

## The Novel at a Glance

### SUMMARY

*Barefoot Heart* is a memoir, a narrative based on the author's personal experiences in a family of Mexican American migrant laborers from South Texas. The memoir begins when Elva Treviño is a young child, the sixth and last in her family, who never gets the attention she craves and feels isolated from her family—especially since Elva never works in the fields. When Elva is twelve, her family is able to leave the fields and Elva begins to grow up and discovers books. She is very successful in school, but continues to feel guilty because her life has been easier than those of her siblings. At the end of the novel, Elva is chosen valedictorian of her high school class, but finds it a bittersweet victory because she knows that her life will now be even more different than those of her family members. In the epilogue, the adult Elva researches her memoir and claims that she hasn't been able to find true happiness until she writes about her experiences as a migrant child.

### MORE ABOUT THE WRITER

Storytelling has always been a part of life for Elva Treviño Hart. While her family worked in the Minnesota fields, young Elva would wait by the car, making up stories to pass the time. After the workday ended, the family would gather around the potbellied stove in their migrant camp quarters, listening to and telling stories. In the absence of toys, television, or books, storytelling was the main entertainment and the chief reward after a long day's work.

Her father's stories became so important to her that when he was in his nineties, Hart recorded him telling the tales she grew up with. Elva Hart admired her father's work ethic and his commitment to his children's education. That commitment prompted him to urge his children to work hard.

Because he had left school after the third grade, Hart's father pictured high school as the highest goal possible. As his children graduated from high school, he hung their pictures and diplomas on the living room wall. With Elva's graduation, there were six diplomas and six pictures. They were the pride of her father's life.

Elva Hart credits her father with teaching her the skills she needed to deal with the segregation and discrimination in her South Texas hometown. The way she learned to cope was to find a way around it. In papers that she wrote for English class, Hart always thought she was being judged for the content rather than the style, and, since her experiences were so different from those of her white classmates, she thought the content was inadequate. So even though she liked English and reading best, Hart concentrated on mathematics.

That focus on mathematics led her to a lucrative career in the computer industry. But her career left her feeling as if she had become two different people. To reconcile them, Hart returned to the storytelling tradition she grew up with. Elva Treviño Hart was interviewing her elderly relatives and gathering their stories when she realized that her brothers and sisters also had interesting tales to tell, so she began interviewing them, too. As she added her own memories and stories to the stories they told, she thought it might be a good idea to take a writing class.

One of the women in the class took Hart's stories home for her husband, a professor, to read. He asked for Hart's permission to read her work at an annual short-story reading he conducted.

Although the book is mostly in English, Hart began writing it in Spanish, her first language. By writing the stories in Spanish, Hart was able to focus on the events and the feelings they evoked in her, rather than on technical elements such as punctuation, grammar, or sentence structure.

The first time Hart read the memoir to her family, it drew a strong—and unexpected—response. When she started reading, her oldest sister started sobbing, her brother had to leave the room to cry, and her other brother fell totally silent. Writing the book was a catharsis for the entire family. Whenever she has a reading in Texas, her family is there to back her up, even if they have to wake up at dawn and drive for hours to attend. Now her whole family loves the book.

In addition to writing, Hart's work includes traveling around the country, talking to migrant children and migrant parents, spreading a message of hope. But she stresses that her book does not have a political agenda.

After graduating from high school, Hart earned a scholarship from the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). That support meant so much to her that she vowed to return the favor. So, as she notes in the first pages of the book, Hart is donating all royalties from sales of the memoir to scholarships.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Elva**, the main character and author of the memoir, is the sixth and final child in the Treviño family.

**Apá**, Elva's father, emigrated from Mexico as a boy, and he expects his entire family to work just as hard as he does.

**Amá**, Elva's mother (also called La Chata), was born on a farm outside of Pearsall. She not only cooks and cleans for the whole family but also works in the fields.

**Delia**, Elva's obedient and quiet oldest sister, is in her first year of high school when the book opens.

**Delmira**, the second-oldest, is in the eighth grade. She is the free spirit of the family.

**Luis**, Elva's oldest brother, does not live up to his father's expectations of a firstborn son. Though he presents a brave facade, he is quite insecure.

