

# Holiday House Discussion Guide

13 STORIES BY SUPER-COOL WRITING CELEB **GARY SOTO**

## HEY 13!

**THE CAMPUS TOUR**  
Emma's Shocking Surprise



**A Very Short ROMANCE**

And a Lesson in Love



**Twin Stars**  
Meet the Glitz Girls de Southeast Fresno



**CELEBRITIES**  
A Dangerous Game

**And more!**

**A SIMPLE PLAN**  
The Worst Thing That He Could Do

**Altar Boys**  
Or Tough Guys?

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## HEY 13!

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**GARY SOTO**



### About the Book

Being thirteen is happy, sad, humiliating, surprising, wonderful, awful, exciting, boring—in other words, full of ups and downs. The thirteen-year-olds in Gary Soto's thirteen stories experience all this and more.

The accounts in *Hey, 13!* are about family relationships, friendships, self-worth, and questions of integrity. Emma broadens her world on a college campus; Saul risks the wrath of his father for the sake of his old dog; and Tiffany finds that dirty language just isn't cool anymore. Little Ray and Jesus skip Mass and go for a ride on a "borrowed" scooter; Joel and Matt come face-to-face with a bully; and Ashlee is so focused on herself that she is rude to a blind man.

**Grades 5-9**

### PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Ask students to try to interpret the titles of the short stories before they read them. Have them find pictures in a magazine or family photos that best illustrate the titles. Allow them time to share their photo selections in class.



# Questions For Discussion



- ★ In “The Campus Tour,” sixteen middle school honor students tour a liberal arts college. Discuss what the students learn about college from their visit. Emma Fuentes is especially affected by the day. How are her ideas and views of the world broadened? Mrs. Mendel tells the class that they were well behaved. Why does Emma question whether college is about good behavior? Ask students to debate whether taking part in student protests is good or bad behavior.
- ★ Explain the title “A Simple Plan.” Ask students to discuss Saul’s relationship with his father. Debate whether his father’s hard times have contributed to his harsh and mean-spirited ways. Discuss whether Saul’s father understands the meaning of friendship. How is Saul a better person than his father?
- ★ In “Finding Religion,” Cynthia Rodriguez volunteers at St. Anthony’s Soup Kitchen. Explain her father’s attitude toward her volunteer work. Ask students to discuss Cynthia’s reaction when she sees Alma, a classmate, eating at the soup kitchen. Discuss the meaning of the word *empathy*. How does Cynthia gain empathy at St. Anthony’s? Ask students to discuss whether Cynthia finds the true meaning of religion at the soup kitchen. How does her work cause her to question her parents’ religion?
- ★ Contrast Little Ray’s and Jesus’s attitude toward religion in “Altar Boys” with that of Cynthia in “Finding Religion.” How do the boys justify stealing the scooter? Cite evidence that Little Ray and Jesus know right from wrong. Compare Little Ray’s mother to Cynthia’s father.
- ★ In “Musical Lives,” Joel and Matt encounter a bully. Joel wishes that he were no longer young. “He wanted to be grown up and be in the adult world, where bullies were, by then, behind bars” (pp. 52–53). Discuss whether Joel is naive to believe that all adult bullies are in jail. Discuss whether Saul’s father in “A Simple Plan” is a bully.
- ★ Discuss the qualities of friendship. Compare and contrast Teri and Luz’s friendship in “Twin Stars” with that of Laura and Jasmine in “Celebrities.” Who is the stronger personality in each relationship? Debate what might happen if the two strong personalities came face-to-face.
- ★ Saul, the main character in “A Simple Plan,” realizes that becoming a teenager means “sometimes making mistakes.” What else does turning thirteen mean? In “Romancing the Diary,” Monica uses the following simile to describe her lost childhood: “Monica could only lament her childhood that had flowed away like a river” (p. 153). Find similes or metaphors in other stories that describe coming of age, or growing up.
- ★ In “Celebrities,” Laura and Jasmine are rehearsing for their teenage years by pretending to be celebrities. Explain what transpires at the mall that causes Laura to become disappointed in Jasmine. At the end of the story, Laura air-plays a sad melody. Debate whether she is sad about losing her childhood and growing up or about her changing relationship with Jasmine.
- ★ Dirty language is a part of Tiffany’s and Beatrice’s vocabulary, but when Tiffany hears baby Maria mimic them in “Dirty Talk,” she has second thoughts about who she is and who she wants to be. Discuss how this changes her relationship with Beatrice. How might Cynthia Rodriguez in “Finding Religion” be a better friend for Tiffany? Who among the other characters might be a better match for Beatrice?
- ★ In “It’s Not Nice to Stare,” Ashlee ponders the difference between liking and loving. How might she describe the difference to Monica in “Romancing the Diary”? Discuss how Ashlee’s focus on herself turns into rude behavior. Which other character might most identify with Ashlee?
- ★ The need to belong, confusion about one’s place in the world, relationships with family and friends, dealing with the opposite sex, and self-esteem problems are common concerns of young teens. Analyze the characters in all of the stories as they struggle with these issues on the journey from childhood to young adulthood.

