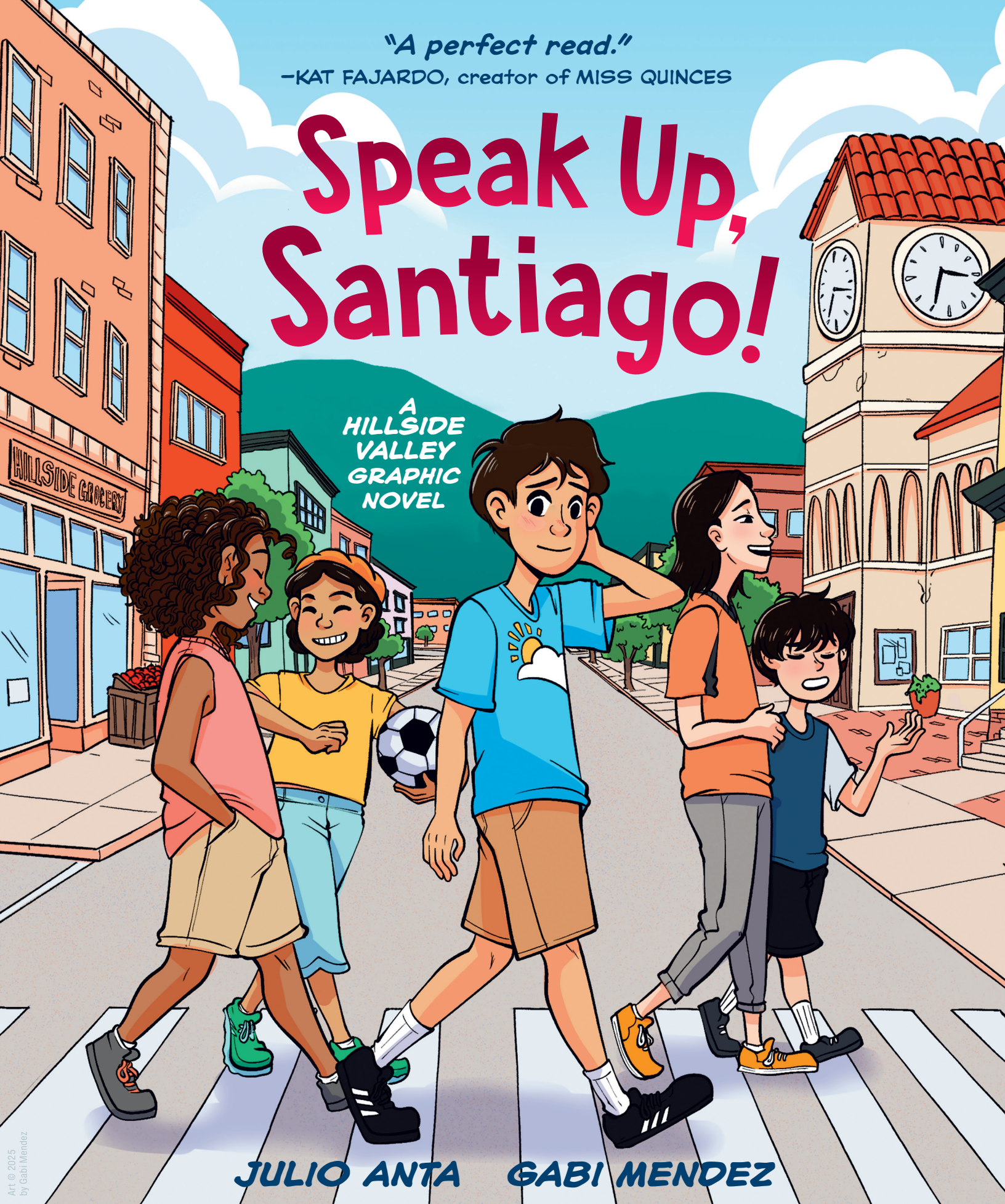


"A perfect read."

—KAT FAJARDO, creator of MISS QUINCES

Speak Up, Santiago!

