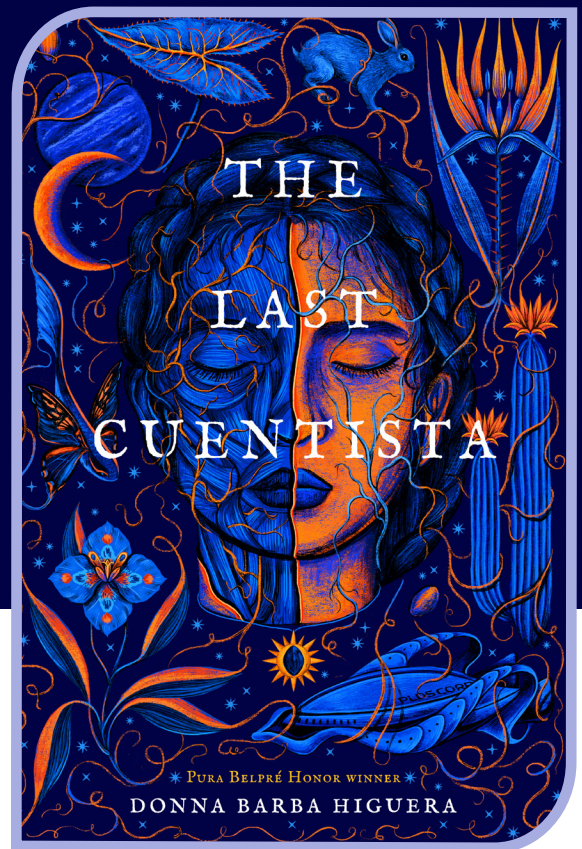


# Educator Guide

# The Last Cuentista

by Donna Barba Higuera



## Synopsis

Había una vez . . .

There lived a girl named Petra Peña, who wanted nothing more than to be a storyteller, like her abuelita.

But Petra's world is ending. Earth has been destroyed by a comet, and only a few hundred scientists and their children – among them Petra and her family – have been chosen to journey to a new planet. They are the ones who must carry on the human race.

Hundreds of years later, Petra wakes to this new planet – and the discovery that she is the only person who remembers Earth. A sinister Collective has taken over the ship during its journey, bent on erasing the sins of humanity's past. They have systematically purged the memories of all aboard – or purged them altogether.

Petra alone now carries the stories of our past, and with them, any hope for our future. Can she make them live again?

Pura Belpré Honor-winning author Donna Barba Higuera presents us with a brilliant journey through the stars, to the very heart of what makes us human.

## About the Author



Donna Barba Higuera grew up in Central California and now lives in the Pacific Northwest. She has spent her entire life blending folklore with her experiences into stories that fill her imagination. Now she weaves them to write picture books and novels. Donna's first book, *Lupe Wong Won't Dance*, won a PNBA Book Award, a Sid Fleishman Award, and a Pura Belpré Honor. *The Last Cuentista* is her second novel.

## About the Discussion Guide Creator

Patricia Ruiz-Rivera, author of the educator guide, has a doctoral degree in Comparative Literature with a focus on Latin American and French culture, fiction, and history. Patricia is an avid reader who speaks five languages, loves golden retriever puppies, and drinks copious amounts of coffee.

# Before Reading

Students will complete mini-research projects, answer critical questions and discuss expectations about the book. Teachers will facilitate discussions via an online virtual call and/or record answers on an online bulletin board or learning management system such as Canvas, Blackboard, or Moodle.

## 1. Mini Dictionary:

There are some words that come into play in this novel which students might not have experienced prior. Review this mini dictionary with students and ask them to write down any words they may not recognize, look them up on an online dictionary, and write their definition in a notebook.

