

Far From Gringo Land

by

Edward Myers



EBOOK DOWNLOAD

Synopsis

Rick Dresner is spending the summer with the Romero family, who live in a barrio in the hills of Santo Domingo, Mexico. He'll help them build a house on their land, and in return, they'll provide room and board and help Rick improve his Spanish. But the construction project turns out to be a lot tougher than Rick had imagined. Language and cultural differences lead to awkwardness and misunderstanding, especially when he falls for a rich American girl from a very different part of town. In this new twist on the classic fish-out-of-water story, it's a middle-class white boy who's out of his element and must change and grow to adapt to his surroundings.

Sort review

From School Library Journal Grade 8 Up—Rick is spending the summer before his senior year with family friends in Mexico to help them build a new house. He'll provide extra labor for the Romeros in exchange for room and board and a chance to improve his Spanish. The work is backbreaking, the construction project has its setbacks, and Rick has a tough time relating to his host family when both the language and culture are hard to decipher. A budding romance with a rich American teen, also visiting for the summer, takes his mind off his troubles. The premise of this story is promising for what it could do to advance cultural understanding, but a waffling Rick is not strong enough to take on the challenge and the Romeros come off as stereotypes. The third-person narration does little to draw readers in, with much of the story told and not shown. Rick's feeble attempts to help the Romeros through troubling times come off as self-centered and patronizing. Even the light romance, which is often related in stilted and confusing conversations between Rick and his paramour, isn't enough to make this story compelling.—Shawna Sherman, Hayward Public Library, CA Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an alternate kindle_edition edition. About the Author Edward Myers is the author of 20 books for adults and 12 for children, including *Storyteller*, published by Clarion Books in July 2008, and two middle-grade adventure novels, *Climb or Die* and *Hostage*, published by Hyperion. He lives with his wife and two children near New York City. --This text refers to an alternate kindle_edition edition. Review "Without bias, the author honestly depicts a rural Mexico that will give young American readers a sense of the good, the bad and the ugly, from the perspective of a young gringo."--Kirkus Reviews "...this quick and thought-provoking read should spark discussion."--Publishers Weekly "...it's a warm and unsentimental tale of a summer spent well for both guest and hosts, and of the way good people can come together across all kinds of divides."--Bulletin --This text refers to an alternate kindle_edition edition. From Booklist Seventeen-year-old Rick Dresner is spending the summer in Mexico, helping the Romeros build an addition to their home and learning to speak Spanish more fluently. Although he looked forward to the experience with a combination of excitement and anxiety, he is completely unprepared for the realities of hard work and being an outsider in

the barrio of Santa Domingo. In this mostly autobiographical tale, Myers fictionalizes his own teenage life and the lessons he learned about being a gringo in a poverty-stricken, yet very proud, country. While the commentary about Rick's experiences and his revelations is a bit too pointed, failing to trust the strength of the narrative to carry its messages, the story of the home's construction, the Romeros' lives, and Rick's mini-romance creates an intriguing account of a well-intentioned American on foreign soil. Grades 7-10. --Frances Bradburn --This text refers to an alternate kindle_edition edition. Read more

[*Download to continue reading...*](#)

