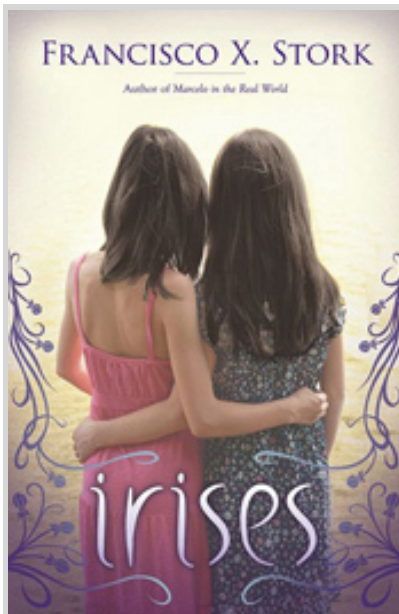


Irises

by Francisco X. Stork

Discussion and Activity Guide Created by Natalie Dias Lorenzi



A Young Adult Novel
by Francisco X. Stork
Published January 2012
by Arthur A. Levine Books
An Imprint of
Scholastic, Inc.
ISBN: 978-0-545-15135-1

Visit
www.franciscostork.com
to learn more
about the author
and his books.

About the Book

Kate is bound for Stanford and an M.D. — if her family will let her go. Mary wants only to stay home and paint. When their loving but repressive father dies, they must figure out how to support themselves and their mother, who is in a permanent vegetative state, and how to get along in all their uneasy sisterhood.

Then three men sway their lives: Kate's boyfriend Simon offers to marry her, providing much-needed stability. Mary is drawn to Marcos, though she fears his violent past. And Andy tempts Kate with more than romance, recognizing her ambition because it matches his own.

Kate and Mary each find new possibilities and darkneses in their sudden freedom. But it's Mama's life that might divide them for good — the question of *if* she lives, and what's worth living for.

Praise for *Irises*

- ♦ “Stork demonstrates his customary skill in creating memorable and multidimensional characters in a story that leaves lingering, contemplative questions regarding death, survival, and love.” *Publishers Weekly*, *starred review*
- ♦ “[A] powerfully thoughtful exploration of one of the most serious questions contemporary life throws at us... Strong stuff, gently handled.” *Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books*
- ♦ “Stork touches on matters of faith, fidelity, and being true to oneself with gentle writing... Although *Irises* covers deep topics, its slow, graceful pace never feels ponderous or overwhelming. It offers readers much to reflect on, even as its protagonists do the same.” *School Library Journal*

Building Background Knowledge

Before reading the novel, jot down your answers to the following questions. Save this page and compare your answers now with how you feel after you have read Francisco X. Stork's novel *Irises*.

1. What is your definition of love? Is your definition of love dependent upon the type of relationship? How does sacrifice enter into your definition?

2. What is your stance on euthanasia? When might it be appropriate? When would it not?

3. What are your dreams for the future?

4. When is it appropriate to put your dreams ahead of the needs of a loved one?

5. What characterizes true friendship?

Discussion Starters

General Discussion Questions

1. How might the settings (weather and landscape) of El Paso and Stanford serve as metaphors for plot and character?
2. When Mary's father dies, she is convinced that she has witnessed his soul leaving his body: "It was like a beautiful, strange light with a warm glow." This is why she doesn't call an ambulance. Should she have? Why or why not?
3. Mr. Gomez, Mary's art teacher, says that although he's taught her everything he knows, her painting "...is so much more than knowing." To what is he referring? Do you agree with him? Explain your thinking.
4. Mary says she used to see light around the people she painted, but since her mother's accident, she longer sees this light.
5. What preconceptions do Mary and Marcos each bring to their relationship? How do those preconceptions change over time? Why do we tend to form preconceptions about other people? What are the pros and cons of doing so?
6. When Mary talks to Marcos about quitting his gang, she says, "Maybe getting out is like a painting. First you see and feel every detail of what you want to paint, then you proceed very carefully, sketching with a pencil first before you put down the paints." How does this metaphor translate to Marcos' decision to leave the gang?
7. Who has more to gain, Mary or Marcos, from their nascent friendship? What do they each give and gain from the relationship?
8. When Kate thinks of leaving Simon, she both "wanted him there and yet she didn't." Think of another situation in which you simultaneously wanted opposite things. How did you resolve this discrepancy?
9. Simon accuses Kate of being selfish for wanting to attend Stanford. Do you agree? Does Simon truly love Kate? Explain your reasoning.
10. How did you react when you learned of Andy's ambition to move on to a larger, more lucrative church? Is it appropriate for a religious leader to have ambition? Why or why not?
11. Andy thinks he is doing Kate a favor by telling her she needs to "make some decisions" about her mother. Do you agree?

12. After Kate receives the insurance letter denying their claim, she asks her mother what they should do. Her mother turns toward Kate, "...and in her eyes was an urgent message she couldn't decipher." Do you think Kate's mother was reacting to Kate's question? If so, what might her mother have been thinking or feeling?