- a. Cuento: story
- b. Cuentista: storyteller
- c. Había una vez/Érase una vez: Once upon a time
- d. En los tiempos viejos: in the old times/in the olden days
- e. Abuelita: diminutive for abuela (grandma)
- f. Pobrecito: diminutive for “poor guy”
- g. Panadería: bakery
- h. Subirse el muerto: sleep paralysis
- i. Rubio: blond/redhead
- j. Tristeza: sadness
- k. Y se acaba lo que se daba: That’s all there is to it

## 2. Summary:

Read the summary for *The Last Cuentista* and keep a running list of words you may be unfamiliar with in your notebook. Write down ways in which you think the story will unfold, including predictions based on details and examples from the summary. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4; 4-5.2]**

## 3. Research Planets:

Visit NASA’s [Exoplanet Exploration website](#). Write down the definition for exoplanet and keep a list of planets that scientists suggest might be habitable. After you’re done, write a paragraph of the things that you would miss from Earth and explain why you’d miss them. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.9]**

#### 4. Learn About the Author:

Research the author, Donna Barba Higuera. Study her author biography and do some research on the books that she had previously written. What are they about? Why do you think she wanted to write *The Last Cuentista*? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.4]**

## Reading Comprehension

Students will keep an interactive notebook to record thoughts, feelings, questions, and concerns while reading *The Last Cuentista*. The teacher will facilitate discussions with students who are in the process of reading the book.

1. Write down the characters of the book and a brief description of who they are and what role they have in terms of our protagonist, Petra Peña. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.6]**
2. The book begins with the character of Lita. Write down what you know about her based on the first chapter. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.6]**
3. In Chapter 2, Petra and her family are on their way to a secluded forest in Colorado. Why are they on their way there? What is Pleiades Corp. and what did they create? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.2]**
4. On page 10, Petra’s mom says, “People are afraid. Some will do things they never thought they were capable of. We’re in no position to judge anyone,” after people started looting. Why were people looting and why do you think Petra’s mom responded this way? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4]**
5. Later on, Petra remarks, “What about Lita? It’s like you don’t even care.” Based on what you know so far, what do you think will happen to Lita? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4]**
6. For how long will Petra and her family be asleep? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.3]**
7. By page 18, we learn about The Collective to which Petra’s dad responds: “Equality’s good. But equality and sameness are two different things. Sometimes those who say things without really contemplating what it truly means...that dogma runs a thin line.” Petra then has to look up the word, “dogma.” Look up the word “dogma” as well and answer the following question: What do you think is the difference between equality and sameness? Provide examples. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4]**
8. Petra’s family is on their way to the planet, Sagan. Research our solar system and other planetary systems in the universe. Why can’t we live in other planets in the solar system? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.2]**

9. On page 22 and 23, we find out that Petra has a “genetic defect” in her eyes. What is it? What did her mom do in order to have the mission ignore Petra’s condition? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4]**
10. How would you feel if you had to leave the place you called home? Write down your thoughts in your notebook.
11. Chapter 5 details the “Youth” room where Petra will remain in “stasis.” What is stasis? Draw the room based on Petra’s description of it. How does the description make you feel?
12. Javier and Petra will be learning a lot about botany and geology while they are in stasis. Why are they learning about those subjects? What electives does Petra want to take? If you were in their shoes, what subjects would you like to learn about?
13. On page 35, Petra says that there are cincuenta (50, in Spanish) stars to Javier and then she says, “sin cuenta” (countless). What does this wordplay mean? Why is Petra telling Javier this story now? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.1]**
14. Chapter 6 talks about the Spanish phrase, “Subirsele el muerto,” which is a phrase Spanish speakers use to talk about sleep paralysis. Take a look at Henry Fuseli’s painting, *The Nightmare*, and make a connection between the Spanish expression and the English “sleep paralysis demon.” Why do you think we use these expressions to talk about sleep paralysis? Use evidence from the book in your answer. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.7]**
15. Petra is going through a lot during chapter 6. What is happening and how would you feel if you were in her situation? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.3]**
16. Listen to the nursery rhyme that is mentioned throughout the book, *Arroro mi niño/a* on YouTube. What do you think about this nursery rhyme? What are your favorite nursery rhymes? What do you think their purpose is? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.7]**
17. Ben gives Petra access to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and she describes how she learns about it. Watch this Ted-Ed video that dives into this epic and compare it to Petra’s summary of the story. Are they the same? How might they differ? Think about how oral stories might change and be transformed throughout time. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.7]**
18. What ends up happening to Ben? What happens to Petra when she wakes up? Who is responsible for all the horrible things that happened? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.6]**
19. What are the names of the other “Zetas”? What does Petra call them individually?
20. The Collective immediately consider “purging” Suma. What is purging in this context? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.4]**
21. Petra soon remembers the story of Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl, as told by Lita. Watch this video or video and note the differences and similarities between how Lita tells the story and how the video tells the story. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.7]**
22. What happened to Petra’s family? Did you expect this to happen? Write down your thoughts using evidence from the novel. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.3]**

