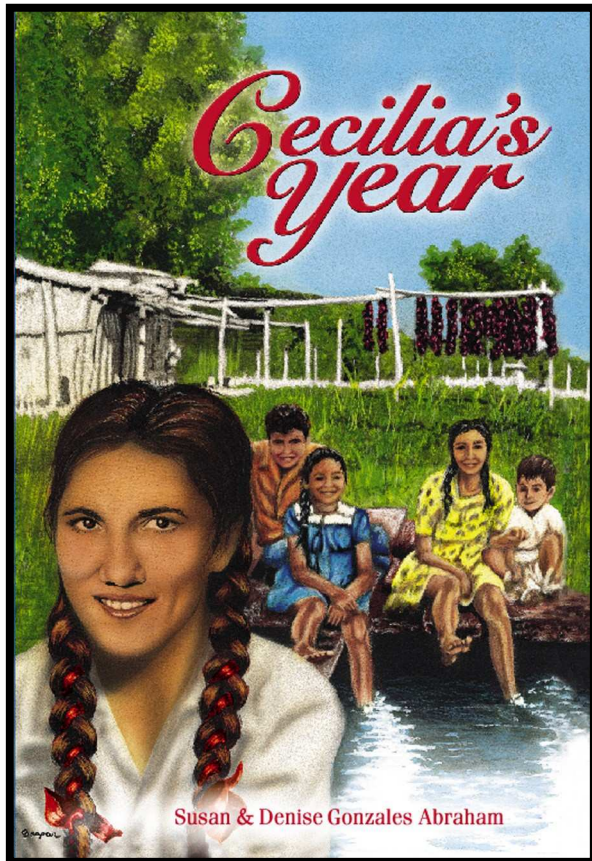


Teacher's Guide to  
**CECILIA'S YEAR**  
*by* Susan and Denise Abraham



**THEMES**

Family life  
Farm Life Rural New Mexico  
History (New Mexico, 20th Century, Depression Era)  
Adolescence and Parental Conflict  
Gender roles  
Schools

**BOOK SUMMARY**

Fourteen-year old Maria Cecilia Gonzales lives with her family on a farm in the Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico. She's smart, loves to read, and wants desperately to go to high school and then on to a job in the big city. But since it's the 1930's, just after the Depression, her mother believes her daughter's highest aim should be to run a home—to cook, sew and raise children. Cecilia struggles between her desire to fulfill her goals and her deep appreciation for her family and the rhythm of life on a farm. As she grapples with her conflicted feelings, she also experiences her first tender feelings of romantic love.

**TEACHING OVERVIEW**

The story of Cecilia's dream is organized by months of the year. The story uses the months to explore seasonal themes as they relate to the routines of farm life and working the land and the crops. It is also a story of deep-rooted ties to family and place.

This guide is broken by months into twelve sections each containing six questions and two activities followed by higher level Before, During and After whole book comprehension strategies. This section provides 15 additional options for developing deeper cognitive reasoning skills.

The questions and activities accomplish three objectives. First, they take into account and cover the spectrum of Bloom's Taxonomy. Second, they align nicely with generalized Language Arts content standards for listening, speaking, reading, writing and viewing skills. Specific questions and activities also develop content knowledge in social studies, math and science. And third, many are designed to help students relate the events of the book to their own lives.



## JUNIO

### QUESTIONS:

1. Describe the setting of the novel.
2. List the names of Cecilia's brothers and sisters.
3. What is the cause of the disagreement between Mamá and Cecilia?
4. What details tell us Cecilia's family is not wealthy?
5. Explain why you think the Gonzales family is lucky to have Tía Sara living with them.
6. Do you plan to stay where you live all your life? Where would you like to live and why would you like to live there?

### ACTIVITIES:

- A. Write a letter to Mamá. In the letter try to convince her to let Cecilia go to high school.
- B. With a partner, make a list of chores mentioned in this chapter. Talk about which ones you would or would not like to do. Fold a piece of paper in half and write your names at the top of each column. Divide all the chores and write the ones each of you would do under your names.

