



**Classroom Guide for  
THE BIRTHDAY SWAP**  
Written and illustrated  
by **Loretta Lopez**

### **Reading Level**

\*Reading Level: Grades 2–3

Interest Level: Grades K–3

Guided Reading Level: O

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 3.1/.5

Lexile™ Measure: 520

\*Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula

### **Themes**

Birthdays, Sisters, Cultural/Family Heritage and Traditions, Sharing and Giving, Community, Latino (Mexican American) Interest

### **Synopsis**

Lori lives with her family close to the United States-Mexican border, and she had relatives living in both the U.S. and Mexico. The family often travels back and forth to visit and shop. It's the day before Lori's older sister Cookie's birthday, and Lori wants to get Cookie her own present, instead of just adding her name to the gifts her parents buy. After her parents gently reject some inappropriate ideas, Lori goes to do errands with her Mother. They cross the border into Mexico where they stop to see Tia Sabina, a baker, and then go to the Mercado, a large market. The following day—Cookie's birthday—is celebrated with a big family reunion at Tio Daniel's house. Lori is surprised to find that this year the party is for her! Cookie has swapped her summer birthday with Lori's winter one in December so that Lori can celebrate at the big summer family party. Many of the items Lori admired while doing errands with her mother, such as the birthday cake at Tia Sabina's and the piñata at the Mercado, are at the party too. And the gift Lori really wanted to give Cookie—a puppy— shows up as a final surprise. It is Lori's birthday gift from her family.

**Background**

*The Birthday Swap* is based on a real-life surprise party that Loretta Lopez, the author and illustrator of the book, had as a child growing up in the Southwest. Says the author, "I relish the color, the flavor, and the humor inherent in much of the Mexican American culture."

**BEFORE READING****Prereading Focus Questions**

Before introducing the book, you may wish to have students discuss one or more of the following questions as a motivation for reading.

1. How old will you be on your next birthday? When is it? Does the time of year when your birthday occurs make a difference in what you do to celebrate?
2. With whom do you usually spend your birthday? With family? Friends? Classmates?
3. What kinds of birthday celebrations have you shared? Does everyone you know celebrate in the same way?
4. What things do you think about when you are selecting a gift for someone? What do you think is the most important thing about giving a gift? Why?
5. Whom among your friends or family would you most like to surprise with a special celebration? If you were planning a surprise for that person, what would it be?

**Teaching Tip**

Use *THE Birthday Swap* as part of your observation of Hispanic Heritage Month (September 15-October 15). Through its text and illustrations, the book offers warm scenes of Mexican American family life, a traditional market, foods, and celebration. The book is also available in Spanish as *¡Qué Sorpresa De Cumpleaños!*

**Exploring the Book**

Show the book cover to the class. Read aloud the title and ask students what they think a birthday swap might be. Write students' responses on chart paper to consult after reading the book.

Talk about the cover illustration. Ask students who they think the people in the picture are. Are they the same age? Who is having a birthday?

Direct students to the Award winner seal on the cover. Discuss what makes a book an award winner. List students' ideas on the board.

**Setting a Purpose for Reading**

Ask students to read to find out who the girls are on the cover and what the book title means.

You may also wish to have students think about why THE BIRTHDAY SWAP has won awards.

**VOCABULARY**

Write the following birthday-related words from the book on the chalkboard. Challenge students to think of different ways to sort the words. For example: food, things to do at a party, kinds of celebrations. Encourage students to add other words to each category. Then have students take turns using the words in their own sentences.

celebrate	gift	cookout	baker
birthday	ice cream	reunion	cake
decorations	party	ribbons	sugary
piñata	band	bow	surprise
candles	dancing	older	food

**Teacher Tip**

You will want to be sensitive to the fact that for religious and other reasons, not all children celebrate birthdays. Also, some children may be unfamiliar with the kind of large, extended family described in the book.

**READING AND RESPONDING****Discussion Questions**

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to help guide their understanding of the book. Encourage students to refer to passages in the book to support their responses.

1. Where is the town in which Lori and her family live?
2. When is her birthday?
3. Why does Lori want to get Cookie a gift this year?
4. What are some of her ideas for gifts? Why aren't they good choices?
5. What kind of work does Tia Sabina do? Why does Lori's mom stop there?
6. What is the Mercado like? How is it different from where your family shops?
7. Why aren't the toys and trinkets in the curio shop right for Cookie?
8. Is a piñata a good gift for Cookie? Why or why not? Why does Lori's mom talk to the piñata maker?

9. Why does Lori's mother make her a new dress?
10. Why do Lori's brothers leave church early?
11. What is the birthday swap?
12. What other surprises does Lori have?

### Literature Circles

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in developing the roles of the circle members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to those in the Discussion Question or Reader's Response sections to help group members explore the book.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for events early in the story that are tied to the ending.
- The **Illustrator** might draw other gifts they imagine Lori gets from friends and family members at the party.
- The **Connector** might find out about other things people sometimes do at family reunions.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion points for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might learn more about and report on the tradition of piñatas.

