A Rice Sandwich by Sandra Cisneros

LITERARY FOCUS: THE NARRATOR

A narrator is the teller of a story. When you begin reading a story, look for clues about who the narrator is. A narrator who observes the action and is not a story character is called an omniscient (əm-nišˈənt) narrator. This type of narrator can tell you about the thoughts and feelings of all the story characters.

A first-person narrator, on the other hand, is a story character. A first-person narrator participates directly in the story’s action. If the storyteller tells the whole tale using first-person pronouns such as I, me, and mine, then you know that you’re reading a story told by a first-person narrator.

Identify the type of narrator in each of these passages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passage</th>
<th>Narrator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I am not diving off this cliff,” I said as we approached the top. Then I saw all the kids lined up to jump, and I gathered my courage.</td>
<td>Omniscient ⟷ First Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The math test was extremely hard. Roz began to wish she had studied. Cora got stuck on item 3 and couldn’t finish.</td>
<td>Omniscient ⟷ First Person</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

READING SKILLS: MAKING INFERENCES

Stories told by a first-person narrator usually give you a lot of information about the character who is narrating the story. However, it is still important for you to take part in the story by making your own inferences, educated guesses, about the characters. Use these tips to make inferences about Esperanza, the narrator of “A Rice Sandwich.”

• Pay close attention to what Esperanza says and does.
• Observe the way other characters respond to Esperanza.
• Examine what you learn about Esperanza’s thoughts.
• Think about how Esperanza is like, or not like, people you know.
The special kids, the ones who wear keys around their necks, get to eat in the canteen. The canteen! Even the name sounds important. And these kids at lunch time go there because their mothers aren’t home or home is too far away to get to.

My home isn’t far but it’s not close either, and somehow I got it in my head one day to ask my mother to make me a sandwich and write a note to the principal so I could eat in the canteen too.

Oh no, she says pointing the butter knife at me as if I’m starting trouble, no sir. Next thing you know everybody will be wanting a bag lunch—I’ll be up all night cutting bread into little triangles, this one with mayonnaise, this one with mustard, no pickles on mine, but mustard on one side please. You kids just like to invent more work for me.
But Nenny says she doesn’t want to eat at school—ever—because she likes to go home with her best friend Gloria who lives across the schoolyard. Gloria’s mama has a big color T.V. and all they do is watch cartoons. Kiki and Carlos, on the other hand, are patrol boys. They don’t want to eat at school either. They like to stand out in the cold especially if it’s raining. They think suffering is good for you ever since they saw that movie “300 Spartans.”

I’m no Spartan\(^1\) and hold up an anemic\(^2\) wrist to prove it. I can’t even blow up a balloon without getting dizzy. And besides, I know how to make my own lunch. If I ate at school there’d be less dishes to wash. You would see me less and less and like me better. Every day at noon my chair would be empty. Where is my favorite daughter you would cry, and when I came home finally at 3 p.m. you would appreciate me.

Okay, okay, my mother says after three days of this. And the following morning I get to go to school with my mother’s letter and a rice sandwich because we don’t have lunch meat.

Mondays or Fridays, it doesn’t matter, mornings always go by slow and this day especially. But lunch time came finally and I got to get in line with the stay-at-school kids. Everything is fine until the nun who knows all the canteen kids by heart looks at me and says: you, who sent you here? And since I am shy, I don’t say anything, just hold out my hand with the letter. This is no good, she says, till Sister Superior gives the okay. Go upstairs and see her. And so I went.

I had to wait for two kids in front of me to get hollered at, one because he did something in class, the other because he didn’t. My turn came and I stood in front of the big desk

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1. **Spartan**: hardy, disciplined person, like the Spartans of ancient Greece.
2. **anemic** (ə-nē’mik) adj.: pale and weak.
with holy pictures under the glass while the Sister Superior read my letter. It went like this:

50  Dear Sister Superior,

Please let Esperanza eat in the lunch room because she lives too far away and she gets tired. As you can see she is very skinny. I hope to God she does not faint.

Thanking you,

Mrs. E. Cordero.

You don’t live far, she says. You live across the boulevard. That’s only four blocks. Not even. Three maybe. Three long blocks away from here. I bet I can see your house from my window. Which one? Come here. Which one is your house?

And then she made me stand up on a box of books and point. That one? she said pointing to a row of ugly 3-flats, the ones even the raggedy men are ashamed to go into. Yes, I nodded even though I knew that wasn’t my house and started to cry. I always cry when nuns yell at me, even if they’re not yelling.

Then she was sorry and said I could stay—just for today, not tomorrow or the day after—you go home. And I said yes and could I please have a Kleenex—I had to blow my nose.

In the canteen, which was nothing special, lots of boys and girls watched while I cried and ate my sandwich, the bread already greasy and the rice cold.
Narrator Detector    By now you know that “A Rice Sandwich” is narrated by the main character, Esperanza. But how did you find out? The story gives you clues in the form of first-person pronouns that Esperanza uses to refer to herself. Re-read lines 32–35 to find all four clues. Write those pronouns on the lines below. Then, tell how you learned the narrator’s name.

Clue 1:       
Clue 2:       
Clue 3:       
Clue 4:       

Where in the story did you find the narrator’s name?


A Rice Sandwich

**COMPREHENSION**

**Reading Comprehension**  Answer each question below.

1. Who is the narrator of “A Rice Sandwich”?

2. Which students eat in the school’s canteen?

3. How does Esperanza persuade her mother to write the note so she can eat in the canteen too?

INFER
Words that describe what Mrs. Moreno is thinking, what she looks like, and what she is doing include “Poor baby, she thought,” “made a sad face,” and “walked back to the living room and cried.” These details show that Mrs. Moreno is sympathetic, caring, and loving.

