

A Reading Group Guide to

## ***Barely Missing Everything***

By Matt Mendez

### **About the Book**

Told from Juan, JD, and Fabi's points of view, *Barely Missing Everything* explores how difficult it is to make it in life when you—your life, brown lives—don't matter. Juan has plans. He's going to get out of El Paso, Texas, on a basketball scholarship and make something of himself—or at least find something better than his mom Fabi's cruddy apartment, her string of loser boyfriends, and no dad. Basketball is going to be his ticket out, his ticket up. He just needs to make it happen. His best friend JD has plans, too. He's going to be a filmmaker one day, like Robert Rodriguez or Guillermo del Toro. He's got a camera and he's got passion—what else could he need? Fabi doesn't have a plan anymore. When you get pregnant at sixteen and have been stuck bartending to make ends meet for the past seventeen years, you realize plans don't always pan out, and that there some things you just can't plan for. Like Juan's run-in with the police, like a sprained ankle, and a tanking math grade that will likely ruin his chance at a scholarship. Like JD causing the implosion of his family. Like letters from a man named Mando on death row. Like finding out this man could be the father you never knew about.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. The book begins with a quote from Sandra Cisneros. Why do you think the author chose this particular quote? How does it relate to this story? Do you think Juan, JD, and Fabi would agree with the statement? Who is Sandra Cisneros, and why is a quote from her particularly apt in this situation?
2. Think about Fabi and what she wants for her life, for the life of her son. How does she try to address or change their situation? Why do you think it's so difficult for Fabi and Juan to escape past circumstances? Think about how Juan's interactions with the police, how hard

Fabi has to work to provide for her family. What do you think Fabi and Juan are able to change on their own, and when do their efforts become dependent on others' willingness to view them differently? Cite evidence from the book in your analysis.

3. The first line reads, "Juan Ramos was dead." What does Mendez mean by this statement? Although Juan is not actually dead, do you think he's fully "alive" at this point in the story? Are there other times throughout the book when Juan could be considered "dead"? Do you feel this is true of Juan by the end of the book? List some of the obstacles in his life, and how he attempts to confront them.

4. Why is it so difficult to get a college scout to Juan's games? Why is it so important to him that one be there? Why does he feel like basketball is his ticket to a better life? Do you think Juan puts too much pressure on himself? Do you feel like Juan has to work harder than his other teammates to prove his dedication and talent? Explain your answer.

5. During the Panthers' one winning game of the season, Juan was met with chants of "Build the wall" and boos whenever he touched the ball. Do you think this is an appropriate response from the opposing team's fans? Why do you think they react this way? Why doesn't their reaction bother Juan that much? Think about other moments in the book when people treat Juan differently because of his ethnic background. How does Juan react to these situations? What kind of effects might longstanding prejudices have on the way you view yourself or others? Have you ever experienced something similar to Juan? If so, how did you handle it? Explain your answers.

6. Why did Juan run from the police at Danny's party? Is this a decision he feels good about after the fact? What is JD's explanation for running? What are the repercussions of their split-second decision? What do you think might have happened if they'd stayed? If you were JD or Juan, would you have trusted the cops to listen to you and make an unbiased judgment of the situation?

7. When confronting JD with the box of condoms, JD's mother says, "You're a bad liar . . . Or, actually, you're really good at it. I'm just finally catching on." Why do you think JD has learned to become a good liar? Who else is he lying to? Do you think he's been lying to

himself? Give examples from the story to support your reasoning.

8. How does JD's crush on Melinda make him feel? Why doesn't he think he stands a chance with her? Do his friends agree with his assessment of his odds? How does his crush on Melinda compare to Juan's feelings for Roxanne? What advice would you give JD?

9. When deciding whether or not to tell Ruben about her pregnancy, Fabi knows, "being nice wasn't the same thing as being good. They were only related. Nice was like Good's cousin, cool, but sometimes shady." Do you agree with this assessment? Does Fabi need Ruben to be nice or to be good in this situation? Are there people in her life that are good? Do you think Fabi is in a better position to have another child than she was at sixteen? Can you relate this to your own life and your relationships? Do you think there are other degrees of nice and good?

10. What was it like for Juan to be arrested and spend the night in jail? How might it become a setback for his future? Why doesn't JD ask him about the experience? Why does Juan want him to? What would you have done if you were in either boy's shoes?

11. Discuss Juan's conversation with Coach Paul. Is Coach Paul's algebra simile appropriate for an educator to use? Describe their relationship, and how Coach Paul treats Juan. What do they need from each other? Coach Paul tells Juan, "You're not driving around shooting up your neighborhood, right?" What do Coach Paul's assumptions tell you about how he views Juan? Why do you think Juan puts up with Coach Paul's treatment?

12. Why does Danny fire the gun? How does it change the dynamic between the three boys? What might you have said to Danny if you saw he had a gun? How do Juan, JD, and Fabi feel about violence? How have their lives been affected by it?

