident.</p> <p>Hugh Steffy was a photographer who traveled across the U.S. and lived in Ohio, California, Indiana, Illinois, Arkansas, and Arizona.</p>
Key Common Core Standards (found in detail following the curriculum)	CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.E, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.6, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1

Author Biography

Montserrat Fontes is a distinguished writer whose first novel, *First Confession*, has been widely praised as a major contribution to Chicana fiction. Her work is often taught in the CSULA U.S. Ethnic Literature course. Her second novel, *Dreams of the Centaur*, was translated into German and French. Fontes has served the community as an educator and taught at University High School and at Marshall High School. She has received numerous endowments and grants, including honors for two National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminars, a Carnegie Mellon grant, and a National Endowment for the Humanities independent study grant. Fontes has had four book reviews published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and has been a guest speaker for organizations including the California Association of Teachers of English, the Journalism Education Association National Convention, and the University of California, Los Angeles Chancellor’s Conference. She earned her master’s degree at CSULA. Fontes is a Glendale resident.

Artist Biography

Hugh Steffy was a photographer who was born in Ohio and who traveled across the United States documenting landscapes and people. Although he grew up in Ohio, he lived most of his life in Southern California and also lived in Illinois, Arkansas, Indiana, and Arizona.

SYNOPSIS

Two children must face the real-world consequences of a seemingly innocent act: hiding their baby cousin--the child of beauty pageant winner Miss Chihuahua--in the neighbor's closet. This short fiction story by Montserrat Fontes explores boundaries--innocence/knowledge, sin/redemption, loss/recovery, and ability/disability--in a landscape of post-war extravagance along the Texas-Mexico border.

CURRICULUM

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

Topic and Main Ideas

Mini Research Project: Research the concept of family honor. What does it mean to bring honor to one's family, and what are some of the different ways this is done? Select a culture--like Turkish, South African, Mexican, or Brazilian--whose idea of family honor you will explore more in depth.

Create a mini presentation to share with the class that answers the following questions:

- How do traditional gender roles play into family honor?
How does family honor affect social class?
How has the concept of family honor changed and stayed the same over time?

You may choose to present using any creative medium, including a short podcast, video, or zine. Select the medium you think will best showcase your content.

Follow-up Writing Activity: In a thorough, well-written paragraph, compare and contrast the concept of family honor in your chosen culture with that of another culture presented. What is similar, and what is different?

Passage-Specific Themes

Read the following excerpt from the story:

“Victor watched her walk away. ‘She’s like a whisper,’ he said. We went inside, more out of fear for her being in the sun than anything the sun could possibly do to us.”

Discussion Activity: In small groups, discuss the following questions: How can a person be “like a whisper”? Who do you think “she” is? What do you think is happening here? Use your imagination and any context clues from the text.

Follow-up Art Activity: Imagine you are a children’s storybook artist who is illustrating a book of similes. Create a drawing for the line, “She’s like a whisper.” Create a classroom gallery, and invite another class to visit.

Universal Themes

Journaling Activity: In a 10-minute journal entry, explore the idea of borders, both figurative and literal. Respond to at least one of the following questions:

- What images come to mind when you think about borders?
What does it mean to exist on the cusp of something?
Have you ever found yourself at the edge of two places—physically or metaphorically—and how did it feel?

In pairs, share your ideas. What do your thoughts and/or experiences have in common, and how are they different?

Key Vocabulary

Definitions are very context-dependent. Make sure that any definitions you look up or work from are the ones that most correctly fit in the context of the story.

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
atomic	itemize	atómico (adj.)
tempo	geranium	plumas atómicas - ballpoint pens
stroke (disease)	tenor	coches atómicos - new cars
cooing	croon	el hombre atómico - the atomic man (like a superhero)
	serenade	curio - souvenir

Level One	Level Two	Level Three
	dictate (n.)	Nuevo Laredo (in state of Tamaulipas, northeastern Mexico)
	Mexican Revolution (1910-20)	compadres - friends
	demeanor	appropriate
	Virgin Mary	Conchita Cintrón (1922-2009), female bullfighter
	jacks (the game)	Pedro Infante (1917-1957), renowned Mexican actor and singer
	cross (adj.)	Monterrey, capital city of the Mexican state Nuevo León
	refrain (n.)	Chihuahua, a state in northern Mexico
	shepherd (v.)	Juarez, a Mexican city in the northern state of Chihuahua
	ransom	Nogales, a Mexican city and port of entry
	intuitive	Mexicali, the capital city of the Mexican state Baja California
	monotony	Silverio Pérez (1915-2006), a Mexican matador nicknamed "The Pharoah"
	convalescing	quell
	voyage	furor
	debacle	pageboy (haircut)
	diagnostician	shoulder holster
	remorse	Bell's Palsy
	Mass	escándalo - a scandal, fuss, or scene