23. How does Petra react to the news about her family? How does Petra’s plan change? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.2]**
24. How would you describe Petra’s life as Zeta-1? What kind of food does she consume? Why is the food she consumes relevant to the story and what the Collective is doing? How does she get along with everyone else? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.2]**
25. “And suddenly, after all this time, I truly understand what the word *dogma* means” (165). What made Petra come to this realization? What has The Collective done to show her this?
26. When Petra is sharing a story with the other Zetas, she says, “In Lita’s version, an awful man stole from the old couple’s dreams, but from now on, this story lives on through me and my new version” (172). How do stories change throughout time? How are they transformed?
27. On Chapter 20, we meet with Epsilon-5. Who is he? What does he do?
28. Epsilon is the fifth letter in the Greek alphabet, known as E in the Roman alphabet, and Zeta is the sixth letter in the Greek alphabet, known as Z in the Roman alphabet. What do you think this means? Who are the Epsilons? What happened to them? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.3]**
29. Who’s Voxy? He tells Petra about the relics from Earth. What are some of the things they find? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.3]**
30. What’s the importance of the book, *Dreamers*? Write down what you think it is and then come back to your answer by the end of the novel.
31. Throughout the novel, Petra remembers some significant moments in her life about Lita and the rest of her family. What is the importance of these flashbacks? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.3]**
32. By the end of chapter 23, Petra comes to a huge realization. What is it? How does it affect Petra personally? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.2]**
33. Epsilon-5 said, “The Chancellor made it clear my service is needed here” (223). Why did the Chancellor say that? How would you describe the Chancellor?
34. Petra shares the story of *La Llorona* in chapter 25 and thinks to herself, “I realize how different and creepy a lot of Mexican folklore is. Love, humor, pain, magic, lost souls—all woven to create stories most cultures might sugarcoat (243).” What does she mean by that? What do you think of the story of *La Llorona*? Have you ever heard of it before? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.7]**
35. On page 248, Petra reads *Dreamers* aloud to Epsilon-5. Why does she do that? Think back on your answer about the importance of the book. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.1]**
36. When people find out that Petra is a relic because she has kept her memories from Earth, Nyla says, “You are one of the few left who actually experienced what your kind had become. Polluting your own air and rivers and oceans...for profit. Starving some so others

become bloated. It is for those reasons the Collective exists” (256). What do you think about these reasons for creating the Collective? Do you think they were right in reforming the systems that once existed on Earth? Have they been doing things the right way? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.1]**

**37.** Later on, Petra argues back that by honoring the past, our ancestors, our cultures—and remembering our mistakes—we become better. Do you agree with her? Do you think memories and stories are a way for us to better ourselves?

**38.** Chapter 27 mentions the ranchero song, *La calandria*. Listen to the song and try to translate the phrases included in the book to understand the parallels between the novel and what the song is saying. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.7]**

**39.** What are some twists and turns that happen before the story ends? What do we learn about Ben and Javier? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.2]**

**40.** Reread the last chapter of the book carefully. What ends up happening to our hero? What did they discover? Write a paragraph in response using evidence from the book. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.1, 3]**

## Post-Reading Exercises

Students will work on a series of independent activities that will enhance the thematic importance of the book in relation to its genre, folklore, and narrative.