13. Mary thinks about Kate going to Stanford and contemplates what it means to be selfish. "Was Kate selfish, or was it Mary who was being selfish, wanting Kate to give up what she cherished most?" How would you answer this question?

14. After Kate disappears with Andy for the night, Bonnie says, "You're a mean person, Kate. You don't care about Simon and never did, obviously. And I was never your true friend because you never trusted me." Do you agree with Bonnie? Explain your reasoning.

15. When Kate tells Andy that she has decided to stay with Mary the next year, she says, "Dreams need to take into account the present, the circumstances that are handed to us, the people who are given to us to love." Do you agree? Why or why not?

16. Is Bonnie a true friend to Kate? Why or why not?

17. If Andy hadn't have arrived in town, do you think Kate would have married Simon? Why or why not? If she had married him, what would the marriage have been like?

18. Do you agree with the decision that Kate ultimately made regarding Stanford? Explain your thinking.

19. What does Kate learn from her relationships with Simon and Andy?

20. How does your perception of Aunt Julia change throughout the book? How does her relationship with Kate and Mary change? How does Aunt Julia's attitude change towards her sister?

21. Did the girls' father have good intentions in the way that he raised his daughters? Explain your thinking.

22. Readers catch glimpses of Kate's and Mary's mother as she was before her accident, but not their father. How, and to what extent, do you think their father changed after the accident?

23. How does religion play a role in the girls' lives? How do their views differ and how do these differences affect the girls' actions, thoughts and decisions?

Discussion Questions Around the Theme of Love

Review and reflect upon the following quotes regarding love from Francisco X. Stork's novel *Irises*. Which quote resonates with you the most? Why?

1. "Mary was wrong when she said that Kate's desire to be a doctor was love. Love had a softness and receptiveness to it. Her desire to be a doctor was strong, willful. It would not bend."
2. Andy on Kate's love for her mother: "Love implies that there's another person to love you back. It's a two-way street."
3. "With Simon [Kate] was content, full, at peace. With Andy she felt the need for more conversation, more emotion, more touch. Which of the two feelings was love?"
4. Kate says: "Mary has never dated anyone and she knows more about love than I do. She says that when she paints, she sees this light in whatever she's painting, and this light is the same as a light she recognizes inside of her. This recognition of light is what she calls love. It's all very joyful, but it involves hard work at the same time to keep them together. I think that something along those lines is probably what it means to truly love another person."
5. Andy disagrees with Kate's definition of love: "Most of us have to settle for the regular human kind of love...wanting the other person physically and emotionally, hurting with their absence, needing them, that's part of it."
6. Kate grapples with her feelings for Simon and Andy: "[Kate] anticipated love to be both wanting and safety, Andy and Simon rolled into one, but in Andy she had found only Andy."

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Create your own definition of love. How does it compare to the one you wrote before reading *Irises*? If your definition has changed, analyze how the novel influenced your ideas about love.

Discussion Questions Regarding Euthanasia

1. The girls' father thought that they "had no right to end human life under any circumstances."

Do you agree or disagree? Explain your thinking.

2. When Kate admits to Andy that she is thinking of disconnecting her mother's feeding tube, she wonders: "Was she talking about disconnecting her mother's feeding tube because she broke up with Simon, because the insurance was denied? Was she thinking about this because all other options had run out?"

What do you think?

3. When Kate whispers to her mother, "Mama, we need to let you go," she worries that she's doing it "for her own convenience."

Is she? If so, is that a bad thing? Explain your thinking.

4. Based on what you know of the girls' mother, what decision would she want her daughters to make regarding her care?

5. Do *love* and *euthanasia* serve as a paradox in the story, or are they the antithesis of one another?

6. What would you want your family to do if you were in a vegetative state? Would your age be a factor? How long would you want your family to wait before making a decision?

7. Do your parents or guardians have a living will? Should they? Explain your thinking.

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What is your stance on euthanasia? When might it be appropriate? When would it not? How does your answer compare to the one you wrote before reading *Irises*? If your definition has changed, analyze how the novel influenced your ideas about euthanasia.

Culminating Projects

The following projects incorporate Dr. Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Consider having students choose culminating projects that best match their learning styles.

Up for Debate

Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Verbal

Prepare: What are society's various opinions about euthanasia? Learn about your own state's laws here:

<http://euthanasia.procon.org/view.resource.php?resourceID=000132> What are the laws in Texas, where *Irises* takes place?

Research euthanasia on sites such as the following. What is the agenda of each organization?

Organization:	Website:
National Right to Life	www.nrlc.org/euthanasia/
ProCon.org	http://euthanasia.procon.org/
American Medical Association	www.ama-assn.org/ (Enter <i>euthanasia</i> in the search box.)
The Hospice Foundation	http://www.hospicefoundation.org/nutrition

Explore: Examine your own views on euthanasia. Prepare talking points to support your point of view and participate in a class debate on the issue. List some possible opposing view arguments and prepare counter arguments for a rebuttal.

Reflect: How did you feel after the debate? Did any of your classmates change your mind on this issue? In your opinion, who presented the strongest argument?