Vocabulary Activity Options

1. In “Miss Chihuahua,” Fontes names many Mexican cities and states. In small groups, create a map of these places. Assign each group member two to three locations to study more in depth. Drawing on what they have learned about each place—its history, trade, or landmarks—add to the map an inspired illustration for each city or state.
2. Research the condition Bell’s Palsy. What causes it? What are the symptoms and treatments? Create an informational, one- page handout on Bell’s Palsy to educate someone who has recently been diagnosed.
3. In the story, the narrator’s father dreams of her becoming a famous bullfighter. Look up the tradition of Spanish-style bullfighting. What are the three stages of the ritual?
4. Read Duncan Wheeler’s article—“It was Spain’s ‘national fiesta.’ Now bullfighting divides its people”—about the controversy surrounding the tradition: <http://bit.ly/2fRcJWn> (<http://bit.ly/2fRcJWn>). Why do you think bullfighting remains important to some Spaniards? Why do animal rights activists and others oppose the tradition?

Support your responses with evidence from the story, article, and your own research. Discuss the topic as a class.

5. In small groups, discuss the following questions: Why do you think Andrea’s father wanted her to become a famous bullfighter? How might she have brought honor to her family? Does the family stop pursuing honor after Pitri’s stroke?

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

1. Why do you think Andrea, the narrator, and Victor hide baby Pedro?
2. Do you think anyone is to blame for Pitri’s stroke? Why or why not?
3. How does society’s obsession with Pitri’s beauty affect her life? Is it for better, for worse, or a combination of both?

Text-Dependent Question Options

1. Why do you think the narrator decides to be a chauffeur for Pitri and her children? Cite the text.
2. Why does Pitri’s grandfather blame himself for what happened to her? What does his reaction reveal about his character?
3. In the story, what do the adults theorize happened to baby Pedro? What does their thinking tell us about the time and place in which the story takes place?
4. What is irony? What is ironic about the party thrown to celebrate Pitri’s beauty?
5. By the end of the story, how does Andrea change? How does she stay the same?

6. Study the story's illustration, a photograph by artist Hugh Steffy. How, specifically, does the medium of photography embody themes in Fontes' story?
7. How do Andrea and Victor respond differently to Pitri's stroke? How do their different responses affect their relationship with each other and with Pitri? Cite the text.

Writing Exercise Options

Narrative

Imagine you are Andrea and that, years later, you've chosen to apologize to Pitri. Write an honest yet respectful conversation between the two women.

Descriptive

In a thorough paragraph, describe what Pitri looks like when she wins the Miss Chihuahua beauty pageant. What is she wearing? How does she carry herself? Capture Pitri's physical appearance and demeanor with figurative language and concrete imagery.

Analysis

In a one-page essay, respond to the following question: How do Andrea and Victor walk the border between innocence and knowledge when they hide and then "find" baby Pedro? To what extent are they aware of what they're doing? To what degree have their spoiled childhoods trained them not to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions? Cite the text to support your position.

Complementary Reading Text Option

Read the following poem from the book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* by author, cultural theorist, and Feminist philosopher Gloria E. Anzaldúa:

To Live in the Borderlands by Gloria E. Anzaldúa

To live in the borderlands means you
are *neither hispana india negra espanola*
ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed
caught in the crossfire between camps
while carrying all five races on your back

not knowing which side to turn to, run from;
To live in the Borderlands means knowing that the *india* in you, betrayed for 500 years,
is no longer speaking to you,
the *mexicanas* call you *rajetas*, that denying the Anglo inside you
is as bad as having denied the Indian or Black;
Cuando vives en la frontera
people walk through you, the wind steals your voice,
you're a *burra*, *buey*, scapegoat,
forerunner of a new race,
half and half-both woman and man, neither-a new gender;
To live in the Borderlands mean to
put *chile* in the borscht,
eat whole wheat *tortillas*,
speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent;
be stopped by *la migra* at the border checkpoints;
Living in the Borderlands means you fight hard to
resist the gold elixir beckoning from the bottle,
the pull of the gun barrel,
the rope crushing the hollow of your throat;
In the Borderlands
you are the battleground
where enemies are kin to each other;
you are at home, a stranger,
the border disputes have been settled
the volley of shots have scattered the truce
you are wounded, lost in action
dead, fighting back;
To live in the Borderlands means
the mill with the razor white teeth wants to shred off
your olive-red skin, crush out the kernel, your heart
pound you pinch you roll you out
smelling like white bread but dead; To survive the Borderlands
you must live *sin fronteras*
be a crossroads.

