

## Discussion / Reflection Questions

### from My Broken Language

by Quiara Alegría Hudes

#### Part I

1. A Multilingual Block in West Philly (p. 1-6)
  - The story begins with Quiara moving away from her friends in Philly. She says her mom sees each move as full of new promises. How often have you moved to a new place. Did you experience it as a set of new promises or something different?
  - Quiara's Titi Ginny promised to visit in their new home but never did. Have you experienced a similar disappointment from a promise that was unfulfilled?
2. Spanish becomes a secret; language of the dead (p. 7 – 17)
  - Quiara describes her mom glowing with radiance when she is planting herbs in the garden. Can you think of any experiences when one of your family members has glowed with pleasure? What made them so happy? Is there something that gives you delight?
  - After moving to the farm, Quiara writes about how she and her mom share a secret between them, speaking Spanish when they are alone outside. She learned about the visions her mom had as a child. Has one of your family members shared a special secret with you? How did it make you feel?
3. English is for Atheism; language of woodworking (p. 18 – 22)
  - Quiara spends time with her dad in his woodworking shop, observing his passion for his craft. Although he claims not to believe in God, she sees his artistic fervor as a contradiction to this claim. Do you have a relative who is a little mysterious or whose actions don't quite match their words?
4. A name that is a mask (p. 23-25)
  - Quiara's full name means 'happiness' and 'beloved'. She loves her name, but kids at the school outside the city made fun of it because it was unusual to them. Is there a special meaning or story behind your name? Has anyone every made fun of it or had trouble pronouncing it?
  - The kids in Quiara's 'English-only' town found her brown skinned, Spanish-accented mother interesting. When asked what she was, Quiara answers "half English-half Spanish". Have you ever had trouble trying to explain who you are to people different than you?
5. An English cousin comes to visit (p. 26-29)
  -
6. Language of the forest (p. 30 – 40)
  - Quira shares the circumstances that led to her parents separating. What thoughts did you have about her description of this change in her life?
  - Quira found a special retreat in the forest near her farm home. It was a good escape for her when she was upset. Do you have a place in nature that you like to escape to?

## Part II

7. Latina health vocab from the late '80's (p. 41-53)
  - What awful health reality did Quiara's mother learn about her own mother that inspired her to advocate for others? Is there any issue that you have learned about in school or through personal experience that makes you want to take action to correct the injustice?
  - Quiara talks about accompanying her mom to workshops and conferences for her job where she learned a lot. Did you ever go to work with someone in your family? What was that experience like?
  - Quiara recalls how her mom and a co-worker of color experienced a visit by a famous feminist differently than their white co-workers. Have you witnessed or experienced this kind of unequal treatment in a situation in your own life?
8. Spanglish cousins on the Jersey turnpike (p. 54 – 62)
  - Quiara is a 'hump' cousin, younger than the older cohort, but older than the youngsters. She shares a time when the older cousins took her to Six Flags. Where do you fall in your line up of cousins? Could you identify with how she looked up to her older cousins?
  - Her cousins tried to down play the fun they had at the amusement park since she didn't feel well and stayed in the car. Have you ever had someone try to do you a similar kindness when you couldn't participate in something you were looking forward to?
9. Body language (p. 63-70)
  - Quiara shares how she likes to linger on the stairs at family gatherings rather than be in the middle of everything. Where is your preferred place in family gatherings? Why?
10. Sophomore English (p. 71 – 81)
  - Quiara was stunned by her cousin Mary Lou's death and started asking questions about the loss of other family members. Has there been an incident in your experience when you suddenly grew more curious about why an event in the past occurred? (it might a positive or negative experience or event)
11. Things go unsaid long enough... (p. 82-27)
  -
12. Possession's voice (p.88-104)
  - Quiara secretly observes her mom's Orisha worship and does not know what to make of it all. She finds she does not have words to sum up her feelings. She is both intrigued and embarrassed by this spirituality. Do you have times where you feel like you are beyond words? What do you do to try to make some sense of your feelings?
13. Sedo buys me an upright; Language of Bach (p. 105-115)
  - Quiara tells about when her step-father bought her a used piano that launched her on a new musical journey. Do you play an instrument? Was your learning experience anything like Quiara's?
14. Taino petroglyphs (p. 116-125)
  - Quiara recalls her visit to Puerto Rico with her mom and step-father and their adventure to the ancient Taino petroglyphs. Have you ever traveled to see ancient runes, historic sites, or natural wonders? What was the experience like and how did you share it with others afterwards?

15. Lukumi thrones (p. 126-131)

- Quiara uses the word “language” to talk about a deep level of comfort with different aspects of her life. Her love of reading is the language of the ‘western canon’ (famous literary masterpieces), her love of music is the language of Chopin (or other composers). Are there other ‘languages’ that you speak based on your familiarity with something?