INTERPRET
Possible response: Her words reveal that she is hopeful, practical, imaginative.

IDENTIFY
Ernie shows he’s a nice boy by calling Yollie to find out why she left the dance and to ask if she was mad at him. Then he asks her to go to a movie. Mrs. Moreno shows her love for Yollie by using her savings to buy her daughter some new clothes.

Possible Answers to Skills Practice
Character Traits Chart (page 71)
Answers will vary. Sample answer:
Character: Mrs. Moreno
Character Traits: funny, caring, loving
Appearance: large, wears a muumuu and butterfly-shaped glasses
Speech: “I’ve been saving a little money every month... For you, m’ija.”
Actions: She walked back to the living room and cried.
Thoughts and Feelings: She wanted to tell her daughter how sorry she was, but she knew it wouldn’t help.
Other Characters’ Reactions: Everyone thought Yollie’s mother was a riot. Even the nuns laughed at her antics.

Possible Answers to Skills Review
Vocabulary and Comprehension (page 72)
A. 1. sophisticated
2. matinees
3. meager
B. 1. Mrs. Moreno is humorous, loving, down-to-earth.
2. Yollie doesn’t have a new dress to wear.
3. Yollie is embarrassed because the dye is washing out of her dress, and she doesn’t want her friends to know she is wearing an old dress.
4. Mrs. Moreno takes Yollie shopping for new clothes.

A Rice Sandwich, page 73

Page 74
IDENTIFY
Clue words that tell you who the narrator is include My, I, and me. The narrator is a schoolgirl who lives close to the school. The narrator is a character in the story.

Page 75
CLARIFY
Words or phrases that help you understand to whom the narrator is speaking include “Where is my favorite daughter you would cry” and “when I came home finally at 3 p.m., you would appreciate me.”

INFER
Possible response: The narrator’s family is poor.

IDENTIFY
Words that identify the kind of school the writer attends include “nun” and “Sister Superior.”

Page 76
INFER
Answers will vary. Sample response: I don’t think Esperanza’s mother took her request seriously because her note sounds insincere and almost humorous.

INFER
Possible response: She cries because she is disappointed. The canteen is not special, and Esperanza went to a lot of trouble to get to eat there.

Possible Answers to Skills Practice
Narrator Detector (page 77)
Clue 1: my
Clue 2: I
Clue 3: my
Clue 4: we

The narrator’s name is in the letter from her mother to Sister Superior.

Possible Answers to Skills Review
Comprehension (page 78)
1. Esperanza, a girl who attends a Catholic school
2. The kids who eat in the canteen live too far from school to go home, or their mothers aren’t at home during the day. Esperanza calls them “special kids.”
3. For three days, Esperanza gives her mother reasons why she should eat at school. She tells her mother there would be “less dishes to wash” and that her mother would miss her at lunch and therefore appreciate Esperanza more when she is home.

4. Esperanza doesn’t enjoy eating in the canteen. Sister Superior humiliates her and tells her she can eat in the canteen for only one day. Esperanza decides the canteen is nothing special. She cries and eats her rice sandwich while other boys and girls watch.

**Learning to Float, page 79**

**Page 81**

**IDENTIFY**  
The narrator is a character in the story. She is visiting her grandmother in Panama.

**INFER**  
The fruits include blueberries, bananas, and coconut. Students’ knowledge of the fruits will vary.

Possible inference: Marisol asks for blueberries, which do not grow in Panama. This suggests she has not been in Panama before.

**Page 82**

**PREDICT**  
Most students will predict that Abuela will not move to America because she says to Marisol, “Why don’t you move to Panama?”

**Page 83**

**DECODING TIP**  
Possible response: Vendors are people who sell products in a store, a market, or on the street.

**DECODING TIP**  
Students should draw a line to “practice.” They should infer that *practicando* means “practicing.”

**INFER**  
Words and phrases that reveal Marisol’s problems with speaking Spanish: “but I was still nervous about trying to use my Spanish”; “At home people make fun of my Spanish.” Students’ feelings will vary.

**Page 84**

**PREDICT**  
Responses will vary. Some students may say Marisol will have a good day because she has started to speak Spanish and feels more confident. Others may say that because Marisol is shy, she will have some difficulties.

**Page 85**

**DECODING TIP**  
Familiar English word parts include *No* and *pre–*. The sentence means “Don’t you worry.” *Preoccupied* in English means “totally absorbed in one’s thoughts.”

**Page 86**

**DECODING TIP**  
Context clues include “You look great” and “stylish.” Students should figure out that the phrase means “It’s the fashion.” *Mode* in English means “fashion” or “style.”

**DECODING TIP**  
The context clue is “New” (line 133). *Nueva* means “new.”

**DECODING TIP**  
Students should underline *signif* in *significa*. The context clue is “It means.” Students should recognize that the sentence in line 141 means “What does *as if* signify?” or “What is the meaning of *as if*?”

**Page 87**

**PREDICT**  
Predictions will vary. Possible prediction: Ana and Marisol will become friends because they’re both talking about starting the school year alone.

**INFER**  
The allusion is to *The Wizard of Oz*. Possible inference: Marisol feels the way Dorothy felt when she landed in the strange land of Oz. Toto is Dorothy’s dog in the movie.

**WORD STUDY**  
The translation is “How’d it go today?” *Cena* means “dinner.”

**Page 88**

**INFER**  
Answers will vary. Possible inference: I think that Marisol misses her mother because she holds her mother’s book to her chest. Marisol is “hugging” her absent mother.

**Page 89**

**INFER**  
Answers will vary. Possible inference: Marisol has decided to adjust to a new culture and master Spanish. She will let the language come naturally, just as she learned to let go and float in the pool.