Look inside the book

Table of Contents
Title Page
Table of Contents
Copyright
Dedication
I
Arrival
The Romeros
La Obra
Good Night
You Like Mexican Work?
R and R
Long Distance
Relatives
Pets
A Ton of Bricks
Time Travel
Toys
Bricklaying
Checking In
Postcards
Work and Work and Work
Insomnia
Crossing Paths
Mother's Helper
Bells
The Crow
El Barrio
He Got Away
Vocabulary
Panic
Muddling Through
El Colorado
Wetbacks
Apprenticeship
Comidas Típicas
Rain
Taletelling
Los Mojados
Muddy Waters
La Colonia Americana
Ricardo
Anda de Novia
Mulling Things Over
Fine! Fine! Fine!
Estoy Contenta
Accounts Payable
A Change in the Weather
Working Out
It's Not Fair
Negotiations
La Panza Blanca
The Three Rs
Departures
Serenading the Neighborhood
Arts and Crafts
Work and Work and Work
Help Wanted
First Aid
Tiempo Loco
Time Is Running Out
Bells Again
Flying Lessons
More Vocabulary
Meeting the Family
Leave Your Name and Number
Disaster
Out of Control
Pleading the Case
Storms
It Wasn't Worth the Trouble
El Gran Colorado
A Work of Art
We Did It!
The News
Cleanup
Wonderful, Wonderful, Wonderful
A Heart-to-Heart
Pulling Out the Supports
Getting Ready
Vete, Gringo
Lucha Libre
Looking for Ellen
Matters of the Heart
Special Delivery
What Do You Prefer?
A Work in Progress
IV
Stay in Touch
About the Author
Copyright © 2009 by Edward Myers
All rights reserved. For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book, write to Permissions, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 215 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10003. Clarion Books is an imprint of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. The Library of Congress has catalogued the print edition as follows: Myers, Edward, 1950—Far from gringo land / by Edward Myers. p. cm. To the Rivera family—Con mucho cariño—E.M. Special thanks to Carol Gaskin, Marcia Leonard, Delia Marshall, Cory Myers, Robin Myers, Noé Orozco S., Alejandra Ortíz de Rivera, Edith Poor, Jesús Rivera Juárez, José Rivera Ortíz, Amy Shapiro, Dinah Stevenson.
I
Arrival
Seated on a bench in the jardín público, the town square in the center of Santo Domingo, Rick Dresner shivers slightly in the early morning chill. He's alone. His backpack and roll-aboard are at his feet. He didn't sleep much during the two-day journey here, but even so, he feels wide awake. Everything is different from home—the ancient buildings, the flowery scent in the air, the sound of the birds calling to one another from the trees around him—and that gives him energy despite his exhaustion. Now a rhythmic gong catches his attention—the town clock tolling six times. The birds fall silent for a moment, then jolt upward, dozens at once, flying off with a great windy noise. The town starts to wake up. A hunched-over old man sweeps a sidewalk with a long-handled broom. Shopkeepers arrive and unlock the doors to their shops. Three schoolboys run by. A waiter sets up tables at an outdoor café. Rick watches these activities and decides he'd better get moving, too. Following directions he'd received in the mail, he heads up a steep street. White walls flank it, and stone doorways with massive wooden doors appear on both sides at regular intervals. The windows, too, are framed in stone, some covered with complex iron grilles. Breathing hard, burdened by the backpack and rollaboard, Rick forces his way upward. At some point he stops to rest, turns,

and finds Santo Domingo spread out before him. The roofs are mostly flat, gray concrete, though here and there he sees a few expanses of red tile. Dark green trees rise between some of the buildings. The reddish-yellow bell towers of six or eight churches rise over everything else. This is the view that appears in so many photos and postcards of the town. Yet Rick sees it in another way, too—as a memory he can't quite place. He sets off again. Once the hill levels off, the street opens up into an unpaved area with houses surrounding it on three of the four sides. The fourth side is an overlook that lets Rick gaze down on some cultivated fields, several tile-roofed adobe houses, the ruins of an old aqueduct, and the gray-green desert beyond. This, too, is a half-remembered view. He stares, trying to fill in the blanks in his memory. The last time he saw this landscape was ten years ago, when he was seven. He turns away. Surrounding him is a barrio, a neighborhood that's the poorest he's seen all morning. Rough brick walls. Clay tile roofs. Clotheslines full of dangling laundry that crisscross between houses—some of them little more than shacks. A thin haze of wood smoke lingers over the area. Three or four radios blare music from different stations. Rick finds the entrance to a street that's only five or six feet wide. Callejón Hidalgo, reads a tile plaque mounted on the wall. Hidalgo Alley. It's so narrow that even the thought of entering it makes Rick feel claustrophobic. He glances around. Two little girls and a woman stare at him from a second-story window across the street. "¡Hola, gringo!" calls one of the girls. Rick knows that "gringo" is often considered an insulting term for an American, but he doesn't think she intended it that way. She was smiling as she called out to him. "Hola," he calls back. The girls giggle. The woman, her long black braids dangling as she leans out the window, simply stares. "Busco la familia Romero," Rick says to her. I'm looking for the Romero family. "No los conozco," replies the woman. I don't know them. Rick thanks her anyway and starts up Callejón Hidalgo. The cobbled surface is uneven underfoot. He has to carry the rollboard and steps carefully to avoid twisting an ankle. The walls are too close for comfort, and the street's narrowness leaves it cool and gloomy. For a moment he feels a twinge of worry. Maybe this isn't such a great place for a lone gringo. But the numbers painted on the whitewashed walls and doorways keep increasing, so he knows he's getting closer to his destination. Eight, ten, eleven, thirteen, fourteen . . . At the corner, where Callejón Hidalgo widens to meet Callejón Catarata, he finds number seventeen. Setting down the roll-board, Rick hesitates for a moment. Finally, he pulls a knotted rope dangling from a hole in the door. A bell clanks somewhere on the other side. The second he hears it, a string of thoughts flashes through his brain: What am I doing here? Why am I visiting this strange place . . . moving in with people I barely know . . . taking on a job I've never done before? Panic surges through his body, leaving him weak and shaky. He fights the impulse to flee. To head back through Callejón Hidalgo, race down to the jardín público, and catch the first bus out. To return to Mexico City, fly back to Colorado, and make up a story to tell his parents. The door swings open. On the other side stands a man clearly much older than Rick, but almost a head shorter. "Busco los Romeros," Rick tells him. I'm looking for the Romeros. "¿Eres Ricardo?" the man asks. Are you Richard? He smiles warmly, and Rick glimpses a gold-framed front tooth. "Sí—Rick Dresner." "Yo soy Julio Romero," says the man. I am