16. Silence = death (p. 132 – 142)

- Quiara writes about when the national AIDS Quilt was created by people across the country and she recognized that she was not alone with her family’s grief and loss. The public health crisis in the 1980s and 1990s was HIV/AIDS. Beyond the COVID pandemic, what do you see as the health crises of the 2020’s? How often do you think about this issue(s)?

17. Unwritten recipes (p. 143-156)

- Quiara asked her grandma to teach her how to cook because she knew her grandma would tell her family stories while they were together. Has someone in your family taught you to cook a special dish? Is there someone in your family who is a storyteller and keeper of the family history?

18. Yoruba vocabulary (p. 157 – 165)

- As Quiara learns more about the Yoruba rituals that came with her ancestor to the new world in Puerto Rico, she notes that “quiet and secrecy were not always indicators of shame but were proven strategies of resilience and resistance” (p.163). Can you identify with this perspective?

19. A racial slur (p. 166-176)

- Quiara indignantly protests the use of the word ‘welfare queens’ by her high school classmates, knowing that her lived experience did not match what her peers were describing. Although this was several decades ago, these kinds of broad characterizations of people are still used. Can you think of some labels that you hear in the media that don’t match the reality you know? What response do you have to these situations?

20. A book is its presence and absence (p. 177-178)

- Quiara struggles with the knowledge that her cousin Nuchi can’t read while she loves the world of books. Is there some aspect of your life that you particularly appreciate when you recognize that others may not have that same benefit? (this might be an ability, a possession, a relationship, etc.)

21. Mom’s accent (p. 179- 182)

- Quiara reflects on how when she was a child, she tried to correct her mom’s accent in English, but her mom didn’t change her pronunciation. Looking back Quiara is proud of her mom’s blend of English and Spanish and perhaps embarrassed about trying to change her pronunciation. Can you think of something you’ve tried to change about someone, or something that used to embarrass you about a loved one that you now find endearing?

### Part III

22. Dad buys me a typewriter (p. 183-195)

- Quiara describes the tension she felt when visiting her dad and feeling like she couldn't speak fully. She constantly felt the contradictions about what she should view and value as 'normal'. In what spaces do you feel most comfortable speaking your mind?

23. She said Norf Philly and One-Two-Free (p. 196 – 202)

- Quiara labels herself a 'sister-leaver' when she goes away to college. She misses her little sister and worries about her. What experience do you have with leaving siblings or being left by siblings who have gone to college or moved away?

24. Atonality (p. 203-211)

- Quiara describes her lack of knowledge about college life as a blessing, she didn't know what she should fear and 'opted for boldness'. In a few words, how would you describe your own attitude as you approached your first day on campus?
- Quiara says that she was able to unwind and relax in her new job at the recording studio away from the many students with different experiences than hers. Have you found a comfort place at college / Who are your people?

25. Fania everything and salsa out-of-prints (p. 212-223)

- 

26. The Serenity Prayer (p. 224-227)

- Flor shared the serenity prayer with Quiara and Quiara understood that this helped her be a better self, just like Quiara playing Chopin. Is there a particular practice/activity that helps you be your better self?

27. Sterling library (p.228 – 232)

- 

28. The Foraker Act (p. 233-242)

- Quiara reflects on generations of change experienced in Puerto Rico under Spanish and US control. What stands out to you about how history affected her family?

29. Gil Scott-Heron asks me a question (p. 243-260)

- Quiara shares how a local professional musician in Philly told her "you're not good enough. You're almost, it's close, but you don't cross the line that makes a musician special". She recognized that music had rescued her younger self from a crisis, but it was just a haven. Do you believe we can come closer to knowing ourselves when we shelter in a haven, or does something else have to happen?

## Part IV

### 30. Writing's a muscle, it gets stronger (p. 261-272)

- Quiara has two very different experiences when being recruited to graduate school. What stuck out to you as you read about her interactions with the two different professors?

### 31. Broken language (p. 273-279)

- Quiara recognized that her background was different than her peers in graduate school. She decided the only viable strategy to move forward was to 'own her ignorance'. She told her mentor who assigned her a custom list of readings to give her deeper understanding of theatre. Have you ever discovered you didn't know what you needed to in order to perform at the level you wanted to? What was your strategy/response?

### 32. On Obscenity (p. 279-287)

- Quiara describes how the artist Holly Hughes helped her speak words aloud about family silence that had burdened her. She and other artists openly named AIDS and other social hurts that helped empower Quiara. Has anyone ever inspired you to speak fully/frankly about something meaningful to you?

### 33. Cold drink became a play (p. 288-294)

- So many of Quiara's personal experiences became her inspiration in her writing. What personal experiences have you had that inspire you (good or bad)?

### 34. Silence = death (Déjà vu) (p. 295-299)

- Quiara chooses not to ask her cousin Nuchi a direct, hard question out of kindness. Can you think of a time when you chose not to say something or perhaps told a little lie as a kindness for someone else? Why did you make that choice?

### 35. The book of our genius (p. 300-314)

- Quiara speaks bluntly about body shapes and sizes, mocking the way the media tells us how we need to look. What thoughts went through your head when reading this chapter?