DISCUSSION + ACTIVITY GUIDE

PESKY ROOTS

RAÍCES FASTIDIOSAS

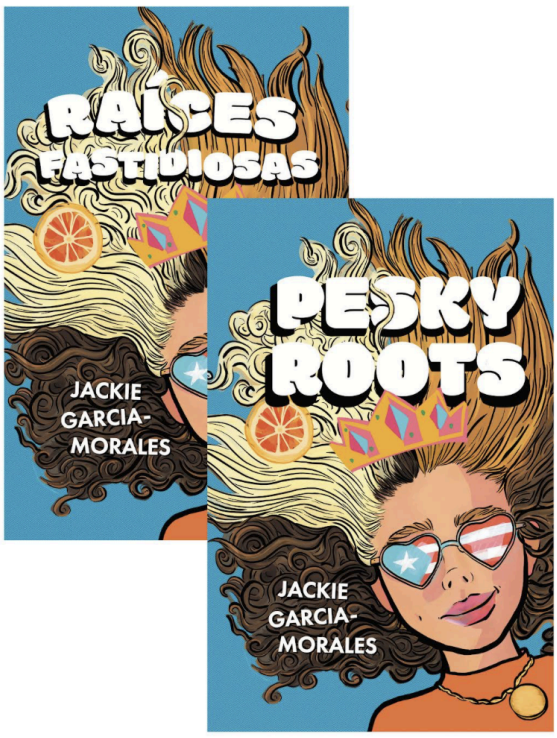
A bilingual middle grade novel by Jackie Garcia-Morales

Spanish translation by Rosarito Rodríguez-González

Designed for flexible use

For educators, librarians, book clubs, families, bilingual programs, and community organizations. Includes three developmental pathways: ages 8-9, 10-12, and 13-14.

IDENTITY | BELONGING | FAMILY | HAIR | CULTURE | LANGUAGE



BOOK INFORMATION

About the Book

Twelve-year-old Ignacia "Call Me Izzy" Rivera-Colón has always known what makes her different. In her big Puerto Rican family, Izzy is rubia: her straight blonde hair makes her stand out.

But after moving from the Bronx to suburban New Jersey, everything shifts. Suddenly, Izzy is surrounded by other blonde girls, and the thing that once made her feel different no longer does. Instead, classmates and adults begin drawing attention to something Izzy has never had to question before: being Puerto Rican, being Latina, and being considered a "minority."

At the same time, Izzy's hair begins changing, with dark roots and curls appearing where her familiar blonde hair used to be.

With the help of family and new friends, Izzy begins untangling other people's expectations from her own understanding of who she is and discovering that identity, culture, appearance, and belonging do not always fit neatly into the boxes other people create.

PESKY ROOTS / RAÍCES FASTIDIOSAS is a warm, introspective coming-of-age story about Puerto Rican identity, family, friendship, hair, beauty standards, belonging, comparison, and learning to define yourself on your own terms.

Book at a Glance

Title	PESKY ROOTS / RAÍCES FASTIDIOSAS
Author	Jackie Garcia-Morales
Translator	Rosarito Rodríguez-González
Publisher	Piñata Books, an imprint of Arte Público Press
Publication Date	October 31, 2026
ISBN	979-8-89375-045-4
Binding	Trade paperback
Length	272 pages
List Price	$12.95
Languages	English and Spanish
Edition Format	Bilingual tête-bêche / flip book, with the complete novel presented in both English and Spanish
Guide Pathways	Ages 8-9, 10-12, and 13-14

Publisher page: View the book at Arte Público Press

Themes & Curriculum Connections

The novel can support reading and discussion across ELA, social studies, media literacy, SEL, bilingual/Spanish language learning, and family or community programming.

- identity and self-definition
- Puerto Rican and Latino identity
- belonging and entering a new community
- friendship
- family and mother-daughter relationships
- hair and self-image
- beauty standards and messages about appearance
- stereotypes, assumptions, subtle bias, and othering
- peer comparison and confidence
- cultural authenticity
- race, ethnicity, nationality, ancestry, and culture
- bilingualism and translation
- internal versus external conflict
- quiet and introspective protagonists
- Taíno history and heritage
- representation in literature

Praise, Recognition & Further Reading

Publishers Weekly

"An empowering story about one tween's attempts to connect with and embrace her heritage on her terms."

Review: Read the Publishers Weekly review

Kirkus Reviews

"A sincere look at the intersection of hair and heritage."

Review: Read the Kirkus review

School Library Journal: Selected for "Highly Anticipated Middle Grade Fiction Releasing Fall 2026 and Early 2027," in the "Fear of Failure" section.