**Diamantina**, the sister closest to Elva in age, worries so much about everything that she bites her fingernails until they bleed.

**Rudy**, in the fourth grade, was macho even when he was six years old. He quickly becomes his father's favorite son.

**Tio Alfredo** is Elva's maternal uncle, with whom the Treviños live for a while.

**Tia Nina** is Elva's maternal aunt, who went out to get sugar and coffee and came back married.

**Lionides "Nides" Treviño**, Apá's younger brother, eloped with Tia Nina.

**Tio Leonardo** is Elva's uncle, who owns a general store in Uvalde.

**Doña Maria** is Elva's maternal grandmother.

**Don Manuelito**, Elva's paternal grandfather, is gentle and kind.

**Tio Manuel**, Apá's most successful brother, owns the Buenos Aires Cantina.

**Alejandra** is Apá's first cousin whom Apá and Elva visit in Sabinas, Mexico.

**Chema** is Apá's friend who lives in Monterrey, Mexico.

**Kit**, Elva's first white friend, is the daughter of the Minnesota farmer for whom the Treviños work.

**Gloria** is Elva's only real friend among the migrant children in Minnesota.

**Marielena** appears at the migrant camp one summer and entrances Elva with her tales of fairies, dragons, and rogues.

**Chachi** and **Lupita**, whose names have been changed, are the mother-and-daughter migrant workers whom Elva interviews at the end of the book.

**Mr. Derderian**, Elva's ninth-grade English teacher, inspires her to write but dies before the second day of class.

**Manuel Madrigal** is Elva's first love.

**Kal** is the Jewish dentist Delmira marries when she is 27.

## MAJOR THEMES

Throughout the book, Elva grapples with her conflict between family and solitude. As she confronts racism and class distinctions in her community and herself, she explores the theme of the individual in opposition to society. And while she discovers that through hard work, she can persevere and triumph over adversity, other characters, such as her mother, find that this is not always true. In the end, she realizes that she can find true happiness only by following her heart.

## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### Characterization

Hart's memoir introduces dozens of characters from her life. She reveals the personalities of her characters in several ways. She uses **indirect characterization**—letting the characters speak, describing how they look and dress, and showing what they do and how they act. She also uses **direct characterization**—discussing the characters' traits directly. Many of Hart's characters are dynamic characters, because they change in the course of the book. Apá, for example, begins the book as a bossy and controlling patriarch but comes to understand that he needs to treat Elva with respect. Amá, who at the beginning sings to express her joy, ends up working so hard for the family that she stops singing altogether.

## Introducing the Novel

### ENGAGING ISSUES

The issues raised in *Barefoot Heart*—work, family, hard times—continue to be relevant today. This activity encourages you to grapple with these issues in ways that have meaning for your own lives.

Use the following list to introduce the issues. Divide up into groups, read each item on the list, tell what you think that word means to you, and then prepare a brief response explaining why you feel the way you do. The response should contain at least one concrete example from your own personal experiences or knowledge.

Afterward, gather in small groups to discuss your responses and attempt, if possible, to reach a consensus. (Alternatively, use the list and responses for a class discussion.)

- Family
- Courage
- Hard work
- Perseverance
- Education

### RESEARCH

#### Some Like It Hot?

Much of *Barefoot Heart* takes place in and around Pearsall, in South Texas. This area is warm most of the year and very hot in the summer. To imagine what it would be like to live in a small town in South Texas, research the community of Pearsall and its surroundings, using the Web and resources at the library. Choose one aspect of the environment—the climate, the culture, the opportunities (or lack of them)—and prepare a short presentation for the class.

### MAKING PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

#### Friends

In *Barefoot Heart*, Elva looks back fondly on one or two friends, such as Kit and Gloria. If you wrote a memoir, which friends would you remember, and why? In your journal, write your idea of what a friend should be. Tell about your closest friends, and why you like them. (You will not need to share this composition.) What do you and your friends do together? What brought you together in the first place? Who is your best friend, and why? List the best qualities you can think of in your friends.