

## Reading Group Guide

### *The Broke Hearts*

By Matt Mendez

#### About the Book

In the aftermath of police murdering their best friend Juan, Danny and JD's friendship suffers amidst distance and the demands of their separate lives post high school. JD has enlisted in the Air Force, learning how to fix fighter jets and feeling his dream to go to film school slipping away while waiting for deployment. Meanwhile, Danny is failing college and losing his love of art when he gets a call about his father's declining health. Told in two points of view, including tastes of JD's screenwriting and vignettes of Danny's and his father's childhoods, this work of contemporary fiction examines the impacts we have on one another's lives and the process of grieving. How do we honor the dead while still living our lives?

#### Discussion Questions

1. What does Apá mean when he tells Daniel, ““Being afraid makes you do the easy, and usually wrong, thing.”” (El Soldado) Do you agree with this statement? Think of an example of a time when fear has influenced your decision, and share your thoughts with the class.
2. After Danny has an outburst in class that breaks the student code of conduct, his professor, Pablo, gives Danny a second chance to pass the class. Does Danny deserve this second chance? Why does Pablo offer Danny compassion and help? Explain your answers.
3. Consider the various ways chapters are written in the book, from titles to snippets of JD's screenplay. How are JD's and Danny's chapters different and why? How do the different writing styles help to tell the story?
4. Danny learns his dad's heart is literally broken and leaking. Discuss how this relates to the title of the book and what else the title might be referencing. Use examples to justify your answer.
5. Their boss Rowe constantly berates JD and Raines, claiming he has his hands full with them even though Raines knows ““the whole time we're over there, we'll be the only ones doing all the actual work, his crew—the Black guy and the Mexican kid?”” (Chapter sixteen) How does Rowe get away with his behavior? Why does it take JD until the end of the book to realize Rowe tells on himself when he puts JD down? These are situations that occur in real life. What actions can we take so that people don't take advantage of others?
6. After Fabi gives Danny the deck of Lotería cards, she tells him, ““It means the past is all anyone really cares about. Fixing it. No one gives a shit about tomorrow.”” (Chapter five) Explain what she means. Pick some scenes in the book that prove this statement correct. With a partner, discuss what current events are repeating history. Why does history repeat itself?
7. The army recruiter matter-of-factly says he gets ““a bunch of recruits like that . . . or ones with a stepdad. Kids really hate stepparents.”” (El Cazo) Why is that the case? Does it help kids who are likely alone to join the army? What kind of support do kids without parents or without adequate care need? Think about how the race and class of the characters in the book affected their decisions to join the army. What do you think about

Daniel's dad's opinion that a draft should be brought back?

8. Pablo tells Danny, "Sending you to school is maybe the only way your dad knows to show you that he loves you." (Chapter twelve) In pairs, describe the different ways characters express love in the book. Discuss how you express love and how you want to receive love. Are you influenced by your culture, family, media, society, or something else?
9. Why does JD keep encountering a coyote? What does the coyote symbolize? Research the meaning behind coyotes and use examples from the book to support your answer.
10. After JD and Tomás sneak into the school to play basketball on a nice court, JD has the beginnings of a panic attack. Why does he get so scared and anxious?
11. Sometimes friends drift apart, like when Danny describes how his friendship with JD slowed down from texting almost every day to barely any communication. What caused their friendship to begin dissolving? Use evidence from the text along with any personal experiences you've had growing distant from a friend. Can people become close again? Provide specific reasons for your answer.
12. JD and his mom get into an argument after JD returns home. Does his mom blame him for the divorce? Why do they clash so much? Back up your answer with examples from the text.
13. The Sarge didn't want Danny to join the army or to always be fighting losing battles, yet Danny still feels he must do what the Sarge wants. Do you feel pressure from the adults in your life about your future? Take some time to reflect and write your response. Share with the class if you would like.
14. Throughout the book, various characters make comments about what it means to be Mexican and, more specifically, what it means to be a Mexican man. Cite examples from the text. Where do these beliefs stem from? Are there beliefs about your culture and gender? Do you agree or disagree? Does it make a difference if someone with a shared identity makes generalized statements like this versus someone on the outside? Expand on your answers.
15. One theme in *The Broke Hearts* is the relationship between fathers and sons and the effects fathers, whether present or not, have on their children. What expectations and pressures are placed on fathers? How does gender, ethnicity, class, and race play a role in how a father is portrayed or what a father is "supposed" to be? Use evidence from the text, your own experiences, media representation, and stories from your community to justify your answers.
16. JD reveals to Danny that he and Juan thought Danny "talked too much crap about your old man. Maybe he's some kind of asshole, but you have one. All the dude wants is for you to not suck." (Chapter nine) JD also has a father, so why does he imply that isn't the case? Did JD have a right to be upset when Danny complained about his dad? What was your reaction to this scene?
17. Roxanne, Danny, JD, and Fabi all lost Juan and ran away from the grief. Name the ways each person ran away both literally and figuratively. How might their lives have been different if they had faced their grief directly? Is there a correct way to grieve? What helped each person begin to heal, if anything?
18. Danny creates remixed versions of Lotería cards to tell a story about his family and community, choosing