# Classroom Activities

★ In “Twin Stars,” best friends Teri and Luz name themselves the Glitz Girls de Southeast Fresno and launch a song-writing career. The problem is that they can create song titles but so far have written no lyrics. Divide the class into groups and ask the students to write the lyrics for the following Glitz Girls hit titles: “Shut Up,” “Stop It,” “Why Me?” “Messed Up,” and “Burning Star.”

★ In “Finding Religion,” Cynthia eats with the homeless at the soup kitchen so that she might know what it’s like to eat there. Ask students to write a poem or an essay from Cynthia’s point of view called “Eating with the Homeless.”

★ In “Finding Religion,” Cynthia Rodriguez thinks that teenagers should channel their energy toward doing good deeds. Ask students to research places in their community where they might volunteer their services. Such places may include food banks, soup kitchens, nursing homes, senior action centers, animal shelters, libraries, and community environmental groups. Then have them design a brochure called “Teen Action: Making a Difference” that describes the services they can provide. Display the brochures in the school and public library.

★ Bullying is a common problem in schools. Ask students to visit the following website and find out what to do should they experience bullying: [www.stopbullying.gov/](http://www.stopbullying.gov/). Then divide the class into small groups and ask each group to make a short video that demonstrates the best way for Joel and Matt to have dealt with Mark, the bully in “Musical Lives.”

★ Draw a cartoon strip that illustrates the last scene in “Whose Bedroom Is This?” or “A Very Short Romance.”

★ In “Romancing the Diary,” Monica flings her diary into the canal, and it lands on a pile of concrete. A fifteen-year-old boy named Michael retrieves the diary and hands it to her. Write a diary entry that Monica writes the night after meeting Michael.

★ Freddie, the main character in “Two Girls, Best Friends, and a Frog,” vows that he will learn to write poetry or a hit song to help him deal with matters of the heart. Write a poem or song lyrics that he might compose after losing Rebecca and Marta.

★ Pick a female character from one of the stories and plan a *quinceañera* party for her to be celebrated on her fifteenth birthday. Consider the personality and interest of the character. Design party invitations, decorations, and favors. Plan music, food, dances, and other activities. Girls usually wear white dresses for their special day. Design several dress options for the character.







Credit: Carolyn Soto

## About the Author

**Gary Soto's** books have sold more than three million copies and are well-known in classrooms nationwide. His poem "Oranges" is the most anthologized poem in contemporary literature. He has received the Literature Award from the Hispanic Heritage Foundation, the PEN West Award, and the Human and Civil Rights Award from the National Education Association. He has earned fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts (twice), and the California Arts Council. The Gary Soto Literary Museum is located at Fresno City College.

Gary lives in California, dividing his time between Berkeley and his hometown of Fresno. For more about him and his books, visit the official Gary Soto website at [www.garysoto.com](http://www.garysoto.com).



## A Q&A with Gary Soto

**When did you first start writing?** I was twenty and a student at Fresno City College when I discovered an array of contemporary American poets. My favorite then was Edward Field. Soon I discovered W. S. Merwin, Charles Simic, James Wright, and the master of them all, Pablo Neruda. Then I discovered the novelist Gabriel Garcia Márquez, and I was hooked. I wanted to make writing my life.

**What do you like to do?** Read. It appears these days I don't have much of a life because my nose is often stuck in a book. But I discovered that reading builds a life inside the mind. I enjoy biographies and novels and reading in Spanish. Also, I like theater, tennis, basketball, traveling (especially to London), and working in the garden . . . sometimes.

**Where do you get your ideas for your novels, stories, and poems?** I'm also a listener. I hear lines of poetry issue from the mouths of seemingly ordinary people. And as a writer, my duty is not to make people perfect, particularly Mexican Americans. I'm not a cheerleader. I'm one who provides portraits of people in the rush of life.

**When writing, do you revise?** Yes, all writers revise and almost all writers have friends who look at their work. My first reader is my wife; poor thing, I bother her almost daily as I beg, "Carolyn, could you please look at this masterpiece?" Of course it's not a masterpiece, but a way of getting her attention.

**Do all your writing projects get published?** No, I have written several picture books that were just awful, and I have written a middle grade novel that was too violent for its own good. I put them away, and sometimes I burn the poetry I feel is no good.

**We hear that you have a library named in your honor?** Yes, this is at Winchell Elementary School in Fresno.

**What is your highest honor?** In Kennesaw, Georgia, there is one wonderful teacher who named her dog after me. She apparently loves my work. The dog is named Soto. Apparently he is one goofy dog.

**Do you often go back to Fresno?** Almost monthly. I have friends and family there, and I like to kick around its streets, sucking up the ambiance. For me, it's important to stay connected to your hometown.

—Excerpted from the official Gary Soto website

Guide prepared by Pat Scales, retired school librarian and independent consultant, Greenville, South Carolina.

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