Writing Exercise

Anzaldúa's poem is deeply rooted in place. How do you think Nuevo Laredo's location, at the crossroads of Texas and Mexico, informs the story? What happens in the borderlands that cannot happen anywhere else? Write a one-page response to the above questions.

Activity Options

Classroom Activity One

What does it mean to be a family caregiver and why would someone, like Andrea, elect to do this difficult work? In small groups, discuss and/or research situations in which one adult family member takes care of another adult family member who is unable to care for herself. Are family caregivers paid—literally or metaphorically?

Journaling Activity: In a five-minute journal entry, explore the following question: How do you think a person balances their career, any other family members, and their own health while caring for a family member in need? Share your thoughts with a partner.

Small-Group Activity: Are there resources (training, legal advice, support groups, health insurance, etc.) available to family caregivers? Citing reputable sources, like the nonprofit National Alliance for Caregiving, answer this question.

Next, write, design, and edit a brochure which briefly explains caregivers' resources. Assign at least one group member each the role of writer (who creates the content), designer (who lays out the content), and editor (who ensures the project is error free). Remember your audience: caretakers themselves. Share with the class.

Classroom Activity Two

In pairs, research a well-known person—an artist, a scholar, an activist, or an actor—who lived with a visible or invisible disability. Create a mini-presentation to share with the class in which you answer the following questions:

- Was the person born this way, or did they experience a life-changing accident later in life?
- What disability—visible or invisible—did the person live with? Was it physical, intellectual, visual, auditory, mental or something else?
- How did the person overcome their challenges to live a fulfilling life?
- Can you find instances of the person speaking openly about their disability?

Follow-up Writing Activities:

Option One: Imagine what it would be like to have a life-changing accident that in some way reduces your ability at a young age. Drawing on your classmates' presentations—or your own experiences—make a list of the ways you would cope with the new challenges in your life.

Option Two: Do you think disability is a border that is crossed and never returned from? Why or why not? Respond in a 10- minute journal entry.

Home Activity

Interview a peer about the transition from childhood to adolescence. Ask them to speak about a moment when they realized they were no longer a child. Where were they, what were they doing, and why did this moment change how they viewed themselves? As an adolescent, how does it feel to be at the border between childhood and adulthood?

Prepare your questions ahead of time, and turn in the interview transcript to your teacher.

Guest Speaker

Option One: Invite author Montserrat Fontes to come and speak to your class about her story, her creative process, and her current endeavors.

Option Two: Invite a medical professional from USC Keck School of Medicine's Caruso Department of Otolaryngology to speak with the class about their career, the field of otolaryngology, and best practices in treating Bell's Palsy.

Note: Ask students to read up on the condition of Bell's Palsy beforehand, so they can ask informed questions.

Field Trip

Visit LA Plaza de Cultural y Artes (501 N. Main St., Los Angeles), a bilingual, nonprofit education center whose interactive exhibits bring Mexican American history to life. LA Plaza offers school tours—see “LA Starts Here!”—which inspires students to think critically about the city's evolving cultural identities and includes a printmaking activity.

Note: Admission is free. LA Plaza is closed on Tuesdays.

Writing Exercise: In a five-to-eight sentence paragraph, respond to the following question: How do Los Angeles' Mexican roots continue to shape the City of Angels?

TEST PREPARATION COMPONENT

Narrative Writing Exercise

In “Miss Chihuahua,” the narrator, Andrea, describes a moment in which she and her cousin Victor make a decision resulting in her lifelong guilt. In no more than one page, detail a moment when you did something for which you felt guilty, whether or not the consequences were as severe as those of the cousins’ actions. Then, write an eight- to 10- sentence paragraph comparing your experience to that of the narrator. Cite the text.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS REFERENCE

Pre-Reading & Themes Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A: Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.E: Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Vocabulary Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2: Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

Post-Reading Class Discussion Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

Text-Dependent Question Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3: Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A: Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Writing Exercise Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2.A: Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

Complementary Reading Text Writing Exercise

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.D: Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

Activity Options

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5: Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.6: Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate. (See grades 9-10 Language standards 1 and 3 here for specific expectations.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3.B: Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.C: Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions.