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Someone to Believe in Me

DAVID BOWLES

My junior year of high school was one of the toughest in my life.

My father had abandoned my mother, my brothers, and me. We were estranged from his family, the Mexican American side of my heritage, the *familia* I so loved. Once, my mother moved us to Section 8 housing in the town of Pharr—still in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, but miles from our relatives. I started eleventh grade. Heartbroken. Friendless.

It was a tough neighborhood. Violence and drugs spilled into everyone's lives.

LITERARY REFUGE

Attempting to hide from the encroaching darkness, I took refuge in two sacred places: the Pharr Public Library and the library at Pharr San Juan Alamo High School. There I found a couple of like-minded outcasts: Gustavo “Gus” Acosta and Ranulfo “Ron” Márquez. We were united by our Mexican American heritage and other commonalities: heavy metal, cinema, comics, and literature. Rocker nerds.

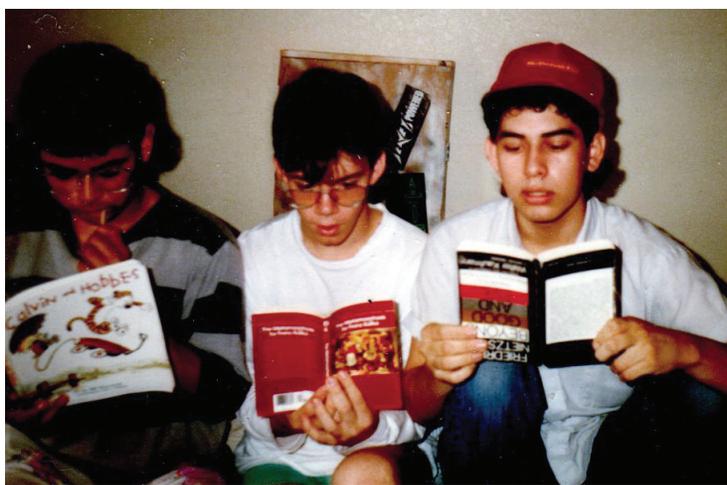


FIGURE 1.
Gustavo “Gus” Acosta, Ranulfo “Ron” Márquez, and David Bowles read with style in 1987. Photo courtesy of David Bowles.

Our English language arts teacher was Mrs. Jennings, a woman in her fifties. Well-meaning if elitist, she insisted on using canonical literature that did not reflect our Latinx identities. But that was typical in 1986. Besides, I had been reading at the college level for six years, so I greeted her literary challenges with a wink and a smile.

Truth be told, I was an arrogant pain in the butt.

When you live in poverty, shopping with food-stamps, wearing used clothes, eating free lunch in the cafeteria . . . any shred of skill, any semblance of superiority becomes precious. Worthy of great pride.

All I had was my brain. Yes, I flaunted it, even at the risk of being picked on. My intelligence and my extensive reading set me apart. Made me someone.

Still, there was a downside to that desperate arrogance.

SABELOTODO

I was a *sabelotodo*, a know-it-all, convinced I was smarter than my English teacher. And I was not subtle about it. *Poor woman*, I now think.

Our intellectual clash came to a head during the fall of 1986.

Mrs. Jennings was teaching us the difference between simple and complete subjects. Taking up the white chalk, she scrawled the following sentence on the blackboard (thereby inscribing it forever in my puffed-up little heart):

The mantle of stars spread above the earth.

“What is the complete subject, class?” she asked. “Olga?”

Olga Méndez was my nemesis, a suck-up who would go on to become valedictorian the following year. (My ACT scores were higher than hers, much to her chagrin and my amusement.)

“It’s ‘the mantle of stars,’ ma’am,” Olga said with a sycophant smile.

Delighted, Mrs. Jennings underlined that noun phrase.

“Now, what is the simple subject?”

Hands went up. Not mine. *Chale*. Nope. I refused to answer such an easy, obvious question. Instead, she called on some other boy.

“Stars?” he asked, tentative.

I sighed, muttering, “Nice try.”

“Correct,” Mrs. Jennings answered.

Mind-boggling! How could she bungle things so badly?

Pointedly, I cleared my throat.

Mrs. Jennings looked at me. “Yes, David?”

You’re wrong.”

“What?”

“The answer is ‘mantle,’ Mrs. Jennings.”

Shaking her head, her cheeks reddening, she pointed at the sentence. “No, it isn’t. The stars are what spread above the earth, sir.”

Sitting up straighter, I explained. “That doesn’t matter. ‘Stars’ is the object of the preposition. That prepositional phrase modifies the noun ‘mantle,’ which is the head of the noun phrase: the simple subject. Should I diagram this independent clause for you?”

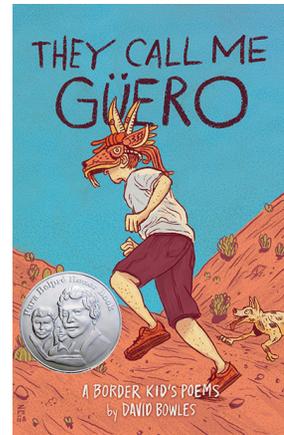
That last bit was unnecessary. She sent me to the office. Good for her. The principal leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, looking very tired.