Julio Romero. He opens his arms and gives Rick a hug. “Estás en tu casa.” You’re in your house. He picks up Rick’s bag and leads him through a narrow entryway into a rather plain-looking kitchen, then down some stairs into a courtyard. Suddenly two little dogs are jumping and yapping at Rick, a large woman is embracing him, a young man is shaking his hand, and everyone is speaking at once. “—y que hayas tenido buen viaje—” “—y llegaste sin problema!” “—bienvenido.” The sounds swirl around Rick until he’s dizzy. He recognizes the Spanish words but can’t make sense of them. Still, the intention is clear: he’s welcome here. Although he barely remembers these people—Julio, Emiliana, and Francisco—he’s among friends. The Romero’s

Early that afternoon, they sit down to a big meal. Emiliana has prepared lentil soup, rice, beans, and chicken in a fluffy tomato sauce. There’s bread, too, and tortillas heated on a griddle. “Eat,” she tells Rick. She gestures with both hands, a brushing motion, and urges him on, using words that he can’t quite follow. He catches one phrase, “muriendo de hambre”—dying of hunger. She’s right about that. He’s starving, and this meal is just what he needs. Emiliana serves him second helpings of each dish, then thirds, and he devours everything. Julio chuckles at Rick’s eagerness. “Don’t they feed you back home?” he asks. Then he adds, “Welcome to Mexico! We’ll show you how to eat.” Though he’s almost fifty, Julio’s close-cut hair is pure black, and he’s slim and muscular. The corners of his mouth droop slightly, so his smile is both a grimace and a smirk. “Pues, ¿cómo está tu familia?” asks Emiliana. So, how’s your family? “Bien. Completamente bien,” Rick answers. Fine. Totally fine. “That’s good,” says Emiliana. “I’m happy they’re doing so well.” She’s about the same age as her husband, but plumpness smooths her skin, so her face lacks wrinkles. She wears her hair in braids that extend halfway down her back. Her expression is gentle and solemn—until she smiles, revealing a gap-toothed grin that makes Rick smile in return. “Your parents don’t mind sharing you with us?” Francisco asks. He’s Rick’s age—seventeen—but looks older. His size is one reason. Although the two of them are the same height, Francisco is stockier, with broad shoulders and a deep chest. His wispy mustache also adds a couple of years to his appearance. “I miss your mother,” says Emiliana. “I wish she could be here, too.” “I’m sure she’d love to visit you,” Rick tells her, hoping he’s using the right Spanish words. He knows that his mom and Emiliana were close during the families’ time together ten years ago and that she’s enjoyed the letters they’ve traded since then. “Maybe when the house is done,” he adds. “Ojalá,” she says. I hope so. The Romero’s are strangers, yet they have a place in Rick’s life. They’re unfamiliar, yet now and then images surface in his memory . . . sitting in a kitchen with a woman who looks like Emiliana, only younger . . . playing near a wall with someone who resembles Francisco, though at age seven instead of seventeen . . . hiking on a hillside with a man who appears to be Julio but seems oddly taller than he is now. Rick takes these bits of recollection and tries to assemble them, but the images come and go like parts of a half-remembered dream. Much of what he recalls is actually what his parents have told him. That when he was seven, the family drove from Colorado to Mexico and lived for three months in Santo Domingo. That the big old house they’d rented wasn’t empty when they arrived, as it should have been, but was still inhabited by the Mexican family working as caretakers for the

