

Note From The Author

Geraldo is a philosophical novel, targeted at 9-10 year olds. The novel speaks directly to children who are learning to read, as well as children learning English as a second language. The work attempts to focus on reasoning skills embedded in language as well as on philosophical themes that arise when a child is learning to read a second language.

Geraldo is from a Latin American country. The first year that he attends school in his new country, he is assigned to a slow learners class, as he doesn't read nor speak English. As the novel progresses, he is mainstreamed into an ordinary fifth year class, where he becomes interested in ideas that come up for discussion in the classroom: ideas regarding the nature of time, mind, death, ethics and science. As *Geraldo* begins to participate (with the help of his fellow students' translation skills) in the discussions, he finds himself thinking in English and one day speaking English. The novel moves back and forth from the classroom to his grandmother's shop, to his home, and finally to *Geraldo*'s old country, where he returns to figure out what he thinks he has to figure out about the relationship between the ocean (nature) and human experience. The aim of the novel is to model philosophical dialogue among schoolchildren, facilitated by a classroom teacher and adults who play an important role in the child's out-of-school experience.

The chapter that follows is Chapter Six of the novel. *Geraldo* will be published in German by Verlag Fur Kinder und Eltern (Hamburg) this coming year.

Ann Sharp

Geraldo

Chapter Six

Ever since Isabel had mentioned her birthday party to me, I could think of nothing else. I had so many worries. What should I wear? Should my father take me to the party as I had said he would, or should I ride over to Isabel's house on my bike? Should I arrive alone? Would Isabel invite any of my Spanish-speaking friends? Would there be a birthday cake and candles? Would there be live music and many flowers? Should I bring some flowers? If there were dancing, should I dance with Isabel and Pixie and Willa Mae?

I was sure the whole family would be at the party: the grandparents, the cousins, the aunts and uncles and the parents, and of course, Connie. But would the neighbors come as they did in my old country. And would the friends and relatives bring along their musical instruments?

But what I thought about most is what I would give Isabel as a gift. I was sure it had to be special.

"Mama, if you were ten years old, what would you like as a birthday gift?" I asked.

"A Mardi Gras mask of many colors."

"But Isabel doesn't celebrate Mardi Gras," I said.

"What about a hand-made poncho, like the beautiful ones at home where little donkies are woven into the material."

"That's a nice idea. They come in beautiful colors and

Grandmother Carmen could order one through the store," I said.

"Should I call her now, *Geraldo*? It might take some time to get it."

"Not yet. I'm not sure that a poncho would be right for Isabel. It's still a Latin gift."

"What's wrong with a Latin gift. She would probably appreciate it very much. And if she didn't, the problem might be hers and not yours," mama said.

I could tell mama was getting a little upset. She started taking things out of the refrigerator and putting them right back in the refrigerator.

"You could be right, mama. All I know is that I want to make Isabel very happy with this gift. It has to be very special."

At that moment, my papa came in the back door and slammed the screen.

"Do you always have to slam that door, Fernando?" my mother asked.

"I guess not. But I do. It's a habit."

"A bad habit," my mother responded.

My father sat down at the kitchen table with a thud. "How about an espresso for a tired man, *Geraldo*?"

"Sure, papa. In a minute."

"How's the soccer coming?" he asked while I was heating the milk.

"Good, really good. The kids think I'm a natural," I said, putting the espresso in front of him.

"I'm really glad to hear that, *Geraldo*."

"*Geraldo* has been invited to Isabel's birthday party and is wondering what to give her as a gift."

"What would you like for your birthday if you were Isabel?"

"A papel amate, framed in gold with the most beautiful colors - bright yellows and pinks and purples and oranges on the bark."

"Big or small?"

"Big. I like the ones that are divided into parts and tell two or three stories."

"What would you like the artist to draw in one of the parts?"

"The tree of life," I answered.

"The arbol de la vida, *Geraldo*? Why?"

My father looked a little shocked.

"I think it's a fine idea," my mother said. "I know if a boy gave me that, I would be very happy."

"But why the arbol de la vida, *Geraldo*?" my father persisted.

"Because it says everything I want to say to Isabel but don't know how to say in words. A good artist could say it in paints."

"Well, that's that. Isabel should have a papel amate," papa said with a smile, slapping his hand on the kitchen table. "I'll call Grandmother Carmen and have her order one right away."

