



## **Discussion & Teacher's Guide: *The Fortune of Carmen Navarro***

by **Jen Bryant**, Knopf Books for Young Readers, a div. of Random House. 11/2010.  
Juv. Fiction, Ages 12 up, \$16.99. Hardcover: 978-0-375-85759-1 (0-375-85759-1)

### **About the Book**

Carmen Navarro rings up customers at the Quikmart, bored to tears. It's a job, and she needs it. But Carmen's true love is music: she dropped out of high school to sing with the Gypsy Lovers and land a recording contract, someday. Just a few miles away, Ryan Sweeney hunches over his books, a studious cadet with his eye on West Point. There's not a single girl at the Valley Forge Military Academy, and that's fine by him. But then, they meet. A romance begins: unlikely, passionate . . . and quickly imbalanced. In an enthralling narrative of obsessive love, the novel builds to a stunning close.

Inspired by the novella and opera *Carmen*, Jen Bryant creates a strong-minded and alluring heroine in this contemporary tale of tragic love.

### **About the Author**

**Jen Bryant** [www.jenbryant.com](http://www.jenbryant.com) is an award-winning poet, biographer, and fiction writer. Previous novels include *Kaleidoscope Eyes*, *Ringside 1925: Views from the Scopes Trial*, *Pieces of Georgia*, and *The Trial*. Her picture book *A River of Words: The Story of William Carlos Williams* illustrated by Melissa Sweet, received a Caldecott Honor in 2009. Jen has taught writing and literature at the college level and enjoys visiting schools and libraries across the country. She lives with her family in Chester County, PA.

### **Pre-Reading Activities**

In small groups or using individual written responses, students should discuss this quote from *Carmen* by Prosper Merimee: "Do you know, my friend, I think I love you a little. But it can't last; dog and wolf don't stay friends for long." Can you love someone "a little"? What is the author saying about love between different types of people? Do opposites attract and, if so, do their differences eventually unite them or drive them apart? What other stories or movies can you think of that support your conclusions? Discuss the responses.

### **Thematic Connections**

**Achievement and Goals**– At the beginning of *The Fortune of Carmen Navarro*, Ryan is a perfect example of an overachiever. Discuss the reasons for Ryan's drive to succeed and how parental expectations play into this. Is it sometimes necessary for parents to push their children to succeed? How much pressure is too much? How can parents help their children create more of a balance in their lives? Compare the novel to others in which a main character is an overachiever or has to deal with parental expectations (i.e. *Ironman* by Chris Crutcher.)

Compare /contrast the goals and motivations of the other 3 main characters. Create a college, written essay, bulletin board, or graphic arts representation of each one.

**Forbidden Love/Obsessive Love** – Discuss why a relationship between Ryan and Carmen might be considered forbidden. Compare their forbidden love to that of Romeo and Juliet in Shakespeare’s play and to that of Tony and Maria from *West Side Story*. At what point do Ryan’s feelings toward Carmen turn obsessive? Compare the obsessive love Ryan feels for Carmen to the obsessive feelings Jay Gatsby has for Daisy in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and/or Heathcliff has for Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte. Do you think that Carmen dealt fairly with Ryan’s obsessive love for her? Explain your response.

**Friendship** – Carmen and Maggie remain best friends even though they value different things. Is it likely that Carmen and Maggie will remain friends in the future? Although Carmen is often portrayed as cold and calculating, what evidence is there that she is caring?

What signs does Will see that Ryan is heading for trouble? Is it Will’s duty as Ryan’s friend to do more to help him? Would that have prevented the tragic outcome? Is it Maggie’s duty as Carmen’s friend to insist that Carmen be honest with Ryan? Is it Maggie’s job to talk to Ryan about Carmen’s previous relationships? Would either have prevented the tragic outcome?

**Independence, Freedom, Gender Roles** – All relationships require some “give and take” on the part of both participants. Near the end of the story, Ryan begs Carmen to love him again. He is willing to give up his life at the military academy in exchange for her affection, but it’s a bargain that Carmen isn’t willing to strike. How do people maintain balance in a love relationship? How do you know when you’re giving or taking too much? Look up the English translation of Georges Bizet’s “Habanera.” Discuss how the lyrics directly apply to Carmen and how the social roles and expectations for women have changed since the novella was published in 1845. How might men and women during that time have reacted to Carmen’s character when they read the original tale? Do you think Carmen’s need for independence is better understood today? Explain.

**Military Life** – Discuss the adjustments in daily life that are required of someone who dedicates him/herself to the military. Research the Valley Forge Military Academy in, PA where Ryan and Will attend. Why does this kind of environment appeal to some and not to others? Read Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* or Walter Dean Myers’ *Fallen Angels*. Compare the life of a soldier from one of these books to the life that Ryan’s brother, Adam, is leading in Iraq.

### **Cross Curricular Activities**

ART: Carmen has a coiled snake tattooed on her wrist. Think about and discuss why this symbol fits her character. Then, either by hand or using a computer, choose another major or minor character from the novel and design a tattoo which represents his or her nature and personality (Note: this can be as simple as a quick sketch or as complex as a multimedia presentation.) Finally, provide a paragraph explaining the meanings and symbolism behind your design.

Use magazines & newspapers to create a collage of words/images that represent your perception of military school life. Write a reflection which analyzes how it expresses your views.

