

STUDY GUIDE

Breaking Through

Francisco Jiménez

About the Book

Breaking Through

Text by Kathryn Bold

Like the Joad family in the Steinbeck classic, *Grapes of Wrath*, the Jimenez's came to California to escape poverty and find a better life. In a short story titled "Crossing *la Frontera*" (the border), told from a child's point of view, Jimenez describes his family's flight from their home in a small village north of Guadalajara across the border into the United States:

"On both sides of the fence were armed guards in green uniforms. Papa called them *la migra* and explained that we had to cross the fence to the other side, without being seen by these men. If we succeeded, we would enter los Estados Unidos...We continued walking along the wire wall, until Papa spotted a small hole underneath the fence. Papa got on his knees and, with his hands, made the opening larger. We all crawled through it like snakes."

"A few minutes later, we were picked up by a woman whom Papa had contacted in Mexicali. She had promised to pick us up in her car and drive us, for a fee, to a place where we would find work. As we traveled north through the night, I fell asleep for a long time on Mama's lap. I woke up at dawn and heard the woman say, we're entering the San Joaquin Valley. Here you'll find plenty of work. 'This is the beginning of a new life,' Mama said, taking a deep breath. 'A good life,' Papa answered.

As it turned out, many years would pass before anyone in the Jiménez family experienced that good life. Jiménez's father, Francisco, his mother Joaquina, and his older brother Roberto, found work picking crops in the fields. So began the cycle of moving from camp to camp, following the harvest.

The family, which eventually grew to nine children, lived in one-room shacks and tents. In the summer, they picked strawberries in Santa Maria. Then they traveled to Fresno to

pick grapes in early September and on to Corcoran and Bakersfield to pick cotton in the winter. In February, they moved back to Santa Maria to thin lettuce and top carrots.

Working from sunup to sundown, the entire family earned just \$15 a day. Jiménez called this nomadic existence "the circuit" in a short story by that title that has been reproduced many times in textbooks and anthologies of American literature.

"It's a symbolic circuit," he says. "If you're a migrant worker, you're constantly living in poverty. It's very difficult to get out of it."

Yet Jiménez soon found relief from the hard life in the fields and a way to escape the circuit: school. "I came to realize that learning and knowledge were the only stable things in my life. Whatever I learned in school, that knowledge would stay with me no matter how many times we moved."

Because Jiménez could not start school until after the mid-November harvest and because he knew so little English, he struggled to keep up with his classmates. One teacher even labeled him mentally retarded.

"I would start school and find myself behind, especially in English," he remembers. "School for the first nine years was very sporadic."

Still, Jiménez was luckier than his brother Roberto, who was old enough to pick cotton and therefore could not start school until February. In "The Circuit," Jiménez describes the pain of leaving his brother behind on his first day back at school:

"I woke up early that morning and lay in bed, looking at the stars and savoring the thought of not going to work and starting sixth grade for the first time that year. Since I could not sleep, I decided to get up and join Papa and Roberto at breakfast. I sat at the table across from Roberto, but I kept my head down. I did not want to look up and face him. I knew he was sad. He was not going to school today. He was not going tomorrow, or next week, or next month."

Unlike many of his classmates, Jiménez looked forward to the days he spent in school. "I had many embarrassing moments; but in spite of those, I enjoyed the environment," he says. "School was a lot nicer than home. Many times, we lived in tents with dirt floors, no electricity or plumbing. In school we had electricity, plumbing, lighting. We even had toys."

Although the physical environment was pleasant, interactions with classmates often were not. "Kids would call me spic, or greaser, tamale wrapper. They made fun of my thick accent and whenever I made grammatical mistakes. That really hurt. I withdrew and became quiet," Jiménez says.

Fortunately, Jiménez sometimes encountered a friendly teacher who recognized his desire to learn. His sixth-grade teacher, Mr. Lema, helped him with his English during lunch. Discovering that Jiménez enjoyed music, the universal language, Lema offered to teach him to play the trumpet.

But Jiménez never got his first lesson. When he went home to tell his mother and father the good news about his music lessons, he found the family's possessions neatly packed into cardboard boxes. They were moving again.

To compensate for his sporadic education, Jiménez began teaching himself. He would jot down words he was trying to memorize on a small note pad and carry it with him into the fields so he could study during his breaks.

Whenever his family visited the local public dump to collect discarded clothes, wood for a floor, and other necessities, Jiménez would pick up books. Once he found a single volume of an encyclopedia. Not realizing it was part of a 20-volume set, he leafed through its pages, figuring that if he could learn to read the whole thing, he'd know just about everything there was to know.

Wherever he was, Jiménez always knew to run and hide from *la migra* (Immigration and Naturalization Service agents), especially when they made their sweeps through the fields and camps.

Jiménez and his family lived in fear of being deported. His father had a visa, but the others did not; visas were too expensive. Jiménez remembers the INS officers interrogating people and sometimes beating them. When someone asked where he was born, he lied.

When he was in junior high school, INS agents entered Jiménez's classroom and arrested him as an illegal immigrant. The family was deported to Mexico but returned after several weeks with visas obtained with the help of a Japanese sharecropper who sponsored them.

Jiménez's life changed forever when he was about to enter high school. Because his father suffered from permanent back pain--probably from too many hours bent over the crops--he could no longer work in the fields. It was up to Roberto to support the family.