"Make sure you tell her that it has to be in brilliant colors, papa. And many of them."

"Yes, *Geraldo*."

Once I had settled on the gift I would give Isabel, I began to worry again about the flowers. Should I bring flowers

from my Grandmother's shop? Would that be right for a boy to bring flowers?

When Grandmother Carmen came home, she said, "Geraldo, I ordered the most beautiful papel amate depicting the Tree of Life. And three other scenes as well. Isabel will love it. It's a real beauty."

"Thank you. Grandmother, do you sell a lot of flowers to young people at your shop?"

"No," she responded. "Why do you want to know?"

"Oh, I was just wondering. Who buys them then?"

"Adults."

"Do all adults buy flowers?"

"No, just some."

"What do you mean by some? A few, a lot or most?"

"I mean more than zero and less than all," grandmother said in a tone that I could tell the conversation was over.

A few days before the party, I called Pablo and asked him to call Raul and Ricardo. Pablo and Raul are my friends. So is Ricardo. Pablo and Raul play guitar and Ricardo plays the mandolin. I play the flute.

"Pablo, would you do me a favor?"

"Depends."

"Would you ask Raul and Ricardo to meet me and you at 4:00 next Saturday morning to practice a serenade. It's Isabel's birthday and I want to serenade her under her window before dawn. Remember how well we could harmonize. My papa said he'd give us a ride to Isabel's house after we've practiced."

"I used to think you were a little odd, Geraldo, but now I know you're crazy. You don't serenade girls under their window in this country. You get put in jail for doing things like that."

"Oh, come on Pablo. You know that I'd do it for you. It is very important to me."

"You really must like that girl to risk your life," Pablo said.

"Look at it as an adventure. You love adventures. Please call Raul and Ricardo for me and talk them into it. Then call me back."

"Just this one time, Geraldo."

In fifteen minutes, Pablo called and told me that Raul and Ricardo had agreed, but only on the condition that I call Pixie so that she can warn Isabel's parents.

"Otherwise Geraldo, we're going to end up behind bars for trespassing."

"Okay, Pablo. Okay. I'll call Pixie."

When I called Pixie she was delighted with the idea. "I'll call Isabel's parents right away. No need to worry. They won't mind one bit. I know them well. Isabel's my best friend."

"I know," I said.

The day of the party arrived and Raul, Ricardo, and Pablo arrived at my house at 4:00 in the morning. We hadn't played or sang together in a long time. I wanted to be sure we got the harmonizing right. Pablo and Raul were sleepy but as we began to practice, they woke up. About 4:45 we took off for Isabel's home in my papa's car. He didn't think it was such a good idea to ride our bikes with our instruments across town at that time in the morning.

Isabel lives quite a way from my neighborhood. She lives

in a big white house with lots of land around it. My father drove up the big circular drive to the front door and we proceeded to get out of the car with our instruments. I was the last one out and gave my papa a big kiss.

"Good luck, Geraldo," he said. "I'll be back at six. Dawn should be just about breaking then and you should be done."

As he drove down the driveway, it occurred to me that I didn't know which window was Isabel's bedroom window. When I told Pablo, Raul and Ricardo this, they were furious.

"How could you be so stupid?" Raul asked.

"Leave it to you, Geraldo. You're a birdbrain," Ricardo whispered. "Now what are we going to do. Climb in every window and take a peek."

"Come on, you guys. It's not going to do any good to have an argument out here on the lawn. I'm getting very nervous," said Pablo as he pulled his jacket closer around his body.

"We'll just have to figure it out," I said. "Let's look at it like a problem. You know, like we do in school."

When I said this, Raul, Ricardo and Pablo looked at each other in the strangest way.

"Where did we get this kid?" Ricardo whispered to the others.

I didn't pay any attention. "We know," I said, "there are only two children in this family, Connie and Isabel. And there are two parents. Usually people don't sleep on the first floor in big houses like this," I suggested.

"How do you know that their cousins or grandparents don't live with them?" asked Pablo.

"Isabel never mentioned any family living with them. That usually doesn't happen in this country."

I could hear myself talking and I knew I wasn't sounding very sure of myself.

"How do you know that they aren't having visitors?" Ricardo asked.

"I don't," I said. "We'll just have to take a chance. Besides, if they were having visitors, perhaps Isabel's parents would have mentioned it to Pixie. And Pixie would have told me."

"And perhaps not," Raul said in a very sarcastic tone.