owner. That Rick's parents invited this family, the Romeros, to stay on during their rental. That the two families became friends and remained in touch long after the Dresners returned to Colorado. "We're so glad you're here," Emiliana says, jolting Rick from his reverie. "So am I," Rick replies, feeling more relaxed and excited now. "It's going to be a big adventure." La Obra This is the plan. Rick will spend his summer vacation with the Romeros. They'll feed him, give him a place to sleep, introduce him to their way of life, show him Santo Domingo and the surrounding area, and teach him as much Spanish as he can learn in three months. In exchange, he'll help them with la obra—the construction project. The two families have discussed the possibility of this arrangement for a long time, but only recently did it become a real option. It's not that Rick was nervous about leaving home or his parents. He's traveled on his own before. And it's not that he was worried about dealing with another language and culture. He's studied Spanish since junior high. The issue is the difficulty and complexity of la obra. Until this year, he wasn't strong enough and big enough to help out. For the Romeros, la obra means building a brick and concrete house. Currently, they live in three tiny rooms. Julio and Emiliana sleep in the bedroom. Francisco sleeps on a sofa in the living room. The other room is a simple kitchen with two tables, a pair of tabletop gas burners, some shelves, an old refrigerator, and a water tank. The rooms stand apart from one another, each set in a corner of the property, facing the irregularly shaped courtyard. All three rooms are cramped, dark, and drafty. The living room has a flat concrete lid; the bedroom and kitchen are roofed with reddish clay tiles. According to Julio, the kitchen roof leaks when it rains. Emiliana's health suffers as a result, and everyone is frustrated by the lack of space. For years the Romeros have dreamed of building a larger house on their property. Know-how wasn't the problem. Julio, trained as a brick mason, could do most of the work himself, and Francisco could serve as his assistant. The problem was paying for materials. It took the family a long time to save enough money for the bricks and mortar needed to make their dream a reality. Now they have the cash in hand. Rick has arrived to help. Everything is ready. To show Rick the property and how they intend to change it, Julio and Francisco take him outside and up a wooden ladder to the living room roof. The two little dogs, Tizón and Sombra—Charcoal and Shadow, as Rick has learned—bark as he and the Romeros leave them behind. The view from the concrete rooftop isn't what Rick expected. He thinks of a house, whether big or small, as one structure, but this house is separate little units within a compound. The three rooms and the boxy walls surrounding them create a cozy haven in the middle. Although small and surfaced with concrete, this central courtyard, el patio, is like an oasis. A pirul—a big tree with tiny clustered leaves and feathery pink blossoms—provides some shade. Large clay pots of geraniums add splotches of red and a spicy aroma. The expanse of sky overhead makes the place feel surprisingly open. Rick understands why the Romeros feel cramped by the small rooms, but the property, tucked against the hillside, is airy and attractive. Belatedly, he realizes that Julio is speaking to him. "—y aquí mero el colado." And right here the—Rick doesn't know what a colado is. Before he can ask, though, Julio turns to him and says, "So what do you think?" Rick's mind is awash with questions. Where will the new house fit on this small property? Where will the

Romeros store all the construction materials? What sequence of steps will they follow in the building process? Unfortunately, he doesn't have a clue how to ask these questions. Despite his years of studying Spanish, he lacks the vocabulary to discuss the construction project. Won't this be a big problem? How can he help build a house if he can't even talk about it? Unsure of what else to say, he answers Julio's question. "Está bien." It's fine. "Are you sure you're ready for this?" Francisco asks seriously. Rick is overwhelmed by another wave of questions. Is he ready? He doesn't really know. And the Romeros—are they doubting his sincerity? His ability to do the work? Or is there some other challenge, some problem with the project that no one has explained? His misgivings flare up again. But what can he say? It's too late to chicken out. More to the point, he really wants to take part in la obra. Being in Mexico feels exotic and exciting. He hasn't ever tackled a job as ambitious as this. And best of all, it's nothing like the tough academic work he'll have to do in his final year in high school. "Of course I'm ready," he says, as much to convince himself as the Romeros. "It's going to be difficult," Julio says. "I know." "We're going to work like mules," Francisco says. "I know that, too." They stand for a moment without speaking. To distract himself from the thoughts buzzing in his head, Rick walks a few paces toward the roof's edge, pretending that something has caught his attention. At once something does—the view. It's the same view of Santo Domingo that he saw earlier, but he's much higher up the hillside now, so the panorama is wider. The land drops away below him, and he gazes at the roofs, the treetops, the church towers, and the town square from the perspective of someone looking out of a low-flying plane. The desert beyond the town rolls away toward the horizon. Everything shimmers in the summer heat, blurring the edges of the view so that Santo Domingo seems to be an island suspended in the middle of nowhere. Rick suddenly feels disconnected from the rest of the world—and from time as well. In this place, with half-familiar people standing nearby and odd sounds welling up from the vista below, his past—growing up in Colorado, living with his parents, going to an American high school—seems as dreamlike as the desert landscape in the distance.

