

ANDREA BEATRIZ ARANGO

Newbery Honor winner for *Iveliz Explains It All*



EDUCATORS' GUIDE

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

No one knows hard work and dedication like Valentina Camacho. And Vale's *thing* is fencing. She's the top athlete at her fencing gym. Or she was . . . until the accident.

After months away, Vale is finally cleared to fence again, but it's much harder than before. Her body doesn't move the way it used to, and worst of all is the new number one: Myrka. When she sweeps Vale aside with her perfect form and easy smile, Vale just can't accept it. But the harder Vale fights to catch up, the more she realizes her injury isn't the only thing holding her back. If she can't leave her accident in the past, then what does she have to look forward to?

In this moving novel from the Newbery Honor-winning author of *Iveliz Explains It All*, one girl finds her way back to her life's passion and discovers that the sum of a person's achievements doesn't amount to the whole of them.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrea Beatriz Arango is the author of Newbery Honor Book *Iveliz Explains It All* and Pura Belpré Honor Book *Something Like Home*. She was born and raised in Puerto Rico, where she first became a teacher. She then spent a decade in the United States working in public schools and at nonprofits. When she's not busy writing about middle schoolers and their families, you can find her hoping to spot manatees at the beach. Andrea lives in Puerto Rico with her family and two dogs.



# PRE-READING QUESTIONS

1. **Fencing and salsa dancing** are important physical activities to our main character, Vale. Fencing is a kind of sword-fighting, which “demands speed, anticipation, reflexes and great mental strength,” according to the International Olympic Committee. The three kinds of swords used are the foil, the epee, and the sabre. Two competitors face off on a short stretch of ground called the *piste* or strip, and points are scored based on “touches,” that is, whether the tip of the sword blade touches the other competitor’s suit. Salsa is a partner (two-person) dance that originated in Cuba, New York City, and Puerto Rico and is practiced worldwide. It has different styles and variations, and can include spins, dips, and fancy footwork. Salsa dancers dance to salsa music.

- What physical activities are important to you? Describe them and what you like about them.
- What physical activities would you like to try? Draw or write about yourself doing them.

2. **Everybody has a set of identities.** Our identities can include our cultures, the ways we self-express, our beliefs, our family origins, our values, and more. Valentina has many identities (some that she names are: young woman, middle schooler, athlete, Puerto Rican). About being an athlete, she writes, “It’s what keeps me *me*.”

- What are your identities? Describe what keeps you *you*. Draw or illustrate identities you hold that are important to you.

3. Vale speaks English and Spanish and lives in the United States. Her family is Puerto Rican. Because fencing is conducted in French, Vale also knows some French words.

- What language or languages do you speak? What language or languages do people in your family speak? What are your favorite foods in the language or languages you speak?
- If you don’t speak Spanish, there will be words and phrases that Vale, her friends, and her family use that are unfamiliar to you. If you do speak Spanish, some culturally Puerto Rican words may be new to you. There may be French fencing words that are new to you. In order to understand

Vale best, look up the words on the internet. As you read, make a list of words in all three languages—English, Spanish, and French—that are new to you.

- When you are finished reading the book, write a poem with all or some of the words you have defined and/or translated.
4. A key theme in this book is **adaptation**. When we adapt to a challenge or obstacle, we learn and grow so that we are better able to take on that challenge or obstacle. Vale’s doctor says to her, “the goal with physical therapy is not to fix / *but to strengthen* / not to change / but to give you the skills / and tools / to adapt.” (p. 24)
- Have you ever faced a challenge that required you to grow in order to solve it, move past it, or learn from it? If so, describe how you grew and what you learned about yourself.
  - Predict three challenges Vale might face and how she might have to grow to face them.
5. Another key theme in this book is **disability**. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines a *disability* as “any condition of the body or mind that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities and interact with the world around them.” A disability can be visible or invisible to others. Vale’s doctor describes everybody in the world as “disabled or pre-disabled / because every single person / will eventually need physical therapy / or other types of help / at some point in their lives. / That if we live long enough, / we all need support / whether because we get diagnosed with something / or we hurt ourselves . . . / or we simply age.” (p. 178)
- Reflect and write about the word *pre-disabled*. What does it mean to you? If it makes you think differently about disability, share how. How can you imagine you or others might need physical help in the future?
  - What might be difficult about asking for help? Why is it okay to ask for help?