Roberto found a job as a janitor at a school in Santa Maria; Jiménez also worked for a janitorial company. Now the family did not have to follow the harvest. Now Jiménez could start school with the rest of the class and keep up with his studies.

"The work was indoors; and after I was done cleaning, I could study in an office," he says. "This was my chance."

With his newfound stability, Jiménez thrived. He became student-body president of his high school and earned a 3.7 GPA. A guidance counselor, disturbed that a gifted student was not going to college because the family could not afford to send him, managed to arrange for Jiménez to obtain scholarships and student loans so that he could enroll at Santa Clara University.

Before Reading the Book
Breaking Through

- Sometimes life takes an unexpected turn. With a partner, think about a dream you have for the future. Then, discuss this scenario: Imagine that your family has to relocate to another country. How would you cope with losing something – a person, a way of life, an experience? Make notes about how you would react to such a difficult situation. What plans would you make to fulfill your dreams? Discuss your revised vision of the future with your partner. As you read *Breaking Through*, pay attention to how Francisco deals with his own obstacles of moving to the United States and how he achieved his dreams.

Make a Connection
Breaking Through

Have students remember a time when they have had to say goodbye to someone. What positive or negative emotions did they experience?

Have students recall a time when they conquered a fear or mastered a task that was difficult for them. Discuss how they felt when they succeeded.

Have students complete this sentence: I once had to start over _____. They may recall a project they were building or a larger challenge in life. Discuss the hardships and rewards of starting over.

Have students remember a time when they made a new friend. Discuss how valuable a friend can be in a difficult situation.

Have students think of a time when they traveled to a new place. Were they excited or anxious? Discuss the emotions associated with experiencing an unfamiliar location or landscape.

As they read, have students keep notes about the external and internal conflicts that Francisco experiences and how he deals with each one.

Breaking Through

Reflection and Discussion Questions

1. What did you learn about the experience of Mexican-American migrant farmworkers of the 1940s? What did you learn about the European-American landowners?
2. How different would this book be if it were about migrant farm workers of Mexican descent today?
3. How would these stories be different if they were told from the eyes of the father in the story? From one of Francisco's teachers? From one of the landowners?
4. What stereotypes are there about Mexican-Americans? Mexico? Migrant farm workers?
5. What are some examples of racial prejudice in this story?
6. What are some examples of power in this story? How is it used?
7. There is great controversy in many communities about "English - only" education. What are the arguments about it? Who is making the arguments? Who has power in these arguments and how are they using this power? What do you think about the "English - only" debate?
8. What do you know of migrant farm workers in your community? Of Mexican-Americans? How could you find out more? What do the Mexican-Americans in your community express as their needs (if they are heard in your community)?
9. This book is for adults and children. If you were giving this book as a gift to a child what would you want the child to know about the book and how young a child would you give this book to?
10. In the section about the author, Jimenez talks about being given *The Grapes of Wrath* as a teenager and realizing it was the first book he had read to which he could relate. What are the stories of your cultural heritage and when did you read them? What stories are the children in your community being asked to read and does it relate to their cultural heritage? What values does this book share in its telling? How would you and folks from your congregation greet migrant farm workers such as Francisco's family if they showed up in church? How is this book helpful in unlearning racism?

11. What questions do you still have that you would like the group to discuss?
12. What do you still wish to know more about and will explore on your own?
13. What did you like most and least about the book?
14. What did you feel and learn about yourself?

Things to Discuss
Breaking Through

Overall Reaction

1. How did the story impact you and what did you learn from the book?
2. What do you think contributed to the author *Breaking Through* successfully?

Comparing the Immigrant Experience

1. If you are an immigrant to this country how was Professor Jiménez's life story similar or different than your own story?
2. If you were born in this country, how has your life or your family's been similar to or different from the Jiménez family?
3. Given that the story was written about events nearly 45 years ago, how do you think things are similar or different for immigrants in 2003?
4. Given the continuous controversies surrounding immigration laws in the state and country, are there any changes you think need to be made?

The Role of Our Community in Educating Our Children

1. What teachers made an impact in your life and why?
2. Should the community play a role in supporting the education of ALL students?
3. What suggestions do you have for assisting and improving bilingual education?

Relating One's Own Personal Story

1. What times have there been in your life when you have had a *Breaking Through* experience?

2. What helped you succeed?

Closing

1. As a result of the **Silicon Valley Reads-One Book One Community** project, what impact do you think reading and discussing the book will make on you or the community as a whole?
2. Do you have any suggestions for future book selections for the community?

Symbolism
Breaking Through

Authors often use symbols – people, places, or things that have their own meaning and also stand for something else to deepen a story’s message. Francisco Jiménez quotes Thomas Mann, *Dr. Faustus* in the beginning of the book – What is the symbolism Jiménez is trying to get across?

“There is at bottom only one problem in the world...
How does one break through?
How does one get into the open?
How does one burst the cocoon and become a butterfly?”

Themes
Breaking Through

Students will see the following themes, or main ideas, developed in detail in *Breaking Through*.

- **Breaking down barriers**
- **Striving for a better way of life**
- **Helping to support your family**
- **Having a strong work ethic**
- **The value of education**
- **Being respectful to others**
- **Encountering racism**
- **Being proud of your heritage**
- **Making friends and becoming a leader at school**
- **Having your parents rely on you for many things**
- **Trying to balance the traditions of your family with a new set of values and a different way of life**

- **Working hard to fulfill your dreams**
- **Writing a story about your life**