Good Night "Buenas noches," Francisco says that evening as the boys settle into their beds. Francisco will sleep on a mattress on the floor; Rick has inherited the sofa. "Buenas noches," Rick replies. As an only child, he has always had a bedroom to himself. Will he have trouble sleeping with someone nearby? He pulls up the covers and sinks into the cushions as if submerging in water. Down, down, down . . . An image flits through his mind: his parents saying goodbye to him at the Denver airport. He knows they're happy that he's making this trip, but they were more upset by his departure than he'd expected. Embarrassed by their emotional farewell—his mother crying, his dad all choked up—he'd entered the security clearance area with a sense of relief. Only one more year till I leave for college, he thinks. He can hardly wait. He loves his parents, but he's tired of living at home. He wants to explore the world, to have adventures. Now, at least, he's made a start. Mexico, he tells himself. I'm in Mexico. He thinks about his bedroom back in Denver—large, quiet, and entirely his own—and feels a twinge of homesickness. "We love you," his dad had called out after Rick had given his boarding pass and ID to the agent. He'd meant to call back, "I love you, too," but the line of passengers had already advanced far enough

through security that all he could do was turn and wave goodbye. Had he hurt his parents' feelings? Rick is beyond tired. All he wants is seven or eight hours of sleep. He needs to be well rested. Julio intends to start la obra tomorrow. Everything will work out, he tells himself. Everything will be fine. Fatigue finally overtakes him. He sinks into oblivion.

You Like Mexican Work? Early the next morning, Rick rolls off the couch and dresses quickly in a T-shirt, a long-sleeved shirt, jeans, and work boots. Emiliana greets him warmly when he enters the kitchen. She's wearing a flowered apron over an almost shapeless cotton dress. "I hope you slept well," she says. "Very well, thanks," Rick tells her, still feeling somewhat dazed. Then, in case he didn't sound convincing enough, he adds cheerily, "I feel great!" At that moment, Julio comes in. He's dressed in tan jeans, a plaid western-style shirt, and a sombrero about the size and shape of an American cowboy hat. "Buenos días, Ricardo," he says, taking off his hat and sitting at the kitchen table. "Buenos días." "Ya llegó la arena." The sand has arrived. "What sand?" Rick asks, puzzled. "The big load I ordered. We'll use it for making mezcla." Rick isn't sure what mezcla is. He knows that mezclar means "to mix," so mezcla must be some sort of mixed construction material. Concrete, maybe? He guesses at the Spanish word by using the risky method of adding o to the English. "Concreto?" "No," Julio replies. "Mezcla." Rick decides not to press the point. He'll find out soon enough.

Stepping outside after breakfast, Rick expects to see a big pile of sand by the Romeros' door. There's nothing there. The open area where Callejón Hidalgo intersects Callejón Catarata is completely empty. "Where is it?" he asks Julio. Julio motions toward Hidalgo. They head down the alley without speaking. It's barely seven o'clock. Rick can hear families talking in the houses right and left, and he smells fried food—breakfast cooking. A few people are out, mostly men in jean jackets and sombreros, and some of them nod to Julio in passing. Otherwise the callejón is empty. Chilly, too. Its walls are so high that they block the sun's rays at this early hour. Rick stretches out his arms and discovers that he can nearly touch both walls with his hands. That's what brings the situation home. The alley is much too narrow for a truck. Even a car wouldn't make it through. The heap of sand that Rick first imagined sitting outside the Romeros' house is a block away.