**1. Creative Writing Exercise:** Lita told Petra, “You have to make your stories your own” (34). Think of your favorite fairy tale, urban legend or TV show storyline and rewrite it. What changes would you make? How can you make your favorite story your own? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4-8.3]**

**2. Researching Stories:** Petra shares so many beautiful and complicated *cuentos* with her friends. Read this and write down the importance of folklore and myths. Research other stories from different cultures, including your own, and write a short paragraph answering the question: Why are stories important?

**3. Mini-research:** The genres of *The Last Cuentista* are science fiction, speculative fiction and perhaps even dystopian fiction. Research the definition of all these genres and write a short essay explaining *which* genre is more applicable to the story.

**4. Dystopian Research:** There are a lot of elements from the novel that lead us to believe Petra lives in a dystopian society. Dystopia comes from the Greek, dys- (bad) and topia/topos

(place). Meanwhile, a utopia comes from u (not) and topia (place). What do you think this means? Read this article from Masterclass that establishes the differences between dystopia and utopia and watch this video titled “How to recognize a dystopia.” Do you think the book’s society is merely a dystopian society? Is it both? After doing some research online, write an essay explaining your answer to those questions, providing clear evidence from the book.

**[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.9]**

**5. Comparative Analysis:** Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were two brothers who worked together during 19th century Germany to collect folkloric myths, stories, and legends, including classics like Little Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and more. One thing they noticed prior to publishing these is that there were variances in *how* people told those stories. As an activity, re-watch the Disney movie, *Cinderella*, and then read the Grimm Brothers’ version of Cinderella. In an essay, write down the differences and similarities between the two stories. What were some changes you liked or didn’t like? How would you have changed it? In addition to that, make sure you research the history of Cinderella. What was the earliest depiction of Cinderella? Why was it important that the Grimm Brothers give us access to this story? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.7]**

**6. Urban Legend Research:** The novel shares so many different stories, many of them come from Mexican folklore, including the spooky tale of *La Llorona* where a woman drowns her children. The cuento is quite terrifying for the children. For this activity, research urban legends, which are contemporary folkloric stories that end in funny or horrifying ways. Read this list of urban legends. Do you recognize any of them? Choose a particular urban legend and research how people think it came about. What makes it interesting? Why did you choose it? **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.2]**

## Themes Activities

Students will answer questions regarding multiple themes or central ideas of the text. During this exercise, they will provide objective summaries of specific parts of the text and provide further analysis of these specific ideas. **[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-8.6] [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4-7.9]**

**1. Grief:** Petra unfortunately lost many of her family members (starting with Lita and her Tía Berta). Identify examples within the novel where Petra misses her family and answer the following questions: how does she cope with Lita’s death? How does she cope with not having her family? What does she do to honor Lita’s memory? How is this grief connected to Petra’s motivations throughout the novel?



**2. Government Control:** The Collective is a group that wanted to write a “new history” (59). What are some examples in the novel that show that The Collective has literally seized control over everyone’s life?

**3. Planetary Disaster:** The novel consists of a family seeking survival and leaving planet Earth due to a comet. They’re on their way to a new planet, Sagan. Can you think of any examples of disaster in movies or TV shows that you’ve seen, or books or articles that you’ve read?

**4. Loss of Individualism:** After Petra wakes up, her “given name” is Zeta-1, The Collective has quite literally taken away her identity by taking away her name. Soon thereafter we learn that her name comes from the Greek, Petra, which means rock. Why do you think she was named Petra? And why do you think it’s relevant to the story and her individualism?

## Additional Resources for Educators

### Article:

Derek Spencer, Why Teach Dystopian Literature, Link, Recovered August 1st 2021:  
<https://www.prestwickhouse.com/blog/post/2015/06/why-teach-dystopian-literature>

### Book:

Jessica A. Heyback and Eric Sheffield, Dystopia and Education: Insights into Theory, Praxis, and Policy in an Age of Utopia-Gone-Wrong

### Website:

NASA Climate Kids, Link Recovered July 30th 2021:  
<https://climatekids.nasa.gov/menu/teach/>

### Website:

Creative English Teacher, Teaching Utopia and Dystopia, Link Recovered July 28th, 2021:  
<https://creativeenglishteacher.com/pages/teaching-utopia-and-dystopia>