



IN HER BONES

STUDY GUIDE | 8–12TH GRADE



COLORADO SPRINGS

Fine Arts Center

at COLORADO COLLEGE



PLAY SYNOPSIS

In Her Bones by Jessica Kahkoska takes a culturally responsive look at some of the little known history of the San Luis region in Southern Colorado near to the New Mexico border. Following the journey of Mia, a freshman at UC Berkeley, as she is stranded during a blizzard, and forced to take shelter at a gas station and general store in the town of Costilla. She shares stories and experiences with the store owner and friend of her recently deceased grandmother, Moises.

Raquel – Grandmother who is living near San Luis, Colorado. She recently passed away before the play began. Memories of her interactions with her daughter Lea, granddaughter Mia, and community members are weaved throughout the play.

Mia – Freshman student at UC Berkeley, recently returned to rural Southern Colorado in response to her grandmother’s illness and subsequent death (Raquel). She is driving to Denver where her mother, Lea, resides.

Lea – Mother of Mia, and daughter of Raquel. Currently residing in Denver, Colorado.

Moises – Owner of the gas station and general store in Costilla, that Mia takes shelter in to get out of the blizzard. Has been friends with members of the community including Raquel for years. Due to several generations of their families having been living in the San Luis region.





SETTING

The play occurs in the present day, in rural Southern Colorado near the border of New Mexico. The primary location of the play is a general store in Costilla, Colorado on a snowy evening. With flashbacks to Raquel's home near San Luis, Colorado and a hospital room.

Costilla County was the first area in Colorado to be colonized by hispanic settlers moving north of the present day New Mexico/Colorado border. With the city San Luis being the oldest continuously occupied town in Colorado since 1851. As well as the first hispanic settlement north of Taos, New Mexico. Before the settlement of this region was the territory of the first peoples groups of the Ute and the Comanche.

In 1843, after Mexico gained independence from Spain 22 years earlier in 1821, the Mexican government awarded Carlos Beaubien family the *Sangre de Cristo Land Grant*. This was some 1 million acres of land in the San Luis Valley of Colorado and parts of present day northern New Mexico. The goal of this land grant was to create a barrier to protect Taos and Santa Fe from Ute raids to the North. The second goal of this land grant was to colonize the area and increase the amount of land lived by Mexican Citizens.

5 years later the United States annexed northern Mexico, with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ending the Mexican American War making Costilla County and San Luis part of the United States. The treaty also included areas of other states such as New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Nevada and California. At first this region was a part of the Territory of New Mexico before Costilla County was officially

designated as one of the original 17 counties in the Territory of Colorado established on November 1st, 1861. Which became the state of Colorado in 1876.

This area resides in the San Luis Valley with the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the East and the Sawatch Mountains to the North and the Juan Mountains to the West with the Rio Grande Valley in New Mexico to the south. The City of San Luis itself sits at an elevation of over 7 thousand feet, and with an average rainfall of less than 10 inches per year it is classified as a high altitude desert climate. With the Grand Sand Dunes National Park less than 60 miles to the west. Today, this area is mostly rural with an agricultural focus on wheat, oats, barley, lettuce, potatoes and peas. Tourism to several ski areas and the Great Sand Dunes National Park

PLAYWRIGHT

Jessica Kahkoska is a writer, producer and researcher for film, tv and stage. She is known for her work with community responsive play writing initiatives and a focus on the American West. She has worked on various projects for a number of different TV and film studios such as CNN, Warner Brothers Discovery, Max as well as others. In 2023 she was the representative of the National Archives Cokie Roberts Fellowship in Women's History for her research on "American Women at the Nuremberg Trials". She has written several plays including *The Death of Desert Rose*, *The Vermont Farm Project* and *In Her Bones*.



THEMES

Heritage – This play deals with the concept of heritage. This is the idea of what was passed down from previous generations and what people choose to pass down to future generations. What is valued by some and not valued by others. Studying this helps to explain why we are the way we are. What values do we focus on, what traditions are established and practiced, what religion is worshiped or what pieces of art are produced. Studying this topic helps to have a deeper awareness of oneself in light of where we have come from. Or by studying the rich diversity of the world and seeing things from a different perspective. Depending on the person seeing this play, it is an excellent mirror into their own cultural heritage and provides an opportunity to reflect upon what makes up one's background. For others this play is an excellent window into several different cultural heritages, both cultural and religious in nature.

Throughout the play, Mia wrestles with her heritage. Being raised Catholic she struggles to come to terms with seemingly contradictory religious practices surrounding the time that she was visiting her grandmother in the hospital before her death and learning that there is more to her heritage than she initially knew. As she remembers different conversations and events with her mother and grandmother, and discussions with a friend of her grandmother. She reflects upon her heritage and the key events that define her life.