# DISCUSSION AND WRITING QUESTIONS

1. Read the first three poems, “Back to School,” “Background Noise,” and “I Know Me Best.”
  - What do we learn about Vale’s wants, needs, and personality? What do we learn about her relationships with her mother, her father, and her brother? What parts of Valentina’s identity are the most important to her? Use evidence from the poems.
  - Choose an object that represents one (or more) of your identities. In a poem or an illustration, share how this object represents you. You can also choose an object that represents a challenge or obstacle to you expressing your identity.
2. How have Vale’s relationships with her mother and father changed before her injury and after? How have Vale’s relationships with her peers changed, including Amanda? Use evidence from the book. Draw or illustrate a before-and-after with Vale and one other person in the book.
3. Vale likes to daydream. “Daydreams are everything,” she says. (p. 88)
  - Choose one of Vale’s daydreams and illustrate it in images or as a short story. Here are two daydreams she shares with us early on:
    - “I’ll tell the sports interviewers / when years from now / they make a documentary / about my life.” (p. 17)
    - “[N]othing compares to the adrenaline of your own body / as you win / the scent of strength / in every one of your pores / as you face someone in all your armor / and score the winning touch / ... / the weight of my jacket / stamped with U.S. CAMACHO / ... / those sweet high-pitched beeps / those sliding sneakered feet / and the rush / the thrill / every time the referee calls out / my winning touch.” (pp. 19–20)
  - What are your daydreams? Illustrate, in words or images, a daydream about your future that you feel good sharing with others.
4. Vale’s mom used to tell her that “second place was the same / as last,” and her coach was “always pushing me to go harder.” (p. 91)
  - What positive and negative impacts do you believe these words have on Vale? Use evidence from the book.
  - Who has given you advice that pushed you to do better? Who has given you advice that felt difficult to take? What is the difference between being supportive and pushing too hard? Is it the same for everyone? Why or why not?
5. Vale’s friendship with Stephanie has ended, and she begins a new friendship with Amanda. What fears or insecurities do you notice Vale shares about building a friendship with Amanda? Use evidence from the text.
6. What evidence is there that Vale might have a crush on Myrka; how does she behave, what does she do, what does she say, and how does she react to Myrka in different scenes? Do you have any evidence as to how Myrka might feel about Vale? What feelings does Vale describe having for Myrka? Reflect on Vale’s feelings: What makes sense to you, and why?





# DISCUSSION AND WRITING QUESTIONS

CONTINUED

7. Vale works through her complicated feelings about the words *disabled* and *disability* throughout her story. Dr. Claudia (in “Dr. Claudia Is Safer than Siri,” p. 104) and Stephanie (in “Disabled,” p. 101) offer two very different perspectives on the words *disabled* and *disability*. Please compare Dr. Claudia’s and Stephanie’s ideas. Which ideas are the most helpful to Vale as she figures out her feelings? Why?
8. Vale tells Myrka that she “can *never* forgive” Myrka letting her win. (p. 212) When she cools down a little, Vale thinks, “maybe it doesn’t matter if I forgive Myrka / or she forgives me.” (p. 230) Then she thinks about it a little more, apologizes to Myrka, and is elated when Myrka, after taking an important couple of days to think about it, forgives Vale.
  - What do you imagine is the lesson that Vale has learned about forgiveness from her fight with Myrka? Describe how Vale has grown from this situation.
  - Describe a situation in which you were forgiven or in which you forgave someone else. If you don’t want to share one of those situations, then imagine a situation in which you are forgiven or forgive someone else. How do you imagine that you grow?
9. Compare these two statements Vale makes:  
“Valentina the non-champ? / What kind of a loser / is / she?” (p. 52)  
“Valentina the non-champ? / I don’t know. / She’s starting to sound / kind of exciting / to me.” (p. 246)
  - Why you think Vale equated being a non-champ with being a loser at the beginning of the story? Use evidence from the book. What has happened in the story to change Vale’s perspective? What is exciting to her now about being a non-champ? Did you expect this shift in perspective? Why?
  - In your own life, please reflect upon a time when you have shifted your perspective about something important to you. You can write about this or draw it.
10. At the beginning, Vale is pretending to be strong. By the end, she says, “I feel strong.” (p. 248) How does Vale’s definition of *strength* change throughout her story? Use evidence from the text. How do you define *strength* after reading her story? Tell a story that demonstrates strength, using yourself as the main character.



# POST-READING QUESTIONS

1. When she comes back from her museum trip with Myrka, Vale has “the prickly feeling / that somewhere out there / is a giant timer / and I’m somehow / running / out of time.” (p. 167) At the end of her story, Vale realizes, “Time is *not* running out. / It’s infinite. / I can find new paths forward / because / I’m in charge of the map.” (p. 229)
  - What do you imagine Vale will do or try or be in her future? Daydream a future for her—you may illustrate it, write a song or a story, or write an epilogue in verse, the way the book is written in verse.
  - Draw a map of your own future with as many options as you can think of, and then write about one or two of the paths that are the most far-out or exciting to you. What if you had infinite time?
2. Myrka, Manu, and Amanda have important dreams and goals for their futures as well. Pick one of these characters and illustrate or write about their dreams as they appear in the book. How might they achieve their dreams? (Dreams and goals can change, and that’s okay!) How are your current dreams and goals different or similar to those of the character you picked?
3. The author, Andrea Beatriz Arango, writes in her author’s note, “Everyone has the right to choose what words they want to use to describe their life experience. While the word *disabled* ends up feeling like a label Vale wants to use when talking about her chronic pain, it may not feel quite right to you or to others in your life. I hope we can all continue to have conversations about the words that feel validating to us, as Vale does in this book.”
  - Are there identity markers, or labels, that are “comfortable” for you? Who do you say you are? What words are validating to you?
4. Vale says, “**o todo o nada / all or nothing** / there cannot be an in-between.” (p. 55) Please reflect on the title of the book, *It’s All or Nothing, Vale*. Having read all of Vale’s journey, what does the title mean to you? Imagine there was a book about you overcoming a struggle and becoming stronger. What would your own book be titled?

Read the Q&A with author  
**Andrea Beatriz Arango**

Christina Olivares is a longtime educator and author of the poetry books *No Map of the Earth Includes Stars* (2015) and *Future Botanic* (2023).



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