Julio and Rick reach the end of the callejón. Just to the left, dumped against a brick wall, is a beige mound at least five feet tall, ten feet wide, and ten feet deep. Julio whistles through his teeth in amazement—or maybe dismay. "How much do you think it weighs?" Rick asks. "I ordered several tons." Julio chuckles quietly. Rick begins to understand the task ahead of them. Several tons . . . Three? Four? Metric tons, yet: 1,000 kilograms per ton, or 2,200 pounds. The Romeros' house is a full block away. Using wheelbarrows to move this huge pile of sand would be best, but the callejón is bumpy, muddy, and slick. There's also a drainage trench about six inches wide running down the center for several hundred feet. A wheelbarrow would be tough to control. Maybe even impossible. "How do we do this?" Rick asks uneasily, wondering, Can it even be done? The answer: "Costales." Another word Rick doesn't recognize. They go back to the house, and Julio shows Rick a little pile of neatly folded coarse cloth bags. Each bag will hold about 25 kilos of sand, Julio says. Rick does some quick multiplication. At 2.2 pounds per kilo, that's 55 pounds of sand in each

costal. "But where do you put them?" he asks Julio. Francisco, who has just finished breakfast, joins them at that moment. He has heard Rick's question and looks puzzled. "Put what?" "The sacks of sand," Rick says. Julio and Francisco exchange glances. "Well—on our backs," says Julio. The morning heats up. Direct sunlight won't enter the steep alley for several hours, but the air grows gradually warmer. Rick's muscles warm up, too; soon he's limber. For the next hour, he proceeds without major problems. He loads his costal with sand, hoists it onto his back, and carries it carefully up Callejón Hidalgo. Passing through the Romeros' kitchen, he descends the staircase into the courtyard and dumps his load onto the growing pile there. Then he repeats the process. Sometimes his efforts are synchronized with Julio's or Francisco's; sometimes he works alone. Slowly, slowly, the pile on the corner diminishes. Slowly, slowly, the pile in the courtyard grows larger. Still, he finds it hard to believe that he won't be hauling sand until the end of time. The sun clears the rooftops; the day grows hot. Rick strips off his shirt, but his T-shirt is quickly drenched in sweat. His hands keep slipping, so he can't keep a good grip on the sacks. How many trips has he made? Thirty? Forty? He lost track hours ago. Three dozen trips at least, he assures himself, maybe more. Soon he's too tired to care. He notices that some men have shown up and are hanging out on a pile of big rocks a short distance from the sand. There must be eight or nine of them. Some are middle-aged, others are younger, a few are teenagers. They're talking and laughing. They're also clearly watching Rick, Julio, and Francisco struggle with the sand. Rick doesn't want to pay too much attention; he's self-conscious enough as it is. When Julio and Francisco are with him, the situation isn't so bad. Once they head off with their loads, though, Rick can hear the voices grow louder, the laughter increase, and the tone of the comments change. "¡Oye, gringo!" someone shouts. Rick pretends not to hear. He keeps shoveling sand into the costal. "¡Gringo!" He waves but otherwise ignores the taunt. "Tú—¿eres sordo?" You—are you deaf? Rick glances down Hidalgo, wondering how soon Francisco or Julio will return. He decides that ignoring the men will only make things worse. He turns to them, gives them a mock salute, and calls out, "¿Qué tal, señores?" How's it going, gentlemen? That silences everyone for a moment. A few comments follow, then a flurry of laughs. Rick wonders what's setting them off. Do they think it's funny to see him—a stranger—working so hard? Are they mocking him because he's an American? He's both embarrassed and annoyed by their taunts. This isn't the response he expected. He thought the people in the Romeros' neighborhood might be impressed that he's working side by side with Julio and Francisco. He thought people might even—who knows—respect him. Instead, they seem to be making him the butt of their jokes. Finished filling the costal, Rick squats, pushes it against his back, and forces himself upright. His left boot skitters on the ground, throwing him off balance. He lurches, struggling to keep a hold on the costal, then manages to stand. The load makes his back and shoulders ache, but he's determined to stay upright. Anything to avoid humiliating himself. The men applaud, cheer, and whistle loudly. "Oye, gringo—¿te gusta el trabajo mexicano?" one of them yells. You like Mexican work? The truth is, Rick hates this work! He's exhausted and sore. He's dripping with sweat. All he wants is to stagger back to the house and collapse on the couch. But that isn't

