



Teacher Companion Guide

Brownstone

By Samuel Teer and Mar Julia

Note about this guide

This book club teacher guide is centered around the graphic novel, *Brownstone*. This guide breaks the book into four sections and offers a short summary of each section, along with suggested discussion questions to accompany the student journal prompts. In addition, we have provided extension activities for deeper learning.

Note about the book

This graphic novel tells the story of Almudena, a fourteen-year-old girl spending the summer with her father, whom she's never met. What begins as a tense, confusing visit becomes a journey of connection and self-discovery as Almudena learns about her Guatemalan heritage, her family's past, and the meaning of belonging. Through her experiences in the brownstone, she discovers that family can be built through understanding, forgiveness, and love.

The book includes references to sensitive topics such as homophobia and parental abandonment. We suggest teachers provide time and space for students to reflect on these themes as they arise.

Materials:

- Teacher Guide (this document)
 - [Before Reading](#): Author Bio
 - Chapter summaries, discussion questions, & extension activities
 - [Chapters 1-3](#)
 - [Chapters 4-6](#)
 - [Chapters 7-9](#)
 - [Chapters 10-11](#)
- [Student Journal](#)
 - Student journal prompts for each chapter grouping
 - Each entry contains an analysis prompt, creative/reflective prompt, vocabulary tracker, and additional prompts.
- [Student Comprehension Guide](#)
 - This is a self-guided document that students can work through as they read the book.

Before Reading

Questions to begin the book club

- What do you think of the cover of the book? What do you think this story will be about?

Brief Bio of Samuel Teer

Samuel Teer is the author of *Brownstone*, which won the 2025 Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature. Raised outside St. Louis, Missouri, he now lives in Aurora, Colorado. His inspiration for *Brownstone* came from his own experiences in a trilingual household and witnessing others bridging cultures. Before *Brownstone*, he published *Veda: Assembly Required* and has written many unpublished graphic-novel projects. In *Brownstone*, Teer explores themes of heritage, language, identity, and community from the perspective of Almudena—a teen on the cusp of understanding where she fits.

Brief Bio of Mar Julia

Mar Julia is a cartoonist and illustrator originally from South Florida, now based in Baltimore on the unceded lands of the Piscataway and Susquehannock nations. *Brownstone* is their debut full-length graphic novel (with Teer as writer) and it has earned widespread critical acclaim, including starred reviews and major award recognition. Their previous work includes award-nominated comics, and they often focus on themes of identity, culture, magical realism, and the small moments that create deep connection. Mar Julia's visual style creates rich, expressive environments and characters—perfect for telling a story about belonging, community, and personal discovery.

Chapters 1-3

Summary	Fourteen-year-old Almudena spends the summer with her father, Xavier, while her mother travels for work. She's never met him before and quickly learns how hard living together will be—he speaks only Spanish, and his brownstone is a noisy construction zone. Xavier's girlfriend, Idola, helps translate, and through her Almudena learns her family is Guatemalan, not Mexican as she'd always believed. The discovery leaves her feeling unsteady and unsure of her identity. The next morning, hungry and frustrated, Almudena sets out alone for food. She meets a boy named Tomaz who challenges her to "battle," passes a homeless man, and feels lost in a grocery store full of Spanish labels. The clerk points her to the "white folks' aisle," where she settles on donuts. When Tomaz confronts her again, Idola steps in, explaining he's struggled since a past assault. Almudena also meets Idola's sister Lorena and Lorena's son, Beto, whose smoking and attitude irritate her. A week later, Almudena and Xavier start to connect as they work on the house together. At the laundromat with Idola and Lorena, Almudena ruins a load of clothes with an ink pen and feels ashamed. The sisters offer her old dresses, which she refashions into jumpsuits. When she nervously admits the laundry mishap, Xavier reacts with kindness, cutting off the stained fabric himself. Idola smiles, noting how similar father and daughter truly are..
Discussion Questions	• How would you describe Almudena's relationship with her mom? How does Almudena "play mom" to her mom? Why might she do this? How do you think Almudena feels about this? • How would you describe Almudena's relationship with her dad? She didn't want to spend the summer with him... how have things progressed since her arrival? • How do Almudena and her father slowly start to connect? If their language barrier didn't exist, what more do you think they would want to communicate to each other? • Almudena and her father can't easily talk to each other because they speak different languages. What problems does this cause for them? What do they do to try to understand one another even without words? • Think about a time you couldn't find the right words to explain something important—maybe with family, friends, or teachers. How did you make yourself understood? What helped you connect anyway? • How has Almudena's understanding of her heritage changed since she came to live with her dad? How do you think this makes Almudena feel? • What do you think Xavier might keep in the locked room? • What do you make of the neighborhood? Does it feel familiar? How does Almudena feel about it? • Who are Beto and Lorena?
Possible Extension Activity	Culture and Connection Collage Students explore how identity is shaped by family, culture, and personal experiences—just as Almudena's understanding of herself shifts when she learns more

about her background.