## JULIO

### QUESTIONS:

1. What does Mamá complain about at the beginning of the chapter?
2. What activity in this chapter leaves the children looking like ghosts?
3. What do you think is the main reason Cecilia is excited about the dance?
4. Cecilia's opinion of makeup is different from her mother's. Do you think girls her age should be allowed to wear makeup? Why or why not?
5. Why is San Isidro Church a good name for a church in Cecilia's town of Derry?
6. Who is Belle? What is she like?

### ACTIVITIES:

- A. Write a description of yourself as if you were writing to a pen pal who has never seen you. Include the way you like to dress. Begin your letter like this: *Dear \_\_\_\_\_, I know you are wondering what I look like, so I'm going to write a description of myself.*
- B. Plan the perfect party and make an invitation for your class. Include the location, entertainment, decorations and food for your party. Pretend you have a lot of money and can have it anywhere in the world.

## AGOSTO

### QUESTIONS:

1. What has Roberto been doing lately?
2. What are some of the things Elías loves? What does he not like?
3. Would you like an uncle like Tío Ben? Explain.
4. What details lead you to infer that Tía María is not a generous person?
5. What steps must Mamá take to get new shoes for her children?
6. What difference of opinion do Cecilia and her brother Elías discuss?

### ACTIVITIES:

- A. Choose a favorite relative. Describe that person and be sure to explain why he or she is special.
- B. Cecilia's joy is reading. Describe your greatest joy or favorite thing to do.

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## SEPTIEMBRE

### QUESTIONS:

1. Why is it important to Cecilia to make high grades this year?
2. How do you know Papá is a generous man?
3. What accident ruins Cecilia's first day at school?
4. Do you think Cecilia is mean to wish the accident happened to Belle? Why or why not?
5. Why has Tía María been sending Cecilia's family old bread?
6. What surprising thing does Cecilia discover about Roberto and the eggs? Do you think she was right to not tell Mamá? What would you have done and why?

### ACTIVITIES:

- A. With a partner, compare and contrast your school to Cecilia's. List the differences on paper or make a Venn diagram.
- B. Draw and label a floor plan of your classroom. Then draw a floor plan of how you imagine Cecilia's classroom (see pg. 61-62). Include the items mentioned in the book, and then add other items you think would be in the room.

## OCTUBRE

### QUESTIONS:

1. Describe what Cecilia sees and smells on the farm in October.
2. What is the purpose of the family's camping trip?
3. How does Papá share a little of his own childhood with his children?
4. What terrible accident happens to Fito?
5. Do you think Cecilia should blame herself for Fito's accident? Why or why not?
6. Do you think Tía Sara was right to obey her father instead of marrying the man she loved? Why or why not?

### ACTIVITIES:

- A. Make a list of the main events in this chapter in the order they happened. Start with the family setting out in the wagon (see pg.77).
- B. With a partner, discuss the causes and effects of Fito's accident.


## NOVIEMBRE

### QUESTIONS:

1. What things does Cecilia do for Fito to show him she is sorry about the accident?
2. What simile do the authors use to describe Cecilia's feeling of guilt?
3. What qualities does Cecilia admire in her cousin Carmela?
4. What does Roberto do at the end of the play that makes Mamá angry?
5. How is Papá's attitude about Roberto's behavior different from Mamá's? Whose attitude do you prefer?
6. What advice does Prima Carmela give to Cecilia?

### ACTIVITIES:

- A. Working in groups, visit your library or use the Internet to read famous myths. Then present a summary and illustration of the myth you read to the class. Here some you can choose: Pandora's Box, King Midas, Pegasus, Medusa, Apollo and Daphne, Hercules and His Twelve Labors, Arachne.



Odysseus, Jason and the Golden Fleece.

- B. Find a book in the library on constellations such as Orion the Hunter or use the Internet. Illustrate a constellation on paper and present it to class.

## DICIEMBRE

### QUESTIONS:

1. At the beginning of the chapter, what words and phrases do the authors use to help you “feel” the cold?
2. How does Cecilia feel when Belle tells her everyone knows she and Johnny like each other?
3. The children at the party participate in two fun activities. If you had to choose between them, which would you prefer to do at a party? Why?
4. What decision does Cecilia make at the end of the party that shows she is a sentimental person?
5. Explain how Fito and Roberto are able to provide the family with a Christmas tree.
6. What gives Cecilia hope that her mother might let her go to school after all?