Feature: Read the School Library Journal feature

From the author: In a Publishers Weekly essay for Hispanic Heritage Month, Jackie Garcia-Morales writes about the quieter forms of othering and discrimination that helped inspire the novel.

Essay: Making Room to Show the Gray Areas of Discrimination in Middle Grade Books

About the Author

Jackie Garcia-Morales is a Puerto Rican author, literary agent, publishing professional, and children's literature advocate raised in New Jersey.

She serves as an Associate Literary Agent and Foreign Rights Agent at Storm Literary Agency and is a two-time member of the United States Board on Books for Young People's Outstanding International Books Committee. She is also the USBBY New Jersey State Ambassador and founder of the forthcoming USBBY Latido Honor List for Latino Children's Literature.

Jackie is Co-Founder and Director of The Storytellers Foundation, an organization dedicated to making publishing knowledge and opportunities more accessible, and co-founder of the StoryRise writing and publishing ecosystem.

Her professional work has spanned publishing, bookselling and distribution, publicity, marketing, reviewing, editorial work, and literary advocacy. Her writing has appeared in publications including Publishers Weekly and Business Insider.

PESKY ROOTS / RAÍCES FASTIDIOSAS is her debut middle grade novel and draws in part from her own childhood experiences navigating Puerto Rican identity, belonging, appearance, and being perceived differently after moving between communities.

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Educators, librarians, schools, book clubs, and literacy organizations interested in virtual or in-person author visits, career-day visits, or programming around the novel can visit the author website or email Jackie directly. Author visits and career-day appearances are offered in English only.

How to Use This Guide

This guide is intentionally flexible. An eight-year-old may connect most strongly with friendship, being the new kid, or feeling different. A twelve-year-old may recognize the pressure of comparison and questions about appearance or belonging. An older middle school reader may be ready to examine the larger systems that influence Izzy's experience, including stereotypes, cultural expectations, beauty standards, bias, and the language society uses to categorize people.

SETTING	A SIMPLE WAY TO USE THE GUIDE
Classroom	Choose one age pathway, 3-5 discussion questions, and one activity. Use the "Take It Further" section for cross-curricular extensions.
Library or book club	Choose one central question and one creative activity. The guide works well for a single-session program or a multi-week club.
Home or family reading	Use one or two prompts at a time. Let the conversation follow the reader's curiosity rather than trying to cover every theme.
Bilingual or Spanish-language learning	Use "Words Across Languages" for vocabulary, cognates, translation comparison, and language-and-identity discussion.
Community program	Mix activities across age bands based on reader readiness. Avoid requiring personal disclosure; fictional responses are always welcome.

A note for adults facilitating discussion

Conversations about culture, identity, appearance, race, ethnicity, family, and belonging can become personal quickly. Students and young readers should never be expected to represent an entire community or disclose information about their race, ethnicity, immigration history, family, neurodivergence, appearance, or cultural background.

- Discuss Izzy or another character instead of asking a reader to disclose something personal.
- Offer fictional scenarios as an alternative to personal reflection.
- Allow private writing instead of sharing aloud.
- Make it acceptable to pass on a question that feels too personal.
- Remind readers that no cultural or identity group is a monolith. People who share a culture, ethnicity, language, neighborhood, or family background can still have very different experiences.

AGE PATHWAY 8-9

Ages 8-9

Guiding Question

What makes us feel like we belong?

For younger readers, conversations can focus on experiences they already understand: being new somewhere, wanting to fit in, noticing differences, making assumptions, friendship, family, and learning what makes us feel confident in ourselves.

Discussion Questions

1. Izzy experiences a lot of change. Why can being somewhere new make us notice things about ourselves that we did not think about before?
2. What does it mean to belong somewhere?
3. What are some things people can do to help a new student feel welcome?
4. Why is it important not to decide what someone is like based only on the way they look?
5. Izzy thinks a lot about her appearance. Why do people sometimes compare themselves to others?
6. How can comparison change the way someone feels about themselves?
7. What are some people, places, traditions, memories, interests, or experiences that help a person understand who they are?
8. How do Izzy's family and friends influence the way she thinks about herself?
9. Can two people from the same family or culture be very different from one another? What are some examples?
10. What do you think Izzy learns about herself over the course of the story?

Activity 1: My Belonging Map

Goal: Help readers recognize that belonging can come from many different places and communities.

Ask readers to draw themselves, a fictional character, or a symbol in the center of a page. Around it, add places and communities where that person might feel like they belong.

- home
- school
- a library
- a sports team or club
- a neighborhood
- a group of friends
- a grandparent's house
- a cultural celebration
- an online community
- a favorite place

Discuss:

- What makes each place feel welcoming?

