



READING GUIDE

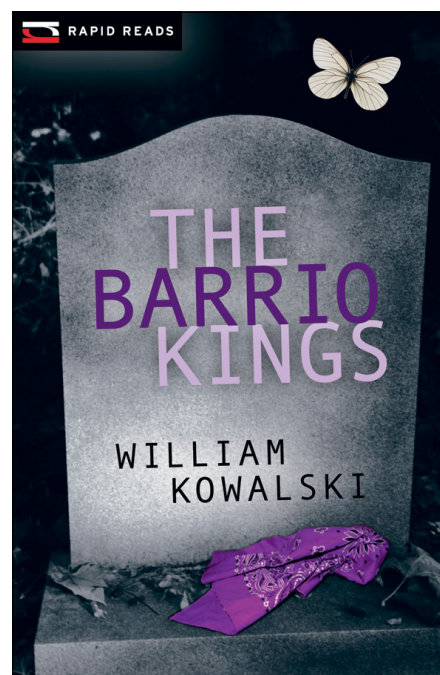
THE BARRIO KINGS WILLIAM KOWALSKI

Reading level: 2.1

Interest level: Adult

Themes: gangs, loyalty, friendship, literacy

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Summary

Rosario Gomez is a hard-working grocery employee whose girlfriend, Connie, is expecting their first son. Rosario's taking night classes to get his GED, and is working toward a promotion at the store. He's looking forward to being a father. He's planning to own his own business one day.

Until five years ago, however, Rosario ran with the most infamous gang in the area.

But those days are behind him. Rosario—"El Loco"—left the Barrio Kings after his brother, Tomás, was killed in a fight. When his old friend and fellow gang member, Juan, gets out of jail, he comes knocking on Rosario's door. Juan has one thing on his mind: revenge for Tomás's death.

When Rosario tells Juan he doesn't wear the gang colors anymore—that he has left that life behind—Juan goes off, angry. But Rosario is determined to keep the promise he has made Connie. Tomás's death helped him realize that gang life was a waste. He knew sooner or later he'd end up just like Tomás: dead. It wasn't what his big brother would wish for him.

But Juan doesn't give up so easily. A career criminal, he keeps pushing Rosario toward a confrontation with Lencho, the rival gangster who pulled the gun on Tomás all those years ago.

When a drive-by shooting at Rosario's apartment puts Connie in the hospital, Rosario decides to take action once and for all. He dons the Barrio King colors once more and makes a plan to confront Lencho in his home. Once there, however, he discovers two things: Lencho has his own little daughter now; and he didn't order the drive-by. It was done by a kid who was eager to take out the legendary El Loco and make his reputation in the gang.

Everything changes. In a sudden burst of faith and understanding that takes everyone by surprise—and yet surprises no one—Rosario and Lencho lay to rest the rivalry that for years has divided the barrio.





Questions for Discussion

1. Juan tries to make Rosario think his time in prison wasn't so bad. For what reasons would he do this?
2. Why is Rosario so strongly motivated to be a good father for Emilio?
3. Why does life “stop” in jail? How hard is this for people who are freshly released?
4. In chapter five, Rosario knows that Juan is just trying to get under his skin. Where does this new kind of insight come from?
5. In chapter seven, Rosario visits Tia Carlita to pick up some baby stuff. What does Rosario mean when he says “Family is everything”?
6. In chapter eight, Rosario remembers one of his teacher's words: “The world trusts a man who trusts himself.” What does this mean?
7. Rosario says he gets nervous when he talks to his employer—even more nervous than he used to feel when he was a member of a street gang. Why does he feel like this?
8. Juan says the cops think they're just a couple of *cholos*. If you don't know what this means, go back and read the sentence again. Knowing what you do about the context and the characters, what do you think *cholos* might be?
9. When Rosario suits up like a BK in a sleeveless shirt, he says his tats are there for the world to see. What does he mean? How do you know?
10. Rosario says sometimes you have to break the little promises so you can keep the big ones. What does he mean? Can you think of an instance in your own life where you have encountered this wisdom?
11. When Juan tells Rosario that no one could have made peace between the gangs but him, what did he mean?
12. When Rosario storms Lencho's place, he discovers Lencho has a child. Why does this discovery suddenly change everything?
13. What was the significance of the butterflies after Rosario's graduation?
14. Why is Rosario at peace with his brother's death? How can it be so?
15. With Tomás's death, Rosario realized he didn't want to live the gang life. Why does it often take a serious event to spur individual change?
16. Does this story make you think of another story or movie? Explain.
17. Why do children so often inspire change in the adults around them?
18. What do you think might happen to Juan? Why do you think so?
19. Rosario seems older than his 23 years. Find several examples in the book where this is true.
20. Rosario sees himself in the roles he aspires to. He actually creates a picture in his mind of himself shaking hands in a suit, or on an airplane. How does this technique, called *visualizing*, affect his success? Explain.