a choice. It would be giving in to these guys' mockery. It would be letting down the Romeros. "I'm glad to be helping my friends," Rick answers stiffly in Spanish; then he trudges up the alley. R and R And so la obra begins. Starting early each day, when the air is still fairly cool, they undertake their construction tasks. One morning, they visit a friend of Julio's to borrow four shovels, a garden hose, a stack of square metal buckets called botes, and a bag of tools for laying concrete. Then they carry all of these items back home through the winding streets of Santo Domingo. Then, for two days, they haul a ton of grava—big chunks of crushed rock for making concrete—from the far end of Callejón Hidalgo to the house. The day after that, they haul four dozen bags of cement—each weighing almost seventy pounds—the same distance. Every day it's something different. Julio, Francisco, and Rick do most of the manual labor. Emiliana does some, too, but mostly she keeps the household running. By one or two o'clock each afternoon, as the day heats up and everyone grows weary, they sit down to a big midday meal she has prepared. Rick feels more exhausted than at any other time in his life. His muscles are sore to the touch. His whole body quivers with fatigue. Has he ever really worked before, he wonders—ever in his entire life? Nothing compares to the effort he's making now. Not the supermarket stock-boy job. Not the lawn-mowing job. Certainly not the library job. And school, by comparison, has been like a day at a country club. Somehow he never thought la obra would be so tough. He never expected the construction tasks to be so—so awful. To prepare for the trip, he spent more time at the school gym than usual. But all the aerobic workouts and weight training didn't do much to prepare him for what he's doing now. He wants to lie down and sleep for a week. The food Emiliana serves at the midday meal offers some comfort. Homemade vegetable soup, pork chops in a spicy sauce, yellow squash, beans jumbled together with rice, fat little cheese-stuffed tortillas, and, for dessert, a yellow custard called flan. It's as much food as Rick would ordinarily eat in a day. He accepts the offer of seconds. He goes along with thirds. Devouring all this food definitely helps; he's still tired after eating, but he doesn't feel as weak. One day, after a welcome siesta—the first afternoon nap that Rick has taken in years—Julio announces that they're all going down to el centro, Santo Domingo's historic town center. "An errand?" Rick inquires. "Un paseo," replies Francisco. A stroll. Rick isn't sure that a stroll is what his body needs right now. But he figures if this is what counts as R and R in small-town Mexico, he'd better grab the chance. They all set off. After a ten- or fifteen-minute walk, they reach the jardín público, the plaza where Rick sat for a while on his first day in Santo Domingo. Surrounded by cafés, hotels, art galleries, and shops selling antiques, jewelry, and Mexican crafts, the jardín is about half a block square, with staircases at the corners leading upward to a parklike area. Trees and plants along the edges filter some of the noise from cars, radios, and street vendors. There's a bandstand at the center and benches set up all around it. Inside this little haven, people sit and rest, sip soft drinks, read newspapers, eat ice cream, or simply watch the tide of people drifting by. Mexican moms with kids. American and European tourists. Local businessmen chatting over coffee. Vendors selling balloons, candy, lottery tickets, magazines, and souvenirs. A few beggars, mostly barefoot kids. "You like it?" Francisco asks. "Very much," Rick replies. Looking