- What could make someone feel like they do not belong?
- What can we do to make our classroom, library, home, or community more welcoming?

Activity 2: More Than One Thing

Goal: Explore the idea that every person has many different parts to their identity.

Give readers a blank circle divided into sections, or ask them to create one. Each section can represent something that might be important to a person: family, hobbies, favorite places, languages, traditions, personality, music, books, foods, sports, pets, dreams, friendships, or things they are good at.

Readers may complete the activity about themselves or create one for a fictional character.

Discuss:

- Can one word tell us everything about a person?
- Why might it be unfair to make assumptions about someone because of only one part of who they are?

Activity 3: A Symbol That Matters

Goal: Explore how objects can carry meaning and connect characters to memories, people, and identity.

Ask readers to design a meaningful object for a fictional character. It might be a necklace, bracelet, photograph, stuffed animal, book, piece of clothing, recipe card, toy, stone, keychain, or something completely invented.

Have them explain what the object looks like, where it came from, what it reminds the character of, and why the character would want to keep it.

Discuss:

- Extension: Write a short scene in which the object helps the character remember something important about themselves.

Closing Reflection

Finish the sentence: Everyone deserves to feel like they belong because...

AGE PATHWAY 10-12

Ages 10-12

Guiding Question

How do we figure out who we are when other people have ideas about who we should be?

At this age, readers are often becoming increasingly aware of appearance, peer comparison, cultural identity, social groups, and other people's perceptions. This pathway examines both Izzy's internal experience and the messages she receives from the world around her.

Discussion Questions

1. How does moving from one community to another affect the way Izzy sees herself?
2. Why can our surroundings change which parts of ourselves we notice most?
3. What is the difference between how we see ourselves and how other people see us?
4. How do other people's assumptions affect Izzy?
5. Why can being told that you are "different" make you start examining things about yourself that never bothered you before?
6. How does Izzy's relationship with her hair change throughout the story?
7. Where do young people learn ideas about what hair, beauty, or "looking right" is supposed to mean?
8. Why do people sometimes feel pressure to look like other members of a cultural or social group?
9. Can someone belong to a culture even if they do not look the way other people expect someone from that culture to look?
10. Why is it important to remember that Latino identity, or any cultural identity, does not have one appearance?
11. What is the difference between curiosity about someone's identity and making an assumption about them?
12. How does comparison affect Izzy's confidence?
13. Which characters help Izzy better understand herself?
14. Where do we see Izzy beginning to decide for herself who she is?
15. What do you think the title PESKY ROOTS means by the end of the story? Could "roots" have more than one meaning?

Activity 1: Identity vs. Assumption

Goal: Distinguish between someone's identity and what others assume about them.

Create two columns: WHAT IZZY KNOWS ABOUT HERSELF and WHAT OTHER PEOPLE ASSUME OR EXPECT. As readers move through the book, collect examples in each column.

For an extension, add a third column: WHAT IZZY LEARNS. Track moments when Izzy begins challenging those assumptions.

Discuss:

- Where do the first two columns conflict?
- How do those conflicts affect Izzy?
- What happens when someone else's assumption begins influencing the way we see ourselves?

Activity 2: Where Do Beauty Messages Come From?

Goal: Introduce media literacy and examine how beauty standards develop.

Brainstorm where young people encounter messages about appearance: social media, television, movies, books, advertisements, family, friends, celebrities, influencers, school, toys, video games, or stores.

Choose one category and investigate which hair textures, skin tones, faces, body types, or clothing appear most often; who appears less often; and who is described or presented as beautiful, popular, professional, fashionable, or successful.

Classroom guideline: analyze media examples rather than one another's bodies or appearances.

Discuss:

- How might constantly seeing one type of appearance presented as "normal" or "exceptional" influence someone like Izzy?

Activity 3: Roots and Branches

Goal: Explore how identity is shaped by both where we come from and who we are becoming.

Create a tree. The ROOTS represent influences that shape a fictional person: family, culture, community, language, important places, traditions, memories, values, ancestors, experiences, or relationships. The TRUNK represents who that person is right now. The BRANCHES represent what they are learning, exploring, dreaming about, or becoming.

Readers may complete this activity about themselves, Izzy, or a fictional character.

Discuss:

- Can someone's roots stay important even while they change?
- Can we discover new things about our identity without losing the things that were already part of us?

Activity 4: Quiet Conflict

Goal: Explore how a story can create tension through interiority rather than action.