13. How much responsibility does JD have for keeping his family together? How do you see the pressure of this responsibility manifest in JD's attitude, choices, or actions? Why do his mother and sister think he is to blame for the disintegration of their family? What is causing the distance between JD and his parents and siblings? What does JD feel ultimately ruined their family?

14. Why do you think the gang members in the gray Cutlass take such an interest in Juan and JD? Why do these run-ins cause the boys so much distress? Why is it so important to Juan and JD not to become part of a gang? Do you think people in JD and Juan's lives, like Coach Paul, would expect them to be part of a gang? Why is the gang's name significant to the story?

15. How does studying algebra help Juan to better understand his life? Is there a connection between the mathematical concepts and the way he's feeling? How does algebra connect Juan and Fabi after Juan is gone?

16. JD's dad is very good at fixing cars, but he has never taught JD how to make repairs. Why do you think JD's father decided not to teach him? Do you think JD felt he was missing out on more than just learning about cars? Think about the important people in your life and why you enjoy spending time with them. Why is it important to have good role models? Where might JD and Juan look to find these role models or supporters?

17. Discuss the different characters and their relationship to God and organized religion. How do the different characters define God? What role does religion play in each of their lives? Do any of them derive benefits from religion? Do any of them question their faith?

18. After hearing her father's account of what he was like before and after the war, Fabi "didn't want bullets for Juan. She didn't want war. She wanted her son to be fearless." Do you think Juan is fearless? Do you think his circumstances forced him to grow up faster, or shaped his attitude toward fear? Explain your answers. Is Fabi able to protect him from bullets and war? How might she define war in this moment? What is she up against, and how is she fighting back?

19. Unlike Juan, JD suddenly realizes that he never had a chance with Roxanne. "Juan would never be called a ghost. He didn't fade into the background. Not the way JD always seemed to." Can you list other times JD fades into the background? Is there anything these situations have in common? What about his life experiences might contribute to his choice to avoid being seen? Is he making conscious or subconscious decisions? Is it ever

advantageous for him to become less noticeable?

20. Why does Armando start writing to Fabi from death row? Why does she respond to him? Why do you think she was afraid to tell Juan the truth about his father? What is the significance of Armando's last statement? Juan "wondered [what] would happen to him once he knew what Armando had done. If after knowing he would be like The Rip, going to another universe. One where he no longer recognized himself." Describe what Juan means by this statement. Why do you think he's afraid that understanding Armando's crime will change him? How closely do you think a father and son's fates are intertwined? Can Juan separate himself from his father's mistakes? Will society see them differently, or will Juan be expected to turn out like his father?

21. How might Juan's life have turned out differently if Fabi had talked to him about his father? Are characters like JD, Fabi, Eddie, and Danny, whose fathers are present in their lives, better off than Juan? Explain your answer. Does anyone step up to become a father figure to either Juan or JD? Why does Juan become convinced that Armando is his father?

22. Describe the strength of Juan, JD, and Danny's friendship. What evidence do you see that shows they care for one another? Do the events in the story drive them apart or bring them closer together? Is there anyone else in their lives providing the same level of support? Have you ever had a friendship like this? What qualities do you look for in a friend? Can you name a friendship that has changed your life?

22. Why do you think the author chose the title *Barely Missing Everything*? What are the characters barely missing? Do you feel like they're in better positions by the end of the story?

### **Extension Activities**

1. *Barely Missing Everything* contains many Spanish words and phrases. As a class, discuss how speaking more than one language might affect your life. Why might people learn a new language? Do you think some people feel forced to learn? Why is being able to communicate and express yourself so important, especially for people like Juan, JD, and

Fabi? What did they do or what could they have done to be heard and communicate their struggles and dreams? Why do some people need to be convinced to listen to stories like Juan's, JD's, and Fabi's? Why can non-native English speakers be at a disadvantage in our current climate?

2. JD is astonished to learn that death row prisoners' last words are readily available online for people to read. Research the last words of famous criminals, or of death row prisoners in your area of the country, if available. Is there anything to be learned from these statements? What perspectives might they bring? Write an essay reflecting on your research and its impact on you.

3. JD and Juan are lucky not to be seriously injured when JD crashes the car while driving drunk. Anonymously poll your classmates on who has known someone who has driven drunk or been in the situation themselves. Use these statistics and other information from the SADD website to write a letter to a loved one, encouraging them not to drink before getting into the driver's seat.

4. Choose a powerful chapter or situation from the book, and rewrite it from another character in the scene's perspective. Think about how different characters view one another, and the prejudices and expectations that exist for each. How do certain characters limit or support others? How might other characters justify their actions? Then share your new scene with a partner, and see how placing yourself in other characters' shoes changes the narrative. Discuss whether you think people in the book are right or wrong in their views or actions, and how that may make other characters feel trapped or inspired.

5. There are many fiction and nonfiction books that deal with systemic racism within police departments and unjustified killings by the police. Read one of these books and discuss it with your class or with other friends who have read the same book. Can you think of ways to improve this situation? What have you learned from these books? What have you seen in your community?

*Guide written by Cory Grimminck, Director of the Portland District Library in Michigan.*

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