A
HILLSIDE
VALLEY
GRAPHIC
NOVEL

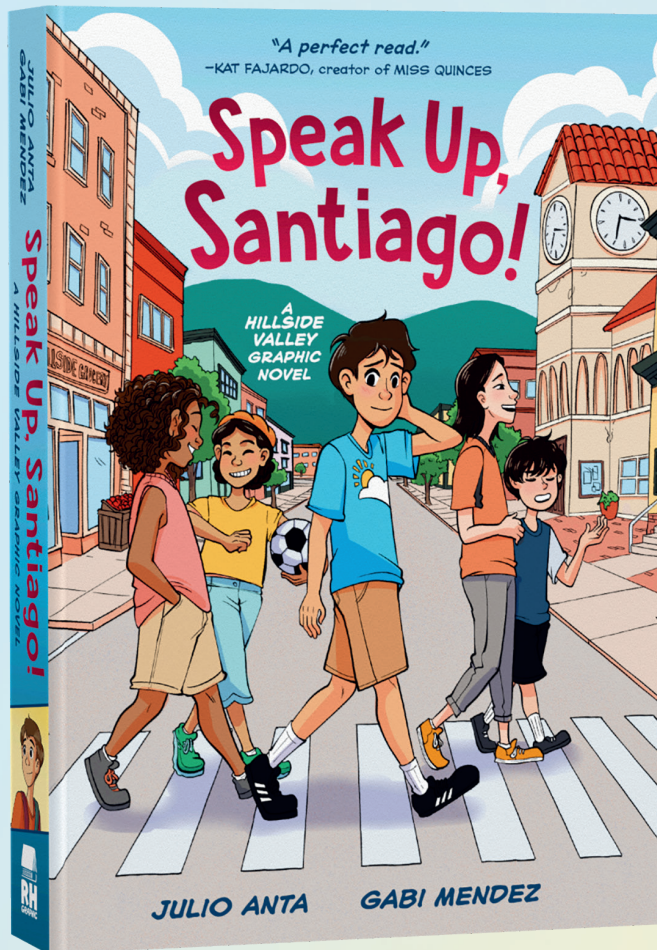


JULIO ANTA

GABI MENDEZ

EDUCATORS' GUIDE

RHTeachersLibrarians.com



About the Book

How can you speak up if you don't have the words?

Santi is excited to spend the summer in Hillside Valley, meeting the local kids, eating his abuela's delicious food, and exploring! There's just one problem—Santi doesn't speak Spanish that well and it feels like everyone he meets in Hillside does. There's Sol (she's a soccer player who really loves books), Willie (an artist), Alejandro (Santi's unofficial tour guide!), and Nico (Alejandro's brother and a blue belt in karate). In between all their adventures in Hillside, Santi can't help but worry about his Spanish—what if he can't keep up?! Does that mean he's not Colombian enough? Will Santi find his confidence and his voice? Or will his worries cost him his new friendships . . . and the chance to play in Hillside's summer soccer tournament?!

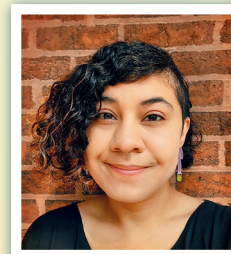
About the Author



Julio Anta is a Cuban and Colombian American author from Miami, Florida and is making his middle-grade debut with the Hillside Valley series. He is also the author of

many other comics and graphic novels, including *Sí, Se Puede: The Latino Heroes Who Changed the United States* and for YA readers, *Home*, the Eisner-nominated *Frontera*, and *This Land Is Our Land: A Blue Beetle Story*. Julio currently resides in New York City, where he works to tell stories about a diverse range of Latinx characters for all ages. Visit him online at julioanta.com or @julioanta.

About the Illustrator



Gabi Mendez is a Queer Mexican American comic artist and illustrator. Originally from the West Coast, Gabi has bounced all over the United States, learning and drawing,

before landing in Chicago to continue making stories where everyone feels included.

Visit her online at gabimendez.com or at @hobbleshmobble.



A Letter from the Author

Dear Reader,

I grew up in Miami, Florida, in the 1990s, when much of my Cuban and Colombian American family struggled to speak English. Spanish was my first language and the natural connective tissue between me, my grandparents, and our large extended family. As I began attending school and English became the language I spoke with friends and teachers, something began to change in me. Like a lot of second-generation Latinx kids, I became extremely self-conscious about my Spanish-speaking abilities.

Now as an adult in my thirties, I still make just as many language mistakes as I did when I was growing up (maybe even more!), but what has changed is the way I internalize those mistakes. Which brings me to my new Hillside Valley middle-grade graphic novel series with Gabi Mendez! The first book in the series, *Speak Up, Santiago!*, is a story about a Colombian American kid like me who struggles to communicate with his Spanish-speaking grandmother and sometimes even his friends.

Our main character, Santiago (or Santi), is modeled in part after my son. Santi, like my son, has a white American mom and Colombian American dad and struggled with speech at an early age. His parents always planned on raising him to be bilingual but focused on one language to start. Before he knew it, Santi was entering middle school and had never learned to speak Spanish.

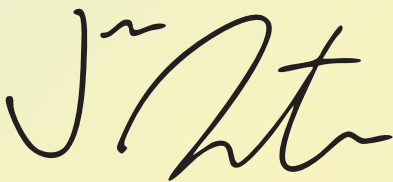
At the start of our graphic novel, Santi is on his way to his abuela Emma's small Hudson Valley town to spend the summer immersing himself in Spanish, and if he's honest . . . he's more than a little nervous.