### ACTIVITIES:

- A. Read the description of the family’s Christmas tree (see pg. 121). Then draw and color a picture of the tree as you imagine it looked.
- B. Read a fun holiday picture book and give a summary to the class. Some good ones are:

Tommie dePaola

- *The Night of Las Posadas*
- *The Story of the Three Wise Kings*
- *The Legend of the Poinsettia*

Argentinian Palacios

- *A Christmas Surprise for Chabelita*

Rudolfo Anaya

- *The Farolitos of Christmas*

Pat Mora and Charles Ramirez Berg

- *The Gift of the Poinsettia*

### **Hanukkah:**

Eric Kimmel

- *Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins*

Amy Erlich

- *The Story of Hanukkah*

Karla Kuskin

- *A Great Miracle Happened There*


## ENERO


### QUESTIONS:

1. What details at the beginning of the chapter show the Gonzales family takes good care of their animals?
2. What job does Mamá say Cecilia and Belia must do?
3. What do you learn about Cecilia from her New Year’s resolution?

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4. How does the family feel during the storm, and what worries them the most?
  5. Why do you think Cecilia “felt a kinship” with Elnora, the heroine of the book she was reading?
  6. Do you think a doll baptism is a good idea or a foolish idea? Why?

**ACTIVITIES:**

- A. Make a list of New Year’s resolutions for yourself, or in a group make a list of resolutions for the class.
- B. Mamá is superstitious about lightning. Research superstitions and tell the class about some interesting ones and how they came about.

**FEBRERO**

**QUESTIONS:**

1. Who do you think put the note in Cecilia’s book?
2. What farming task do Papá and Elías do in February?
3. What evidence is there that Papá and Mamá love each other?
4. The family sits down to a delicious meal. Why do you think they all thought it tasted so good? What kind of meal do you enjoy after a busy day?
5. How does Cecilia’s class celebrate Valentine’s Day? Compare it to Valentine’s Day at your school.
6. What mystery puzzles Cecilia at the end of the chapter?

**ACTIVITIES:**

- A. Do you think students should get a school holiday on Valentine’s Day? Write a letter to your principal persuading him or her to make it a school holiday.
- B. Decide what you think the perfect valentine should look like. Then make the valentine and give it to someone special on Valentine’s Day.

**MARZO**

**QUESTIONS:**

1. If you won a spelling bee, would you be happy with a dictionary for a prize? Why do you think the thought of owning a dictionary excites Cecilia so much?
2. Why is Cecilia so tired? Do you think Mamá is fair to be angry with Cecilia for falling asleep?
3. Why does Papá warn the family not to spend too much money on Easter clothes? What does Tía Sara offer to do?
4. Cecilia and Elías drink Tío Santiago’s goat milk to be polite. Tell about a time you did something you found unpleasant just to be polite and not hurt someone’s feelings.
5. How does the family pay for new Easter clothes?
6. How was Cecilia’s family rewarded for their kindness to the gypsies?


**ACTIVITIES:**

- A. Research goats and how they are raised.
- B. Read the description of the gypsy camp (see pg. 166-167) and draw it as you imagine it.

**ABRIL**

**QUESTIONS:**

1. Who were the men in black suits, and why did they come to the farm?
2. What does Cecilia reveal about herself when she speaks to the two men?

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3. Using context clues, write what you think the word “foreclosure” means. Use a dictionary to check if you are right.
  4. Why is Cecilia so upset about fainting in church?
  5. What important messages are contained in the two letters the family receives?
  6. What does Mamá say that shatters Cecilia’s dreams at the end of the chapter?

**ACTIVITIES:**

- A. Pretend you are Cecilia or Elías. Write a letter to Mr. Coke Johnson convincing him not to foreclose on the farm.
- B. Think about one member of the family dressed in his or her Easter outfit (see pg. 178). Draw and color that person as you imagine he or she looked.

## MAYO

**QUESTIONS:**

1. Describe Cecilia’s state of mind at the beginning of the chapter.
2. How does Cecilia hurt Johnny’s feelings? Do you think she should have told him the truth? Why do you think she didn’t?
3. What does Mamá do to let Cecilia know she loves her? Why is the cape so dear to Mamá?
4. How does Miss Malone come to Cecilia’s rescue?
5. Do you think Belle was right in telling Johnny the truth about why Cecilia treated him coldly? Explain why or why not.
6. Explain the reasons Cecilia has for being happy at the end of the book.