- Begin by revisiting the moment Almudena learns her family is Guatemalan, not Mexican. Ask:
 - How does this discovery make her feel?
 - Why might learning something new about our identity be both confusing and exciting?
- Explain that identity can include many things—family, language, food, interests, values, traditions, and more.
- Students will create a “Culture and Connection Collage.” Using magazines, drawings, or printed images, they’ll fill a half sheet or page with symbols, words, and pictures that represent who they are.
- Encourage one “surprise piece” — something they’ve learned about themselves recently or something that others might not know.
- Optional share-out: Display collages on a “Community Wall” or have students explain one part that means a lot to them.

Chapters 4-6

Summary	Almudena and her father, Xavier, still struggle to communicate, so Idola helps translate. On a trip to the paint store, Almudena is embarrassed by her father’s broken English but later realizes his struggle mirrors her own with Spanish. At the store, she helps Beto avoid trouble after he’s caught stealing paint, and the two begin to understand each other better. Later, when Idola and Lorena invite them to church, Xavier angrily refuses. Confused, Almudena learns the truth about his faith—he keeps an altar that blends Catholic and Guatemalan traditions. She comes to see that her father’s beliefs, like her identity, are “a little of both.” Tensions rise when Idola publicly shames Queralt for being a lesbian. Almudena defends her, leading Beto to open up about being gay. Queralt reveals she and Idola were once close until Idola exposed her years ago, ending their friendship. Wanting to help, Almudena brings Queralt to stay at the brownstone—only to find Xavier injured after falling from a ladder.
Discussion Questions	● What happens at the paint store that changes how Almudena sees both Beto and her father? How does this experience shift her perspective about them—or about herself? ● When Almudena goes into her father’s locked room, what does she discover about him? How does what she finds help her understand him better? How do you think she feels about what she learns? ● How does Xavier’s approach to religion compare to what Almudena expected from him? Do you think she would have expected something different if she’d known she was Guatemalan and not Mexican? How can our expectations for people shape the way we perceive them? ● What did we learn about Queralt’s history with Idola and Lorena? Why did their friendship end? ● Why do you think Beto kept his sexuality a secret from his family? Why do you think Beto felt comfortable sharing his secret with Almudena? How might he have felt before and after telling Almudena? ● How do Queralt’s and Beto’s experiences show the difference between older and younger generations when it comes to acceptance? ● When Almudena defends Queralt to Idola, it helps Beto feel safe to be honest. Why do you think seeing someone stand up for others can make us braver? ● How does this part of the story fit the bigger theme of Brownstone—learning to understand people even when they are different from us?
Possible Extension Activity	Building Understanding and Allyship Students explore how empathy and standing up for others can create more accepting communities, connecting to the experiences of Beto, Queralt, and Almudena. ● Warm-Up Discussion: ○ Ask: Why was it so powerful when Almudena stood up for Queralt?

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ How did that moment help Beto feel braver?● Class Activity Options (choose one):<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ “Stand Up” Role Play:<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Read short scenarios where someone is being left out or judged. As a class, brainstorm how to respond with kindness or courage.○ “Words That Help” Wall:<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Students write supportive phrases or messages someone could use to make others feel seen and respected. Post them as a class display.○ “Ally Pledge” Reflection:<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Each student writes a short paragraph or poster beginning with: “I can help others feel accepted by...” and shares one aloud if they wish.● Wrap-Up:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Connect back to the book: How did Almudena, Beto, and Queralta each help others feel understood? What can we learn from them about being allies in our own lives? |
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Chapters 7-9