around, Julio spots an empty bench and claims it. The others follow. Rick grunts in pain when he sits. Julio notices. "Are you all right?" "Fine. Just a little sore." "I hope we're not pushing you too hard," says Emiliana. "No, I'm fine. Really," he reassures them quickly. But he wonders, How can they look so relaxed and rested? Am I the only one who's totally beat? "Something to drink?" Francisco asks. "Maybe later." They fall silent, simply enjoying the shade and the sight of all the people hanging out in the jardín público. Watching, Rick realizes that while most of them are Mexicans, plenty are Americans. He hears English almost as often as Spanish. "I still think you could have gotten a better price," says a frizzy-haired woman on a nearby bench. From somewhere else in the park a boy shouts, "I wanted the green balloon!" The mood is festive. Everyone seems to be getting along. But Rick notices that Americans seem to hang out only with Americans, Mexicans only with Mexicans. The few interactions between the two nationalities occur when the vendors approach the tourists. Otherwise the members of each group keep almost entirely to themselves. A family of Americans wanders past, catching Rick's attention: a father with three girls, all pretty. The oldest, a redhead dressed in jeans and a light green T-shirt, looks about his age. She turns abruptly, gazes back at him, and smiles. "Jeez, that was such a laugh!" one of the younger girls is saying. At once the redhead turns away. In a few moments the family is gone. What caught her attention? Rick wonders. Was she staring because she liked his looks? Or only because she noticed he was hanging out with Mexicans? Did she find him appealing—or just puzzling? None of the Romeros comments, though Francisco, turning to Rick, raises one eyebrow and smiles. Rick gazes across the jardín, trying to spot the redhead and her family. If he were alone, he could have gotten up, kept them in sight, and maybe figured out a way to bump into them again. Even talk to them. Hanging out with the Romeros, though, he can't break away. At that moment he feels a longing that's a bit like homesickness, only stronger. Long Distance "So, anyway," Rick says toward the end of his first phone call home, "that's about it." He has told his parents about his trip, about his first week in Santo Domingo, about settling in, about la obra. He has passed on the Romeros' greetings and good wishes. He has answered his parents' questions about how the Romeros are doing. He has assured them he's fine. Now, standing in a booth at the Teléfonos de México office in el centro, he grows restless. "It sounds as if you're off to a terrific start," Dad says. "We're glad everything has gone so well," Mom says. Rick can't think of anything to reply. He imagines them at home: Dad on the phone in the study, Mom on the extension in the master bedroom. He can't shake the feeling that his parents miss him more than he misses them, that they want more from him—more news, more emotion, more something—than he can give them. Feeling both awkward and resentful, he finally breaks the silence. "Sorry," he says. "I'd better go." "Sure," Dad says. "We know you're busy," Mom says. He feels a pang of love for them but doesn't know how to express it. "Thanks for everything," he says. "I'll call you again soon." Relatives Several of the Romeros' relatives live in the neighborhood, and Rick meets them as the days pass. Emiliana's sister, Carmen, has a house just down the hill, and she stops by now and then to say hello. She's a cheerful woman, about forty, whose squat face, wide smile, and somewhat bulging eyes give her more than a

passing resemblance to a frog. Rick likes her a lot; she's friendly, relaxed, and easy to talk with.

[Download to continue reading...](#)

What people say about this book

Flamingnet Teen Book Reviews, "An engaging read. The summer between your last year of high school and your first year of college can be filled with new experiences. But for Rick Dresner, it will become life-changing. Traversing the border between the United States and Mexico, this Colorado native immerses himself in a new culture while helping family friends, the Romeros, build a house. Unexpected challenges await him though. Cultural differences shock his brain and readers are engaged in pondering differences not usually thought of. For those looking for an eye-opening read or just a good book, this is one to be sure and pick up. This book really got me thinking. What are the differences between American culture and the cultures of other countries? It was quite a shocker for me, a pet-lover, to find out that animals are not kept as pets unless they perform services like being a watchdog. But despite the shocks, this book was an engaging read, drawing me farther and farther into Rick's trip to Mexico. I was satisfied with what I read and have learned a lot. I encourage all readers who are interested in foreign countries to give this book a look. Reviewed by a young adult student reviewer Flamingnet Book Reviews Teen books reviewed by teen reviewers"

The book by Edward Myers has a rating of 5 out of 3.5. 12 people have provided feedback.

Title Page Table of Contents Copyright Dedication I Arrival The Romeros La Obra Good Night You Like Mexican Work? R and R Long Distance Relatives Pets A Ton of Bricks Time Travel Toys Bricklaying Checking In Postcards Work and Work and Work Insomnia Crossing Paths Mother's Helper Bells The Crow El Barrio He Got Away Vocabulary Panic II Muddling Through El Colado Wetbacks Apprenticeship Comidas Típicas Rain Telling Los Mojados Muddy Waters La Colonia Americana Ricardo Anda de Novia Mulling Things Over Fine! Fine! Fine! Estoy Contenta Accounts Payable A Change in the Weather Working Out It's Not Fair Negotiations La Panza Blanca The Three Rs Departures Serenading the Neighborhood Arts and Crafts Work and Work and Work Help Wanted First Aid Tiempo Loco Time Is Running Out III Bells Again Flying Lessons More Vocabulary Meeting the Family Leave Your Name and Number Disaster Out of Control Pleading the Case Storms It Wasn't Worth the Trouble El Gran Colado A Work of Art We Did It! The News Cleanup Wonderful, Wonderful, Wonderful A Heart-to-Heart Pulling Out the Supports Getting Ready Vete, Gringo Lucha Libre Looking for Ellen Matters of the Heart Special Delivery What Do You Prefer? A Work in Progress IV Stay in Touch About the Author

Book Information

Language: English

File size: 998 KB

Simultaneous device usage: Unlimited

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced typesetting: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Print length: 245 pages

Lending: Not Enabled

[DMCA](#)