**HISTORY:** Bizet's *Carmen* is considered the most popular and widely-known opera of all time. Research the history of the opera *Carmen* by Georges Bizet and the response of audiences and critics to the opera when it was first performed. What social factors might account for these early responses? Make a list of other now-famous composers, writers, and painters. Divide the names among the class and have students research how their work was received in their own time. Discuss possible reasons why great creators are often rejected by their own generation.

**MUSIC:** Opera is a form of storytelling through song or "literature come to life." Have students watch and listen to two arias from *Carmen*, "Habanera" and "Toreador," on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). Many students will recognize the music. Discuss the many renditions of *Carmen*, including MTV's *Carmen: A Hip Hopera*. Have students view clips from this version (if the school blocks it, teachers can convert youtube videos to an acceptable format by accessing [www.keepvid.com](http://www.keepvid.com).) Break the class into seven groups and assign one part of the novel TFOCN to each. Individual groups work toward composing a *musical synopsis* of their part of the book, set to any type of music. Have groups present their musical synopsis to the class.

**LANGUAGE ARTS:** Either alone or with a partner, have students create a shrinklit for the novel. Shrinklits are short, poetic (rhyming couplets) summaries of works of literature that highlight the characters, plot, theme, symbols, etc. of a story. The finished shrinklit should be between 8-12 couplets. Examples can be found online: <http://shrinklits.wikispaces.com/>

Discuss the many themes of TFOCN. Ask each student to focus on one for a poetry project. Students should find a cross-section of five poems reflecting this theme and prepare a written explanation of how each poem connects to the novel. The poems should reflect a variety of attitudes toward the theme. Ex: Y. Komunyakaa's poem "Facing It" and Wm. Stafford's poem "Men" both express the poet's views on the human cost of war but in distinctly different ways.

### **Instructional Technology Activities**

**Illuminated Text** - Students work in small groups to create illuminated text projects, which are animated versions of the actual text, plus effects (animation, colors, and special effects available in PowerPoint) to explicate what is happening in the story. Presentations are set to music and students may choose music that best represents their section. The point is for students to choose a particular passage or excerpts from the novel (teachers need to assign sections to each group) and *focus solely on the words that best portray their section*. Graphics, pictures, video clips are absolutely NOT the focus and, in fact, detract from the point of illuminating the text. You can watch an example of an illuminated text project from Hemingway's short story "The Cat in the Rain" (<http://www.awaytoteach.net/?q=node/29>). The PowerPoint version is preferred. This

example is quite lengthy and involved; while this project does not have to be quite so much of either, students should choose text deliberately and be given plenty of time to complete it.

**Visual Literacy** – Divide the class into 7 groups. Each group is responsible for creating a 2 min. visual representation depicting the story line, characters, themes, symbols, etc. of that section. Words are not allowed; group members must agree on pictures that best represent their section of

the book. Students should use iMovie or MovieMaker to create their 2 min. clip. The teacher coordinates the 7 clips and sets the entire 14 min. show to music from *Carmen*. After viewing the completed version, discuss how well the pictures in each clip represent the story line.

**Casting Call/Soundtrack and Movie Trailer** – Imagine that a Hollywood studio just optioned the film rights to *The Fortune of Carmen Navarro*, and they have asked your group to choose the cast and the soundtrack and to promote the movie. You may pick any actors to depict the 4 main characters. (Through special effects and make up, the studio promises to make anyone your group chooses appear to be of h.s. age.) Create a PowerPoint presentation with photos of the chosen actresses/actors as well as the rationale for each. In addition, groups should pick a minimum of 4 songs for the soundtrack. In conjunction with the casting call PowerPoint, present one slide with your group's soundtrack choices and explain why each is appropriate. While you don't have to provide a sound clip for each song, you must present at least 1-2 lines from each, explaining how it relates to the movie/novel. Lastly, your group should create a 1-2 min. video trailer promoting the movie. Include at least one clip from your soundtrack.

**Confessional Video** – Working in groups of three, students should choose one of the four main characters. One student will act in the role of the character, another will act as the interviewer, and the third will videotape the confessional. The interviewer and videographer should come up with questions regarding the outcome of the book and the role the person played in it, but the student acting in the role of the character should not see the questions until the video is shot. It is imperative, therefore, that the interviewee truly understands the character and his/her thoughts, feelings, fears, etc. This student *should remain in character throughout the confessional*. Your group is limited to two minutes, so the interviewer should ask the most important questions first. The videographer should use a variety of shots during the video and may choose to focus only on the interviewee or on both participants.

**For further viewing, reading, listening:**

[www.metoperafamily.org/met\\_player/](http://www.metoperafamily.org/met_player/) Download free operas from this Met Opera sponsored site.

*Bizet's Carmen*. DVD. Francesco Rosi, Dir. Orchestre National de France, Lorin Maazel, conductor. With Julia Migenes & Placido Domingo.

*TAPS*. DVD. Directed by Harold Becker. With Tom Cruise, Timothy Hutton, Sean Penn, and George C. Scott. Twentieth-Century Fox, 1981.

Conroy, Pat. *The Lords of Discipline* (novel). NY: Houghton-Mifflin, 1980.

Merimee, Prosper. *Carmen and Other Stories*. Nicholas Jotcham, trans. Oxford World Classics. NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008.

*Bizet: Carmen*. CD. Deutsche Grammophon, 2005. London Symphony Orchestra, Claudio Abbado, conductor. Teresa Berganza & Placido Domingo.

*Carmen: Scenes & Arias* (Highlights). CD. Polygram Records, Oct.1990. Artists: Troyano, Domingo, Te Kanawa, Van Dam, Solti.

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