**ACTIVITIES:**


- A. In this chapter, Cecilia realizes time flies quickly and wonders what her life will be like in the future. What do you think your life will be like twenty years from now? Describe it.
- B. Interview an older relative or friend about his or her childhood experiences. Write about one memory to present to the class.

## HIGHER LEVEL COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES

Each of the following three sections contains five questions and/or activities. The incorporation of these additional enrichment ideas ensures skill development in these key areas: doing research, thinking critically, discussing complex ideas, reviewing with attention to detail, reading for deeper meaning, and writing for variety of purposes.

### BEFORE READING

1. Why do you think the authors named this book *Cecilia’s Year*?
2. Is there anything you have wanted or something you wanted to do that others were opposed to? How did you resolve this?
3. Cecilia’s house is made of adobe. What is adobe and how is it made? What are the advantages and disadvantages of using it to build a house? In what part of the United States is adobe construction common? Draw an adobe structure you would like to live or work in.
4. Research and write a brief report on President Porfirio Díaz of Mexico or President William Taft of the United States. Present it to class.

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5. Would you rather shop from a catalog, through the Internet or at a store? Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each. Write them on chart paper and present them to the class.

### AS READING PROGRESSES

1. Each chapter of *Cecilia's Year* is named for a month in which it took place. After reading each chapter, write your own chapter title. Explain why your titles are appropriate for each chapter.
2. Note the photographs used for each chapter. What do they add to your understanding of the story? What is your interpretation of their meaning and how do they extend the meaning of the text?
3. After reading *Octubre*, go back and reread p. 87. If Tía Sara had married Edmundo, and her father had been wrong, what might her life have been like? If she had married Edmundo, and her father had been right, what might her life have been like?
4. After reading *Enero*, go back and reread pg. 187. Have you ever identified with a character in a book or a story you have read the way Cecilia does with Elnora? How are you like that character? How are you different? In *Abril*, Cecilia felt hope rising in her heart (see pg. 178). Write a poem about hope using the five senses:  
Line 1: Tell what color hope is. (Example: Hope is green and purple)  
Line 2: Tell what hope tastes like.  
Line 3: Tell what hope sounds like.  
Line 4: Tell what hope looks like.  
Line 5: Tell how hope makes you feel.

### AFTER READING

1. Dichos, or proverbs, are a way of sharing knowledge and wisdom. The dichos used in this book are translated literally in the glossary. Choose five dichos used in the book and explain what they mean in your own words.
2. How Cecilia's family lived and worked is different from how your family lives and works today. Fold a large piece of paper in half lengthwise. At the top, label one side "Life in 1935" and the other side "Life Today." In pairs or small groups, brainstorm and discuss differences in the following areas: Transportation, School, Housework, Chores, Food, Shopping, Status of Women, Entertainment. List your observations under the appropriate label on your paper.
3. Draw a map of Cecilia's farming community as you imagine it. Include her house, the houses of her friends and relatives, the store, the school, the church, the canal, the mountains, and anything else you want to include.
4. What do you think are some of the themes of the book? (Example: Follow your dream, Don't ever give up; Anything is possible with hope and hard work; Adolescence and parental conflict; The importance of education; The importance of family....)
5. Do you think Mamá and Papá are good parents to their children? Explain and show concrete examples from the book to support your opinion.



### **About the Authors**

Susan and Denise Gonzales Abraham are daughters of Cecilia Gonzales Abraham, the title character of *Cecilia's Year*. The sisters were born and raised in El Paso, Texas, but spent holidays and every summer on their grandparent's farm in Derry, New Mexico. They both graduated from the University of Texas at El Paso with a B.S. in Education. This, their first novel, is a tribute to their mother and to the deep roots of their family in rural New Mexico. They have written a sequel to *Cecilia's Year*, which is titled *Surprising Cecilia*. It will be available in the Fall of 2005.

Susan taught in the El Paso Independent School District for twenty-nine years as a high school English and business education teacher before retiring in 2002.

Denise received a master's degree in reading education from Arizona State University. She has taught Spanish, English, reading skills, and English as a Second Language in Phoenix, Arizona and El Paso. She is an elementary school librarian with the Ysleta Independent School District in El Paso.