Family – Another major theme of this play is that of family, the community and connection that comes from being a part of a family. Both the good and the bad parts of being part of a family. Throughout *In Her Bones*, there is an undercurrent of the cross

section of family ties meeting a modern world. The traditional rural community being left and younger generations moving to more urban areas. During the play there is a poignant scene in which Mia and her mother Lea share their mutual desire to leave the region that they grew up and go off to the urban areas for college and better opportunities (first to Denver with Lea and then to Berkeley, CA for Mia). Then the guilt for Raquel living alone. Before this conversation Lea shares a story of her spending almost the whole weekend with relatives when growing up as her mother and her mother's sisters lived just down the road from each other. While the two are happy with their options to move away from close relatives they are regretting the time lost.

Intergenerational Trauma – Throughout the play, *In Her Bones*, there is a brief motif that is recurring throughout the play and is slightly different and subtle for each of the different women. This motif represents the experienced generation trauma that each has. This appears when the characters experience anxiety from something that occurs in the past before the scene that is currently on stage.

Generational Trauma happens when painful experiences, like violence, discrimination, or forced migration, affect one generation and then continue to impact their children and even grandchildren. For example, if someone lived through a war or a genocide, they might have trouble feeling safe or trusting others. Their kids might grow up with those same feelings, even if they didn't go through the war themselves, because they learned to see the world in a similar way. Over time, this can shape how families act, think, and cope with challenges.



PRE-PERFORMANCE QUESTIONS

- Have you been to a play that is having its initial release before? What are your expectations when visiting the Fine Arts Center for this play?
- What do you think it would feel like to wake up one day and find out you're living in a different country without moving? How might your life change?
- Why is it important to listen to and see stories of how diverse groups have lived?

POST-PERFORMANCE QUESTIONS

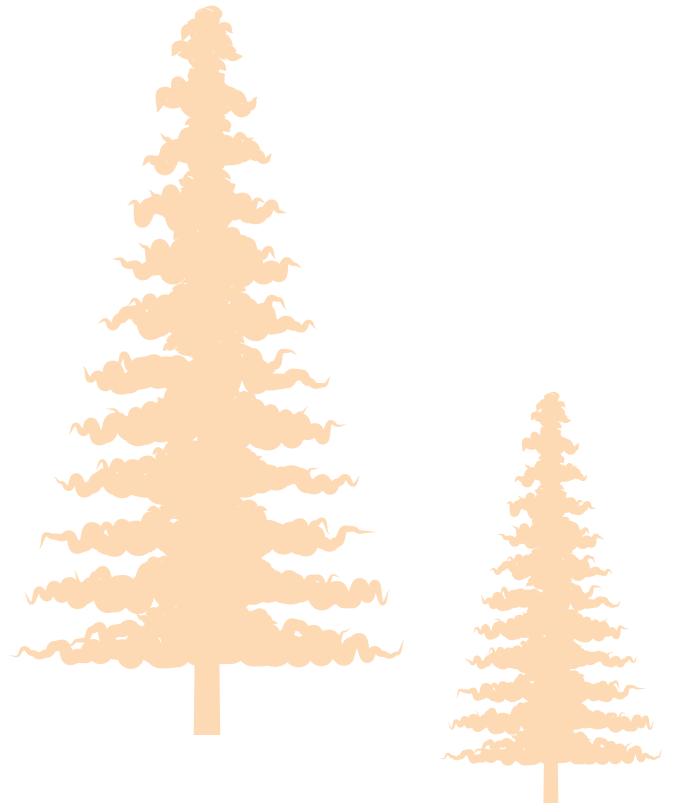
- What was something that stood out to you in the play? Why?
- How did the theme of intergenerational trauma play out?
- How did the characters' secret practices shape their identities and relationships?
- How do you think historical experiences like those of Crypto-Jews influence descendants today?
- What risks did Raquel and Lea face in maintaining their faith? How did they navigate those challenges?
- What connections can you draw between the experiences depicted in the play and other historical or modern struggles for religious or cultural freedom?

ACTIVITIES FOR FURTHER CLASSROOM STUDY

Research – Have the students research modern day groups that have to hide their cultural or religious identity around the world for fear of persecution. Students can create a short presentation to share their findings with the class.

Socratic Seminar – Have students generate discussion questions about the play, the themes that were presented, etc. Facilitate a socratic discussion to allow students to deepen their understanding of the play and its content.

Compare/Contrast – Have the students research other reasons for forced migration around history. Then look for primary and secondary sources for how descendants of those events responded to their experiences and compare/contrast it to the play.





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