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English 112B

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***Barely Missing Everything* by Matt Mendez**



<https://mattmendez.com/>

Matt Mendez was born in El Paso Texas and much like Juan he played basketball for his high school team although he struggled staying on the team for academic reasons. Like JD, he found himself in the air force after college, and has worked with planes for most of his adult life. He has also written a collection of short stories called *Twitching Heart*. *Barely Missing Everything* is his debut novel.

Summary

Barely Missing Everything by Matt Mendez is a story of Juan, his mother Fabi, and his best friend JD as they all attempt to piece together their fractured and convoluted reality. Juan attempts to rehab an injured ankle so that he can impress college scouts while trying to bring his grades up, while searching for his estranged father, while trying to impress a girl, all with a court date looming in the background that could



put him in jail for a year. His mother Fabi must find them a place to live after breaking up with her boyfriend, after finding out that she's pregnant, after picking Juan up from the police station. JD can't get anything right. The moments he is trying to capture on video are all messed up, he was kicked off the basketball team, and with each day his family drifts more and more apart.

Quotes

Quote #1

“Remember when you told Grampá you could be an engineer? [...] Also isn't your dad a murderer?” (223)

The internal conversation that Juan has while taking his consequential Algebra test lays out all of the weight that rests on Juan's shoulders. Juan has to balance familial problems, performance stress from basketball, anxiety from his upcoming court date, and he now has to grapple with the fact that his dad, who he just found out about a few days ago, is currently sitting on death row with an execution date within the next month. All of these pressures are internalized by Juan over the course of the novel and he has momentary outbursts, and snappy reactions because of it.

Quote #2

“Fabi sighed and dug through her purse, looking for a pen... People she wanted to be (134).

Fabi had dreams growing up, but becoming pregnant with Juan at 16 changed all of that. She never finished school and has been stuck in the same bartending job for the last seventeen years. Money is tough, her rent is past due, her credit card is

maxed, she had to bail Juan out of jail, and now she has to get him a lawyer. This quote is significant because it shows that Fabi wishes that she could do better for her and for Juan, but that the setbacks she has has created a hill that is too hard to climb alone, despite her best efforts.

Quote 3

“He focused the camera on Juan... would lose his second family” (260-261)

JD points his camera at his best friend, and he is finally able to capture a moment. He sees Juan standing next to his “thing,” and they seem happy. This moment shows the Juan’s perseverance and strength because despite all of the things that were thrown in his way, Juan made it through. He’s on the other side of it and it’s all uphill from here. This quote also shows JD’s growth over the course of the novel. He spends most of the time running from his family, choosing to go out instead of facing the reality that waits for him at home. But now JD sees the importance of having a family, and he mourns the day where his second family would leave him.

In the Classroom

This novel is suited best for upperclass high school students and above. The more light hearted themes of friendship and family are juxtaposed with the consequences of discrimination, death, and broken families. If we look at the relationship between Juan and his father; it takes a higher level of emotional intelligence to be able to humanize a murderer in the complex way that Juan is forced to. Teenagers should read this because it can give them a new perspective into

cultures or family dynamics that they have not been exposed to, it can help students learn to empathize with each other because we see how much each character is going through, and it shows the dangers of drunk driving amongst many other things.

If I was to teach this book in class, I would focus a lot of the time on the development of characters as I think that is one of the most striking features of the novel. Our three protagonists are so well developed that we can understand the motivation behind each of their actions and their conversations. I could have students recall something that they've done or a conversation that they've had, and then have them try to understand what made them do or say those things. I could also use this novel to introduce students to translanguaging, as much of the dialogue in the novel is spoken in spanglish, with the speakers toggling freely between the two languages without italics on the Spanish words. I think that this is very important to point out to students because italicizing non-English words makes English seem like it is a superior language.

Of the categories listed in *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning, Barely Missing Everything* falls into these categories:

- Books about Real-Life Experiences
- Books about Facing Death and Loss
- Books about Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions
- Books about Courage and Survival

Text Analysis

The Lexile Range of this text is 410L-600L which means that it is recommended to be taught to elementary school students in the third and fourth grade. The Dale-Chall Readability Index recommended that it be taught to student sin grades 5-6. These numbers were generated likely from the simple sentence structure and a very easy to understand vocabulary. Personally I disagree with this ranking, because the text that I chose moves between English and Spanish very fluidly, and I don't think that that would be understood by elementary school students unless they spoke both languages already.