We circled the house slowly. It was very dark and we hadn't thought to bring a flashlight. "Stupid," I said to myself. The moon was out just a little. Raul fell down twice and Ricardo kept calling him "dumb-bell."

We finally zeroed in on the rooms in the back of the house and gazed toward the second floor.

"It would be just our luck that Isabel sleeps on the third floor to get away from it all, and write poetry in solitude," Pablo intoned in a funny high kind of voice.

There were a number of small windows on the second floor and two larger ones.

"Perhaps the larger windows belong to the parent's bedroom," I suggested.

"Perhaps," the three of them echoed.

"How in the world am I going to figure out which is Connie's bedroom and which is Isabel's," I thought to myself.

"Listen," said Pablo. "There is only one thing to do.

Someone has to climb up there and look in the window. We know that Connie is younger than Isabel. Maybe little girls' rooms are different than rooms of ten year old girls."

"Maybe," said Ricardo. "And maybe not."

"Maybe little girls have more dolls and toys around their room. Look, let's give Ricardo a boost up to that small window at the end of the house. He can look in and check it out."

"Why me? I don't even know the girl." Ricardo said.

"You're taller than us," I said as Pablo and I and Raul melded our bodies together and intertwined our hands to form a cup to hoist Ricardo to the second floor. Ricardo was high enough now to look inside the window. As he turned to motion something to us, Pablo lost his balance and our hands came apart. In a flash, Ricardo tumbled down to the ground with the biggest thud you've ever heard.

My first thought was "the whole house will wake up." Then I whispered, "Ricardo, are you very hurt?"

Ricardo was laying on the grass curled up like a shrimp.

"Oh, no. Just a few broken bones. Nothing to worry about when you're doing something absolutely mad for a man in love."

"Let's try again," said Pablo. "Only this time, Geraldo, you're going up."

"Yea," said Raul. "you're the one who likes Isabel, not any of us."

"Let's try the other window," suggested Ricardo.

"Why the other window?" I asked.

"Because I saw enough of the end room to think it is not Isabel's. There were lots of dolls all over the room," responded Ricardo abruptly. I could tell he was angry.

"Okay," I said. "Hoist me up. But be careful. I'm fragile."

When they got me as high as they could, I still couldn't see in the window. So I had to stretch myself on my toes. My balance was not very good, and I began to weave from side to side. At first, I could see very little through the window pane. After a while, though, I began to make out a book shelf, a desk and a canopy bed.

In a split second I thought to myself, "Isabel would have a canopy bed. This is her room. I know it."

I motioned to Ricardo, Raul and Pablo to lower me down.

"I think this is the room. And even if it's not, we have to start singing. It's going to be dawn soon. Remember, we sing the song three times to make sure Isabel is awake. I want her to hear the words."

Ricardo, Pablo, Raul and I tuned our instruments and formed a semi-circle under the window. Then we began to play and sing:

Las Manitas

Estas son las manitas
que cantaba el rey David
hoy por ser día de tu santo
te las cantamos aqui.

Despierta mi bien despierta
mira que ya amanecio
ya los pajarillos cantan
la luna ya se metio.

El dia en que tu naciste

nacieron todas las flores
y en la pila del bautismo
cantaron los ruiseñores.

The first time I thought it sounded a little weak. "A little louder next time fellows," I said, and we sang it again. The four of us sing well together. Two of us have high voices and two of us have low voices. We know how to harmonize this song perfectly.

At the end of the third performance, we accomplished our end. Isabel came to the window and opened it up. I can't tell you how beautiful she looked with her long hair flowing over her shoulders.

"Come on, fellows," said Ricardo. "Let's sing it one more time, but in English, so Isabel will know what we are saying to her on her birthday."

The Dawns

These are the dawns
that King David sang
on your saints day.
We sing them to you.

Arise, dear one, arise.
The birds are singing
and the moon is gone.

The day of your birth
the flowers blossomed
and the humming-birds sang
awaiting at the fountain
where your Christening will come to be.

After we finished, I said, "Come on, fellows, let's go. My papa will be waiting for us."

As the four of us walked across the lawn with our instruments, we looked back at Isabel's window. She was standing there in what looked like a white nightgown. She was waving at us. We all waved back.

