

# HOLIDAY HOUSE EDUCATOR'S GUIDE



Margaret Ferguson Books

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## *Yoli's Favorite Things* by Patricia Santana

A Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection

### ABOUT THE BOOK

The Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement form a rich historical backdrop for a young girl's coming of age amidst the fear of war, the pull of religion, and family dynamics.

Twelve-year-old Yolanda Sahagún, an aspiring nun raised by strict Mexican immigrant parents, likes to envision her family of nine siblings as the von Trapps from her favorite movie, *The Sound of Music*. But a larger-than-life family isn't the only thing Yoli has in common with her fictional friends—she, too, is coming of age as war looms large.

In Yoli's household, rules define everything—especially those about what the Sahagún daughters are old enough to do, like no talking to boys on the phone. But there are no rules on the battlefield, and Yoli is grown enough to understand that her draft-eligible big brother (her favorite brother!) could be killed in the war. Determined to protect him, Yoli makes a pact with God. But what happens if God doesn't keep his end of the bargain?

Patricia Santana's heartfelt middle grade novel balances weighty themes with warm family dynamics and a captivating voice—for fans of character-driven historical fiction and readers experiencing the challenges of just living their lives when it feels like the world is on fire.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Setting is when and where a story takes place. Identify the setting of this novel. How does the author define the setting? What does the setting contribute to the plot?
- Conflict is the central challenge or problem the main character faces. What is the conflict of this novel? Discuss the conflict resolution.
- In what way is Yoli a typical twelve-year-old? Explain how this sometimes presents a problem to her. Cite evidence that she is straddling childhood and adolescence.
- Describe Yoli's friendship with Lydia. What do they have in common? How are they different? Discuss the challenges to their friendship as the novel progresses.
- Miss Toscano, Yoli's sixth grade teacher, likes to send the class off for the weekend with words of wisdom. How does Yoli find her advice to "concentrate on the positive" (p. 1) especially troubling? Why is it difficult for Yoli to focus on the positive?
- Yoli's favorite movie is *The Sound of Music*. Define obsessive. Why does Lydia call the movie Yoli's "utterly obsessive enthrallment"? (p. 2)
- Describe the Sahagún family. What do they have in common with the von Trapp family in Yoli's favorite movie? Yoli has four brothers. Why does she say it sometimes feels like the sisters have four extra fathers? In what way do the brothers contribute to the family when Papá is away at his job in the trailer park?
- Tía Matilde comes to stay while Mamá goes to Mexico. Draw a parallel between Maria, the governess in *The Sound of Music*, and Tía Matilde. Discuss the bond that Yoli and her siblings form with Tía Matilde. How do they express their love for her? Identify the playful side of Tía.
- The Sahagún family is very religious. How is religion an integral part of the story? Debate whether the children worry that Tía Matilde will bring more religion to the family.
- Discuss the special relationship that Yoli develops with Tía Matilde. Mamá had warned Yoli that it would be rude to ask Tía why she left the convent. What gives Yoli the courage to ask? Why is she surprised by her aunt's answer?
- How does Yoli's pact with God about Chuy and the war make her life more confusing? Debate whether this pact interferes with Yoli's daily life and her enjoyment of friends and family.
- What are the family rules? How do the girls live by stricter rules than the boys? Discuss Carolina's plea for equal rights. How is Papá especially strict about telephone conversations with boys? Carolina has been a student of psychology in high school. How does she use the skills she learned to cut a deal with Papá?
- Yoli and Lydia made a pact when they were eight years old to become nuns. How is this early pledge to her friend and family a burden to Yoli? Mamá and Papá want a nun in the family. Discuss their reaction when Yoli reveals she may not want to enter the convent. At what point does Lydia suspect that Yoli is changing her mind?
- The war is raging in Vietnam. Explain why Mamá doesn't want any discussion about the war. Discuss whether this makes Yoli more worried about the war.
- Yoli goes to talk with Miss Toscano about the war. Explain what Miss Toscano means when she says the war in Vietnam is "complicated" (p. 23). How do American citizens get mixed messages from the news media and politicians?



- What is the draft? Identify the reasons some men are ineligible for the draft. Why is Chuy, Yoli's favorite brother, likely to go to war? How does this fear hang over Yoli and her family?
- Discuss Yoli's opinion of Father Carrasco. Explain Father Carrasco's reaction when Chuy asks him to write a letter of recommendation for conscientious objector status. How does this make Yoli think even less of the priest? Why does Father Carrasco ask to be transferred to another parish?
- Describe Yoli's feelings for Benjamín, the altar boy. Why is she reluctant to share her feelings for him with her family and Lydia? Discuss Benjamín's kind nature. Mamá gives Yoli permission to meet Benjamín for thirty minutes. Why doesn't she want Papá to know?
- Explain the title of the book.

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

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Patricia Santana** was born and raised in San Diego, California, and is the daughter of Mexican immigrants. *Yoli's Favorite Things* is a prequel to her two previous novels. *Motorcycle Ride on the Sea of Tranquility* was selected as a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association. *Ghosts of El Grullo* is a novel for adults that won the Before Columbus American Book Award, the San Diego Book Award in Fiction, and the Premio Aztlán Prize.