Choose a scene in which Izzy spends time thinking, comparing, worrying, wondering, or trying to understand something about herself. Create two categories: WHAT IS HAPPENING OUTSIDE IZZY and WHAT IS HAPPENING INSIDE IZZY.

Discuss:

- Which conflict feels larger?
- How does the author create tension even when the scene is not action-heavy?
- Why might a reader relate strongly to an internal conflict?
- Writing extension: Write a short scene in which almost nothing happens physically, but the character has an important realization.

Closing Reflection

Respond to one: What does Izzy learn about allowing other people to define her? OR What would you say to someone who worries that they are not "enough" of one part of who they are?

AGE PATHWAY 13-14

Ages 13-14

Guiding Question

Who gets to define identity, beauty, and belonging?

Older readers can move beyond Izzy's individual experience to examine the larger social forces surrounding her. This pathway introduces questions about cultural authenticity, beauty standards, bias, social comparison, belonging, and the difference between intention and impact.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Izzy understand herself at the beginning of the novel? How does that understanding change?
2. Why does moving between communities affect Izzy's perception of her own identity?
3. What is the difference between someone's identity and the way other people perceive that identity?
4. Why might someone feel pressure to "prove" that they belong to a culture?
5. Why can labels such as "minority" feel very different when they move from demographic language into someone's personal experience?
6. What beauty standards does Izzy encounter?
7. How might beauty standards influence ideas about what hair or physical features are considered beautiful?
8. What is the difference between direct discrimination and subtle exclusion?
9. What is the difference between someone's intent and the impact of what they say?
10. How does social comparison become internalized?
11. How does Izzy begin reclaiming control over the way she defines herself?
12. How does the mother-daughter relationship shape Izzy's understanding of identity?
13. Does the novel provide one correct way to be Puerto Rican? Why might refusing to create a single definition be important?
14. Can someone belong to a community even if other people do not immediately recognize them as belonging to it?
15. By the end of the novel, what do Izzy's "roots" represent?

Activity 1: Beauty Standards Media Audit

Goal: Analyze how beauty standards are constructed and reinforced.

Using adult-selected advertisements, book covers, television clips, magazine images, social media campaigns, or other media, investigate representation: hair textures, skin tones, facial features, traits associated with beauty or popularity, and who appears to be missing.

For an extension, compare media from two different decades or cultures.

Discuss:

- Are beauty standards natural, or are they taught?
- Who benefits when one appearance becomes the standard everyone else is expected to compare themselves against?
- How might these messages influence Izzy?

- What does change across time or culture suggest about the idea of a universal beauty standard?

Activity 2: Intent vs. Impact

Goal: Explore how seemingly small comments can affect another person.

Choose a conversation or interaction from the book in which one character says something that affects Izzy. Create four categories: WHAT WAS SAID? WHAT MAY HAVE BEEN INTENDED? HOW DID IZZY EXPERIENCE IT? WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN SAID DIFFERENTLY?

Discuss:

- Does someone have to intend harm for their words to cause harm?
- What responsibility do we have after learning that something we said affected another person?
- Can curiosity be expressed without making someone feel like an outsider?

Activity 3: Socratic Seminar

Goal: Use textual evidence to debate a central question about belonging.

Central question: Can you belong to a community even when other people do not recognize you as belonging to it?

Discuss:

- Who has the authority to define someone's identity?
- Does belonging come from ancestry, culture, family, language, personal identification, community recognition, or some combination?
- What happens when those things do not align neatly?
- Why might people expect identity to be simpler than it actually is?
- Can someone be both an insider and an outsider at the same time?

Activity 4: Rewrite the Perspective

Goal: Explore how point of view changes our understanding of conflict.

Choose an important interaction involving Izzy and rewrite the scene from another character's perspective. Consider what that character notices, what they misunderstand, what assumptions they might be making, and what they do not know about Izzy's internal experience.

Discuss:

- Would understanding Izzy's perspective change the way they behaved?
- How might the same interaction feel completely different to two people?

BILINGUAL READING

Words Across Languages

PESKY ROOTS / RAÍCES FASTIDIOSAS can be read in English or Spanish, making the book an opportunity to explore how words, expressions, and ideas move between languages. Readers do not need to speak both languages to participate. The goal is not to test fluency, but to notice unfamiliar words, use context clues, make connections between languages, and think about how language can be part of culture and identity.

Facilitator note

Readers who already speak or understand Spanish should not be expected to translate for a group unless they volunteer.

Ages 8-9: Word Detective

While reading, keep a Word Detective List. When you notice a Spanish or English word you do not recognize, write it down and use context clues before looking it up.

Word	What do I think it means?	What clues helped me?	What does it mean?