Luckily for Santi, he'll come to learn that his grandmother loves him for who he is, not how fluent he is in Spanish. And he'll meet a group of kids his age who invite him to join their "Secret Soccer Club" and take him on adventures through the mountains that surround their small town.

Speak Up, Santiago! and the forthcoming titles in our Hillside Valley series mean a lot to both Gabi and me, as Latinos of varying levels of Spanish fluency. It's a heartwarming series about friendship and community that puts Latinx kids of various backgrounds and identities at the center. And even though each book will focus on a different Hillside Valley middle schooler, everyone's favorites (including Santi) will be returning in supporting roles.

We hope you enjoy!

Julio Anta



Art © 2025 by Gabi Mendez

Pre-Reading Questions

1. Spend some time looking at the cover of the book. What do you notice? What questions do you have? Based on the cover, how is Hillside Valley different from where you live, and how is it similar?
2. Santiago is about to spend the summer with his abuela Emma in Hillside Valley to immerse himself in Spanish. What emotions do you think he might be having? How would you feel if you were Santi? Santi's parents won't be there. Have you ever spent time somewhere new or away from your family?
3. What experience has shaped your understanding of yourself and your history?
Extension activity: After reading the book, create the first chapter of a graphic novel about your experience.
4. Read the letter from the author included in this guide. Julio Anta says that the Hillside Valley series "puts Latinx kids of various backgrounds and identities at the center." Why do you think this is important for the creators? What other books have you read with Latinx characters?
5. In the story, Hillside Valley is a character, rich with personality and history and a diverse community. What is your community like? Is it diverse? Where are your favorite places to go? Go to data.census.gov/profile and investigate the demographics of where you live.
6. Both author Julio Anta and illustrator Gabi Mendez dedicate the book to their grandmothers. Who is an elder in your family or community that you admire? If you could ask them something about their life that you don't know, what would it be? Brainstorm a list of possible questions.



Questions and Activities

1. As you read, compare Hillside Valley with your town or city. What do you notice? What stands out? What is something you didn't know before?
2. Santi feels nervous about speaking Spanish during his summer in Hillside Valley. When he was younger, people assumed that Santi could and should speak Spanish (p.6). Are there things that people have assumed about you? How have other people's assumptions impacted you and how you move through the world?
3. Santi's dad says "language is a journey. It takes twists and turns, and sometimes it takes longer than we expect to reach our destination" (p.17). What do you think he means by that? Is language a big part of your identity? Are you learning a language? What has been your experience? What advice would you give Santi as he embarks on this new journey?
4. What happens when Santi and Abuela Emma reunite? What emotions does Santi experience? Why do you think the traditional Colombian food that Abuela Emma has prepared puts Santi at ease? Are there any foods eaten in your family that make you feel similarly? What dishes are traditional to your family or culture?
5. Who are the other kids that Santi meets in Hillside Valley? Pick a character who stands out to you or whom you would like to know more about. Create a character profile poster or identity map for that character. Add to it as you read. How does this character change throughout the story?
6. In chapter 5, Alejandro gives Santi a tour of Hillside Valley. Where do they go? Create a map of Hillside Valley based on the information you learn from Alejandro and others. What are some of your favorite spots in your community? Why?
7. Describe the Secret Soccer Club. Can you relate to how the friends connect over soccer? What is something that helps you and your friends connect? What about soccer brings people together? Do you think this is the case for all sports? Have you ever welcomed someone new into a group you were part of?
8. Language and our relationship to language plays such a diverse and key role in this book, as well as in the Latinx experience generally. Santi learns some new colloquial terms (expressions unique to a particular region or group of people) during his time with his new friends, including a term used among Colombians and Colombian Americans like himself. Imagine that a new student is moving to your neighborhood and will start at your school tomorrow. What are some colloquial terms that they might hear?
9. On page 90, Nicolás (Nico) teases Santi for not knowing what *parce*, a colloquial Colombian word, means. How does Santi react? What happens right before this interaction that may make the comment feel extra hurtful? How would you have reacted? Has anyone ever made you feel like you weren't authentic or "enough" of something? What advice or words of consolation would you give Santi at that moment?
10. What about cooking with Abuela Emma and sharing a meal is so special for Santi? Why do you think his hesitation around language falls away when they are cooking together or when Santi is expressing his love of the food? Colombian food plays a major role in the moments of connection between Santi and Abuela Emma and Santi and Spanish. How does your family connect? Food? Games? Activities?

Extension activity: Make a glossary of the Colombian dishes mentioned in the book. Use it to build cultural knowledge and vocabulary. Do some research and learn about the history of the dish and/or geographical region where it is eaten.