The party was scheduled for two o'clock. This time, I did get permission from my papa to ride my bike over to Isabel's house, but the papel amate was so big that I decided to ask my uncle to give me a ride. He lives around the corner from us now and sometimes he helps my Grandmother Carmen in the store. He said he would give me a ride.

Grandmother Carmen had wrapped the papel amate in beautiful striped paper, pink, purple, grey and blue. I picked out a birthday card at her store. It said, "I'm happy to have you as a special friend. Happy Birthday."

When I arrived at Isabel's house, I was surprised to find so few people. There was Brian, Neil, Willa Mae, Pixie, Robert and Chita. Isabel's mother and father were there and, of course, Connie. But there were no neighbors, no cousins, and no grandparents. There was not even one aunt or uncle.

I looked around the living room and dining room. I could see no flowers. "You should have brought some gladiolas or forget-me-nots from the store," I said to myself.

And there was no one playing music. Some taped music came out of the speakers in the living room very softly.

"Perhaps Isabel's parents don't like music. Or maybe they don't have any friends or relatives that play an instrument." I found that very unlikely. "If they can live in a house with two living rooms, they must have friends and relatives who play an instrument," I thought to myself as I spied another smaller room with sofas behind the large living room.

Isabel's mother motioned for us to gather around one of the round coffee tables in the large living room. Immediately everyone started urging Isabel to open her gifts. Everyone except me.

Gift after gift was unwrapped. Each was a toy of some kind with two exceptions. Willa Mae gave Isabel a book. Brian gave her a game that I'd never heard of before. It was a board game. As each gift was opened and everyone looked at it, I began to feel jittery. "Maybe my gift was odd," I thought to myself. "It certainly is nothing like what I've seen so far. Why do I always have to be so different?"

Suddenly, Pixie blurted out, "Isabel, I didn't bring a gift."

"Why not?" asked Robert. "You know you're supposed to bring a gift to a birthday party. I mean, if you come, you're supposed to bring a gift."

Isabel's mother interrupted quietly and said, "Robert, I'm not sure of that."

"Why not?" said Robert. "She accepted the invitation."

"I didn't invite Pixie to my birthday party to get a gift, Robert," Isabel said.

Pixie didn't say anything for a long while. Then, when Isabel was opening still another gift, she blurted out, "Isabel, do you want me to go home?"

"No," said Isabel. "I don't want you to go home. I invited you to my party because I like you very much. I want you to share this day with me. Please don't feel badly."

"Why don't you open my gift now?" I offered, wanting to change the subject.

"Okay," said Isabel. "The wrapping is so beautiful, I hate to destroy it."

"Wait till you see what's inside."

When Isabel finally had the papel amate unwrapped, she held it at a distance from her and just stared at it. I couldn't tell from the expression on her face whether she liked it or she didn't.

"What is it?" asked Pixie.

"It's what we call a papel amate," I said. The people paint these pictures on the bark of the trees. The bark is removed, then pounded until it becomes soft and then oiled. When this is finished, the artist uses it as his canvas."

"There seems to be four pictures in this one," Willa Mae said. "I mean the bark is divided into four different scenes."

"Yes," I said. "The first one is the people giving praise to the sun god. The second is a picture showing the people and the donkeys going to the field to gather the wheat. The third is the tree of life. We call it the arbol de la vida. It is a wonderful symbol that says many things. The fourth is a peace scene. It is Quetzalcoatl, the peace god, who was a feathered snake-bird. His colors are brilliant, aren't they? They say that he invented writing and was against all human sacrifice."

"I think the colors are wonderful," Isabel said. They are all so bright and full of life. They make me feel happy, especially the pinks and purples and golds. And the brilliant yellow and orange of the feathered snake. It is a beauty, Geraldo."

"You're right," Isabel's father said. "It's a real beauty. If I got a gift like that, I would treasure it very much."

By this time all had gathered around to see the papel amate. Pixie and Brian were looking at it very closely, pointing out the different figures to the others.

"I bet there's more of a story behind each of these scenes," Brian said. "Especially the one with the feathered snake."

"You're right, Brian. "Quetzalcoatl is also the god of good and evil, and life and death."

"All in one?" Brian asked.

"All in one," I responded. "I'm sorry I don't know the stories behind the other scenes, especially the tree of life. I'll talk to my parents and grandmother about it, and share it with you in class."

"I suggest that we all sit around the table and have some cake and ice cream," Isabel's mother said.

"And sing 'Happy Birthday'," Connie said.

Ann Sharp