- Look at the sentence around the word.
- Notice what the characters are doing.
- Look for words that resemble words you already know.
- Use descriptions, a dictionary, or another trusted resource.

Mini Dictionary

Choose five new words. For each, record the word, language, meaning, and either a sentence or a drawing.

Ages 10-12: Vocabulary Across Languages

Collect words or expressions that are unfamiliar, interesting, connected to Puerto Rican culture or Izzy's family, similar in English and Spanish, difficult to translate exactly, or used differently than expected.

- Word or phrase
- Language
- What I think it means from context
- Definition
- How it is used in the story
- A related word in English or Spanish, if there is one

Look for cognates

A cognate is a word that has a similar origin, meaning, and appearance in two languages. How can recognizing cognates help someone understand a language they are learning? Can similar-looking words ever be misleading?

Ages 13-14: What Changes in Translation?

Choose a short passage and compare the English and Spanish versions. Look for words that translate closely, sentences that are structured differently, idioms or expressions, differences in rhythm or tone, words without one perfect equivalent, and places where the translator may have needed to make a choice.

1. Why can't every sentence be translated word-for-word?
2. What might a translator have to consider besides dictionary definitions?
3. Does one version of a sentence create a slightly different feeling than the other?
4. How can language communicate culture as well as information?
5. What might bilingual readers notice that monolingual readers do not?

Translation Challenge

Choose a short sentence from the book. Without looking at the published translation, try translating it into the other language using dictionaries or classroom resources. Then compare your version with the published translation. What choices were different? Was one necessarily wrong, or were there several ways to communicate the same idea?

Language & Identity

1. How can language be part of someone's identity?
2. Does someone have to speak a particular language to belong to a culture?
3. Why might members of the same family have different relationships with Spanish and English?
4. What assumptions do people sometimes make about someone's identity based on the language they speak, their accent, or whether they are bilingual?
5. How does the novel challenge the idea that there is only one way to belong to a cultural community?

Optional group project

Build a class, library, book club, or family PESKY ROOTS glossary. For each entry, include WORD | LANGUAGE | MEANING | CONTEXT | EXAMPLE.

EXTENSIONS

Take It Further

English Language Arts

- character development
- internal conflict
- symbolism
- setting
- point of view and voice
- quiet protagonists
- theme
- bilingual storytelling
- translation as a creative act
- writing from lived experience

Social Studies

- Puerto Rican history and culture
- movement between Puerto Rico and the mainland United States
- Latino identity in the United States
- Taíno history and cultural survival
- demographic terminology
- how communities and identity can shift across geographic regions

Media Literacy

- beauty standards and peer comparison
- representation
- advertising
- social media
- stereotyping
- cultural assumptions

Social-Emotional Learning

- belonging
- confidence
- friendship
- comparison
- empathy
- navigating change
- self-definition
- responding to assumptions

Writing

- a character entering a new community

- an object that carries family or cultural meaning
- a moment when a character realizes an assumption about them is wrong
- a quiet internal conflict
- a character trying to understand two seemingly contradictory parts of themselves
- a scene about belonging told from two points of view

Quick-Use Ideas for Libraries, Book Clubs & Families

20-minute library or family conversation

Choose one guiding question from the appropriate age pathway, one favorite scene, and one closing reflection. Keep the focus on the character unless the reader chooses to connect personally.

45-60 minute book club

10 minutes: opening question. 15 minutes: discussion. 20 minutes: one creative activity. 10 minutes: share-outs and closing reflection.

Bilingual program

Read a short section in both languages, complete the age-appropriate "Words Across Languages" activity, then discuss what changed or stayed the same across translation.

Possible Author Visit Connections

- identity and belonging
- hair, confidence, and beauty standards
- peer comparison and learning to define yourself
- writing a quiet or introspective protagonist
- bilingual books and translation
- how stories move from idea to publication
- how to become an author and careers in publishing

For virtual or in-person author visits, career-day visits, and current program information, visit JackieGarciaMorales.com or email jackie.garcia.morales@gmail.com.

Final Reflection

A question at the heart of the novel

What happens when the world tells us who we are before we have had the chance to decide for ourselves?

Invite readers to consider how Izzy's understanding of herself changes over the course of the story and what the novel ultimately suggests about identity, confidence, culture, and belonging.

There is no single way to look, speak, behave, or live that makes someone "enough" to belong to their family, culture, or community. Our roots can shape us without limiting who we are allowed to become.

Guide prepared by author for use with PESKY ROOTS / RAÍCES FASTIDIOSAS.

Activities may be adapted for classrooms, libraries, book clubs, families, and community programs.