11. On page 97, Santi says to Sol, "You grew up speaking Spanish. You haven't had to feel like you're just a big *fake*, pretending to be someone you're not." Why do you think Santi feels "fake" at times? How does Santi define identity at this moment? How do you define identity? Is there such a thing as being fake when it comes to identity? Do you have to know colloquial terms or slang to authentically claim an identity? Do you agree with how Sol reacts? What would you tell Santi at this moment?
12. There are many instances of intergenerational communication and connection, not just between Santi and Abuela Emma but also in the larger Hillside Valley community. What are the ways in which the Latin American community (of all ages) comes together in the book? What is significant about Doña Marta (p.101)? Who in your community plays a similar role?
13. What happens at Doña Marta's party that sparks Santi's feelings of humiliation (chapter 10)? What would you have said or done if you were Santi? What do you think of Abuela Emma's response to the other women? How does this moment affect Santi and Abuela Emma's relationship and communication? How does it affect his relationship with the Secret Soccer Club? What would you say to console Santi? Have you ever felt humiliated or out of place? What happened and how was the situation resolved?
14. In chapter 13, Abuela Emma suffers a fall for which Santi blames himself. Why is this? What does he do in the face of the resulting challenges? In what ways does this moment change Santi? Was there a time when you had to take control of a difficult situation? Write about it.
15. Abuela Emma's recovery provides an opportunity for Santi to ask questions about her life and about his dad. Through this conversation with Abuela Emma, what do we learn about Santi's dad? How does his experience compare with Santi's? Relate this back to the author's note at the end of the book. Julio Anta writes about his experience as a second generation Latinx kid, which he says is at once similar but also very different from generations before his. Think about your own experience and identity. How does it differ from that of others in your family? How does it differ from that of your friends?
16. Abuela Emma says, "We worked hard to make sure your father never missed out on his heritage." p. 194 What are some of the ways they celebrated or engaged with their heritage when Santi's dad was young? What are some of the ways *you* celebrate or engage with your heritage?
17. How does Abuela Emma describe her life growing up in Colombia? On page 192, we learn about immigration from Colombia and Abuela Emma's story in particular. Put her experiences in some context and research Colombia. Find the places she mentions, like Cartagena and Arenal del Sur. Share a new fact you learned about Colombia with the class.
18. Do you know anyone who has immigrated to a new place? How is Abuela Emma's immigration story similar or different to their story?
19. On page 199, the Secret Soccer Club begins to play better than ever before. Santi says, "For the first time, we were a real team." Why do you think that is?



Post-Reading Question and Activities

1. Choose one of the traditional Colombian dishes from your earlier list. Research the ingredients and steps to making the dish. Using an index card or any card stock, write the recipe and ingredients on one side. Now, do the same for a traditional dish that is important to you. Include a story about the dish and why it is significant to your family or culture. (Hint: Use this as an opportunity to connect with a family member and ask them to help you with the recipe!)
2. Imagine your school will welcome several new students who have moved from far away. Create a travel brochure for where you live. Think of five places you would highlight. Include a visual for each place and an explanation of what you could do there.
3. Finding ways to tell, record, and preserve intergeneration stories has proved to be important across many different cultures. It is through asking questions that Santi finds out about Abuela Emma, his dad, and his own history. In this way, intergenerational connections and stories play a major role in the book. StoryCorps was founded in 2003, and they help people record personal and family stories that are then preserved in the Library of Congress. Explore the site here: archive.storycorps.org/search/interviews.
 - a. Begin by searching for interviews based on your own personal interest. For example, you can type in "soccer," "language," "travel," or "food," to name a few. Spend some time listening to the stories that come up.
 - b. Think of someone in your family or community whom you would like to learn more about. Brainstorm a list of questions you would ask them if your conversation could be recorded by StoryCorps.
4. Think of a story about you or your family you wish could be preserved in a recording that people could listen to many years from now. Write that story out.
5. The novel shows several depictions of tight-knit communities, such as the Secret Soccer Club. Show what community means to you. Depict it in either a diorama, poster, or clay or playdough scene.
6. The forthcoming books in the Hillside Valley series will focus on other characters. Choose one of Santi's friends. Predict what we will learn about their backstory and what will happen in their story. Use details from the book to help you make those predictions. Write and create a chapter that takes place in Hillside Valley that centers one of the friends you have chosen to focus on.
7. Imagine you will write a graphic novel series based on the place where you live. Design a book cover and include a title. What would be the title of *your* story? Why? Before you begin, reflect on how the illustrator uses details from the story on the cover.
8. Reflect on the title: *Speak Up, Santiago!* What are the many ways Santi learns to speak up?



Extension: Conduct and record the interview using a computer or other electronic device.

*This guide was written by **Anna Lapera**.
She is an author-educator passionate about
making sure all kids know they have a story to tell.*



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