Connect: If Kate and Mary had been in your class, on which side would they have argued? What are the major points each would have made?

Mural Art

Visual-Spatial, Mathematical

Take a look at urban mural art on a site such as the following:

<http://weburbanist.com/2010/12/13/incredible-urban-mural-projects-and-street-art/>.

Which mural is your favorite? Why? Discuss or write about the impression that the mural leaves with you as well as feelings or impressions that it evokes.

Which mural do you think Marcos would like best? Which one would Mary choose? Explain your thinking.

Create a plan for a mural that you would like to create. Use paper, pencil and colored pencils to sketch a model of your mural. Discuss or write what your mural symbolizes. What feelings, impressions or thoughts would you want your mural to evoke in viewers?

Marcos struggles with proportion as he plans his own mural. Choose a wall where you would like to paint your mural if you could. Choose two or three objects from your mural sketch and calculate the dimensions that they would need to be if painted on the wall.

Irises

Naturalistic

When asked why he chose *Irises* as the title of his book, author Francisco Stork says, "For some reason, seeing a group of irises together reminded me of sisters. You have to look carefully to distinguish one flower from another."

Which flowers would you use to represent the members of your family? Go on a virtual tour of the United States Botanic Garden (www.usbg.gov/) and create your own family garden. Print images of the flowers you find, or create a virtual poster with <http://edu.glogster.com/>. Add a caption for each flower that explains your reasoning for choosing each one.

Irises Book Trailer

Linguistic, Musical, Bodily-Kinesthetic

Work with a group to create a book trailer for *Irises* that you will show to students who have not yet read the book.

Outline frame by frame what you want to convey regarding character and plot. Use a combination of images and music that convey each character's emotions in key parts of the story. Add video clips of your group acting out pivotal scenes from the book. Images and video can be assembled into a book trailer using a site such as www.animoto.com, or programs like Photo Story, Movie Maker or Power Point.

Meet Author Francisco Stork

How did you come up with the idea for *Irises*?

I think it was a combination of things. After having written four books from a young man's perspective, I wanted to try my hand at writing from a young woman's point of view. Then around that time I was struck again by the story of Mary and Martha in Matthew's Gospel. I wanted to write about two sisters who had very different personalities and who had different types of faith. Finally, I was aware that many people in our country were going through some very hard economic times and I wanted to make that part of the story. What effect does poverty have on our dreams and ambitions and our relationship with our family?



Describe your writing process. Do you have a routine? How long did it take to write this book?

I have a day job as an attorney for a state agency that develops affordable housing so it is difficult for me to have an established routine for my writing. I try to write every day, even if it's just a page or two, but sometimes my brain is so tired from my legal job that even that is not possible. I work on weekends and whenever I can with patience and perseverance knowing that it will take me a long time to write a book.

What was the most difficult part about writing *Irises*? The most rewarding?

The most difficult part of the book was finding the energy to write it. I have something called Bipolar Disorder and I had to write the book during a very severe and lengthy depressive episode. Writing was a real challenge. There were days when I could only write a couple of paragraphs. At the same time there were many things about this book that were rewarding. I challenged myself to write in a different style than ever before, a spare, bare-boned style that I thought was appropriate to Mary and Kate's situation. It was also very rewarding to work with my editor at Arthur A. Levine/Scholastic, Cheryl Klein. She helped me shape the story in a way that was not possible to do by myself.

***Irises* is your fifth published novel. Does what has changed from your first novel to this one? How have you changed as a writer?**

Writing is one of those things that gets both easier and harder with time. It is easier to create and give voice to characters. It was easy for me, for example, to stand out of the way and let Kate and Mary's voice come through. On the other hand, the more I write the more the temptation to listen to reviews, the more the temptation to compare myself to other writers or to compare the book to previous books I've written and these temptations can really interfere with the job of writing. I think that I am more and more grateful for the gift of writing as I grow older. There is so much of it that is simply gift: the ideas, the words, the ability to work, the energy and patience. Where does that all come from? These things don't seem to come from my will. They are given. So the main way that I have changed as a writer is that I've become more grateful and humble.

Are any of the characters in *Irises* based on people whom you know?

I took a little bit of Kate and Mary from my daughter and my wife, but mostly Kate and Mary seem to come from different parts of my personality. There is a Kate part of me that is ambitious and forward-driven and Mary part of me that is intuitive and artistic. There is the lawyer and the writer in me and I guess you can say that Kate and Mary came from these inner parts of me.

What is the best writing advice you've ever received?

I think the best writing advice comes from the Bhagavad Gita, that beautiful Hindu scripture: "Offer your work to God and don't concern yourself with the results."

What advice do you have for young writers?

Try to enjoy the process of writing as much as possible. Try to find value in the simple act of writing. Be both playful and serious in your writing. Think of writing not in terms of a story or a book or a poem but in terms of a vocation, something you are called to do your whole life long. It is the trying that counts.

What are you working on next?

I am working on a story of a young girl who is recovering from depression an attempted suicide. The topic was suggested to me by my publisher and I embraced it because it is something that it is close to my heart. Wish me luck!