to represent important people and moments in each card. What does each card represent? What does Danny learn about himself and other characters as he paints the mural?

19. In a flashback, Daniel fixes Adán's car. What is the significance of this scene, knowing Adán was Daniel's bully? Why does it matter that Daniel's father and the army recruiter watched? How does this moment change Daniel and influence his style of parenting?

20. *The Broke Hearts* ends with a flashback to the Sarge meeting his son, Daniel, after his birth. Why does the book end with a beginning?

### Extension Activities

1. Isa writes her number inside a copy of *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson, which JD buys along with *Dominicana* by Angie Cruz; *The Sentence* by Louise Erdrich; *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward; *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* by Charles Yu; and *The People of Paper* by Salvador Plascencia. Choose one of these books to read, then write a short essay describing what themes the book shares with *The Broke Hearts* and what the characters of *The Broke Hearts* could learn from reading the same book.

2. There are many iterations of Lotería cards. Find a version online and use the cards to tell a story about a pivotal moment in your life or a current event in your community. You can choose to paint your own renditions, print and cut out a collage, create a story map using the cards, or write a poem or short story inspired by the cards you chose. Be prepared to present your project with the class.

3. Interview a family member or community elder about their teenage years and their life after leaving their childhood home. Create a checklist like Daniel's to tell the story they shared with you. Consider this a work of creative nonfiction and fill in any gaps that might be missing.

4. There are arguments that the US Military acts in a predatory manner by recruiting in high schools. Read the article in *Teen Vogue* titled "The Military Targets Youth for Recruitment, Especially at Poor Schools." (<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/the-military-targets-youth-for-recruitment>) How does this article connect with JD's experience in the book? Discuss the article as a class and locate the thesis, the main arguments, any counterarguments, any recommendations made, and what your overall thoughts are about the issue.

5. JD joins the Air Force not only for a chance at film school, but to get "as far away from where Juan was killed, from his parents' divorce, as he could." (Chapter two) Describe how he deals with these issues throughout the book. How do you deal with difficult issues in your own life? Where do you find support? What about your classmates? Is there a way you can offer support? Work with a partner to create a list of local resources and tangible actions to help folks who feel alone.

6. Write an epilogue for the book that takes place five years later. Make sure to include the main characters and use textual evidence that will give context to the epilogue.

7. When JD tells Danny and Roxanne about his deployment, Roxanne is upset and replies, "Like, some kind of war has been going on for our entire lives. Like for what this time?" (Chapter eleven) Although her question is rhetorical, how would you answer her? With a group, research the wars that have taken place in your lifetime, involving the US or not. Are there ways the US is involved in violence that does not involve an actual war? Are there activists who speak out against war? What do they have to say? Have a small group

discussion about your findings and what your beliefs are regarding the issue of war. What is the most effective way to share what you have learned with others?

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