“David, why?”

“Because she was wrong. The others are going to learn grammar the wrong way.”

His sigh came from deep within him. “Look, I’m not saying you didn’t get the answer right. I’ll admit I don’t even know. But you can’t treat people like that, David. Especially not adults. She’s doing the best she can. She cares about you all. Can’t you give her a break?”

Somehow, this plea reached me more than a stern scolding or other punishment. I myself desperately needed a break. Bullies waited for me after school nearly every day. A neighbor had thrown his girlfriend’s lover through the window of their apartment just last week. All around me, kids and



grown-ups alike were suffering. Why should I make things worse?

I went back and apologized. Genuinely.

Mrs. Jennings? She didn’t just accept my apology. In fact, she took me under her wing.

THE CONTEST

My papers had always gotten As. However, now Mrs. Jennings began adding praise and suggestions for pushing myself even harder. She would also suggest I read specific books, including *The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand. (Bad choice for an arrogant, young Chicano, but she was trying to help.)

Then came the day that Mrs. Jennings asked me to drop by after school.

“There’s a contest,” she said without preamble as I walked in. “A writing contest. I think you should enter.”

“OK, sure. What, poetry? Short story? Essay?”

Jennings paused a beat. “A novel. If you win, Avon Books will pay you 500 dollars and publish your book. You’ve got it in you, David. There’s just one catch.”

She handed me the advertisement she’d cut out of some journal.

The deadline was two months away.

Now, I had dreamed of writing a novel. But I’d assumed I’d have years to complete it. Not weeks.

I swallowed heavily and thanked her.

At home, I called my friends Gus and Ron. They were surprisingly supportive. Ron in particular had a great idea.

“Make it short and funny. Like those Douglas Adams books. *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*.”

That night, I could hardly sleep. A seed had taken root, preparing to sprout.

In the morning, the driver of our school bus almost hit a kid who stumbled into the street, jay-walking like a fool, arms swinging.

And I had it: *Jay Walker, Time Traveler*. A satirical science fiction romp about an alien who hates how humans swing their arms back and forth as they walk. The villain travels into the past to alter our evolution. Only an outcast high school junior—a Chicano with an Anglo surname—can undo the damage.

Forget classes. I spent every moment that day scribbling the story down in every available blank page in every notebook I had in my locker.

Same routine the next day. And the next.

In three weeks, I had a rough draft. Now it needed to be typed, though my family had no money for luxuries like typewriters.

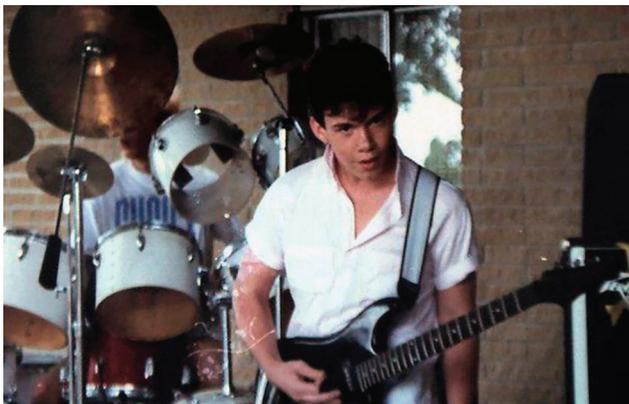


FIGURE 2.
At age seventeen, the young David Bowles plays guitar. Photo courtesy of David Bowles.

My mom came to the rescue, renting one for me, and I put my skills (honed in typing class all year) to good use.

A copy to edit and revise. Then the final version, sent off on the last possible day.

“YOU WROTE A FREAKING NOVEL!”

After all that work came the long wait. I checked the mail every day, heart pounding.

Finally, it arrived. A letter from Avon Books. I ran up the stairs, bursting into our apartment. I opened the envelope in front of my mom.

*Dear David Bowles:
We regret to inform you . . .*

Rejection. There would be no 500 bucks, no book deal.

My shoulders slumped.

“I’m proud of you,” my mom said.

“Why?” I asked glumly. “I didn’t win.”

She hugged me. “You wrote a freaking novel, David! And you’re only seventeen!”

The next day, the bus dropped me off at an ungodly hour. I went to Mrs. Jennings’s class. She was grading.

“Ma’am?” I said, poking my head in. “I just wanted to say thanks.”

Mrs. Jennings looked up, pulled off her glasses.

I explained about the letter to her. “That’s what I needed. Someone to believe in me. A goal to struggle toward. And humility. Because I’m not where I need to be as an author.”

She started to say something. I raised my hand.

“But one day I will be. Thanks to you.” **EJ**



DAVID BOWLES is the author of several books, most notably *The Smoking Mirror* (a Pura Belpré Honor Book) and *They Call Me Güero* (winner of the Pura Belpré Honor, Walter Dean Myers Honor, Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children’s Book Award, and Claudia Lewis Award). His new middle grade book *The Chupacabras of the Río Grande* was cowritten with Newbery Honor winner Adam Gidwitz. David teaches in the Department of Literatures and Cultural Studies at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.