Summary	After Xavier is released from the hospital, Almudena asks if Queralta can rent the downstairs apartment, and he agrees. Idola and Lorena are upset, revealing their landlord is raising the rent and they'll soon have to move—they wanted the apartment. Wanting to help, Almudena proposes a plan so everyone can stay close: Queralta in the downstairs unit, Lorena and her sons on the main floor, and Xavier, Idola, and Beto upstairs together. As summer ends, Almudena feels sad about leaving and fears losing her new community—and her father—after she returns home. One afternoon, feeling ignored, she wanders off and gets lost, unable to speak in Spanish to ask for help. Tomaz finds her and brings her home, where she discovers a surprise quinceañera party in her honor. Overwhelmed and feeling like an imposter, she retreats upstairs until Idola comforts her, apologizing for making her feel like she didn't belong and gifting her a book on Guatemalan mythology. Almudena rejoins the celebration, dancing as a gesture of gratitude. It's not a traditional quinceañera, but it feels perfect.
Discussion Questions	• Why does Almudena create a plan to help everyone stay in the brownstone? What does this show about how she's changed since the start of the book? • How does Almudena feel about leaving at the end of the summer? What does this reveal about how she's changed since she first arrived? • Everyone seems to ignore Almudena before the party. Why do you think the author includes this part? What does it build toward? • When Almudena gets lost, she can't speak Spanish to ask for help. How does this moment reflect her journey toward understanding her identity and her connection to others? • How does Almudena feel during the quinceañera? What helps her realize that she belongs there? • Why is Idola's apology and her gift of the Guatemalan mythology book meaningful? What does it represent? • How has gentrification affected the neighborhood and the people who live in it?
Possible Extension Activity	What Makes a Family? Students explore how Brownstone shows that families can be formed through understanding, forgiveness, and shared care—not just blood or tradition. Teacher Mini-Lesson • Warm-Up Discussion: ○ Ask: Who is part of Almudena's "family" by the end of the book? ○ What makes them a family, even if they're not all related? ○ How do forgiveness and kindness help people grow closer? • Activity: Family Circles (Drawing or Writing) ○ Have students draw three circles that overlap like a Venn diagram: ○ One for family you're born into ○ One for family you choose ○ One for community that feels like family

	○ In each, list or draw people who fit—and in the middle, write what connects them all (e.g., love, trust, forgiveness). ● Wrap-Up Discussion: ○ What makes a family strong? ○ How can we create communities that make everyone feel like they belong—like Almudena’s brownstone?
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Chapters 10-11

Summary	After the party, Xavier gives Almudena a letter explaining his past. He fled Guatemala seeking a better life and met her mother while working as a roofer. Afraid he would repeat his own father's mistakes, he left when Almudena was born but continued to send money. Over time, he built a home, found steady work, and met Idola, who brought joy back into his life. In the letter, Xavier tells Almudena he regrets leaving, that he needs her, and that he wants to be part of her life moving forward. The morning after the quinceañera, Almudena's mother arrives unexpectedly, injured and home early from her trip. Almudena feels conflicted about her return, and tension rises when she asks if her mother plans to take her home. Over breakfast with Xavier, they run into Idola and Beto. Mistaking the situation, Idola storms away, and Almudena runs after her, explaining she once hoped her parents would reunite but now sees how much her father loves Idola. She invites Idola back, and the meal slowly turns into a moment of understanding. Back at the brownstone, Almudena insists on finishing the renovations before leaving so everyone will have a home. Moved by her determination, her mother joins in, and soon the whole group—Xavier, Idola, Beto, Lorena, and Queralt—work together to complete the project. When Almudena and her mother depart, they promise to stay connected. The brownstone stands finished—a symbol of the family and community they've built together.
Discussion Questions	• What does Xavier's letter help Almudena understand about her father and his choices? • Why do you think Xavier chose to write his feelings in a letter instead of saying them out loud? • How do forgiveness and understanding bring the characters together in the end? • The brownstone becomes a home for people who once felt disconnected—Almudena, Xavier, Idola, Beto, Queralt, and Lorena. What does this house come to symbolize? • What does this ending tell us about family—both the one we're born into and the one we build? • How does the story show that belonging and identity can grow from both roots and choice? • How does Xavier's letter connect to the story's theme of forgiveness and starting over? • Why is it important that Almudena's mother joins in the repairs at the brownstone? What does this show about growth and healing? • How has Almudena's idea of family changed by the end of the book? • One of the final lines suggests Almudena is "going home with more than she came with." What do you think that "more" means?
Possible Extension Activity	Building Our Own Brownstones Students reflect on the idea of community and chosen family by creating their own symbolic "brownstone" — a representation of what belonging means to them.

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Discuss:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Ask: What makes the brownstone special at the end of the book?○ How did it turn from a construction site into a home for everyone?● Activity Options (choose one):<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Option A: Brownstone Blueprint (Drawing or Writing)<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Students design a “blueprint” of their own brownstone. In each room, they write or draw one value or person that helps them feel at home (e.g., kindness, trust, humor, a friend, a pet).○ Option B: Community Mural (Group Project)<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ As a class, create a large “brownstone” on poster paper. Each student adds one brick labeled with a word or symbol that represents what they bring to a community (e.g., empathy, honesty, creativity).○ Option C: Brownstone Reflections (Writing)<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Students write a short paragraph beginning with:<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ “My brownstone is built with...” and finish it with traits, memories, or people that make them feel they belong.● Wrap-Up Discussion:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ What makes a home more than just a building?○ How do the people we include—and forgive—help build our sense of belonging? |
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