\*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: *Getting Started With Literature Circles* by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), *Literature Circles: Voice And Choice In Book Clubs And Reading Groups* by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and LITERATURE CIRCLES RESOURCE GUIDE by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

### Reader's Response

Use the following questions or similar ones to help students practice active reading and personalize what they have read. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals or in oral discussion.

1. What does this story tell you about Lori's family?
2. How many different examples of giving did you notice in the book? What were they?
3. How do the illustrations help you understand the story?
4. Have you ever been in a curio store like the one Lori was in? Why do people like to take home souvenirs?
5. How did you feel about the story ending? Was it a surprise to you? Why?
6. With whom would you want to swap a birthday? Why?

### Other Writing Activities

You may wish to have students participate in one or more of the following writing activities. Set aside time for them to share and discuss their work.

1. In the story, Lori never does find a gift for her sister. Describe a gift that you think Lori could give to Cookie when she celebrates her birthday in December.
2. Write and design an invitation to the party for Lori. Be sure to mention that it's a surprise.
3. Write a compare-and-contrast paragraph about a Mercado in Mexico and a supermarket in the United States.
4. Suppose you are Lori. Write a letter to Cookie to thank her for the birthday swap.

### ELL (ESL) Teaching Strategies

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. Partner Spanish speakers with strong English language students. Direct them to the glossary in the front of the book. Have the Spanish speakers teach their partners how to say these words correctly. Then have the English speakers pick five words from the book and teach them to their partners.
2. Have students write or dictate questions about the book. Set aside time to help students explore these queries.
3. Model how to use the illustrations to enhance understanding of the text. Read aloud and comment on how an illustration provides clues to the words. (See also the Art activity in the Interdisciplinary Activities section below.)

#### Teacher Tip

You may wish to pair Spanish speakers with strong English speakers to work with both the English and Spanish versions of the book, translating from one language to the other.

### INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

#### Social Studies

1. Provide a map showing the United States-Mexican border. Have students locate the places listed below and talk about how many people who live in border towns cross back and forth on a regular basis to see family or go to work.

Texas  
Mexico

Rio Grande  
El Paso

Juárez

2. Ask students to do research to learn more about Mexico. Questions they might seek answers to include:

- What is Mexico's capital? In which Mexican state is it located?
- What bodies of water border Mexico?
- What language do its people mainly speak?
- What are some special holidays and customs in Mexico?
- What are some things Mexico is famous for?

### Math

Remind students that in the story Lori's real birthday is in December. Have students take a survey to learn the birthday month of everyone in the class. Then ask students to make a graph based on this information. Discuss the results and draw some conclusions about the data collected.

### Music

A mariachi band played at the party in the book. If possible, play a CD or tape recording of mariachi music for the class. Help students identify the instruments in the band. If you wish, students may be encouraged to dance or move to the music.

### Art

Take students on an Art Walk through the book. As you turn the pages, ask questions such as:

- What are some things Lori's family has for breakfast?
- What kinds of cakes does Tia Sabina make?
- What might be in the barrels in the Mercado?
- What other kinds of piñatas does the store sell?
- What is in the box Lori's brother is holding? Why does Cookie have a finger to her lips?
- What is the weather like the day of the party?
- What food is served at the party?

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR/ILLUSTRATOR

**Loretta Lopez** grew up in El Paso, Texas, near the Mexican border. She feels that her work is inspired by her personal experiences there. "I consider my illustrations to be a celebration of the love I have for my cultural heritage, my native southwest, and life in general."

Lopez earned a degree in fine art from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. She has lived in several places in the United States and currently resides in New York City.

*The Birthday Swap* has been praised by *Booklist* as a warm autobiographical story with "bright, cheerful pictures and a wonderful surprise ending." The book is also a "Choices" selection of the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) and is included on the Commended List of the Américas Award. In addition to writing and illustrating *The Birthday Swap*, Lopez has illustrated the three books in the Say Hola to Spanish series—*Say Hola to Spanish*, *Say Hola to Spanish*, *Otra Vez (Again!)*, and *Say Hola to Spanish at the Circus*, all available from Lee & Low Books.

### RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Learn more about *The Birthday Swap*:

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/21/pb/the\\_birthday\\_swap](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/21/pb/the_birthday_swap)

*The Birthday Swap* in Spanish:

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/156/hc/que\\_sorpresa\\_de\\_cumpleanos](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/156/hc/que_sorpresa_de_cumpleanos)

BookTalk with Loretta Lopez:  
<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/lopez.mhtml>

Other books illustrated by Loretta Lopez:

*Say Hola to Spanish:*

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/103/hc/say\\_hola\\_to\\_spanish](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/103/hc/say_hola_to_spanish)

*Say Hola to Spanish Otra Vez:*

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/104/hc/say\\_hola\\_to\\_spanish\\_otra\\_vez\\_again](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/104/hc/say_hola_to_spanish_otra_vez_again)

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