

A study guide prepared by IYC Tutor Byron Eden

Brothers in Arms

By Paul Langan & Ben Alirez

Make a list of all words used in this book that you do not know the meaning of. Some words that you might not be familiar with, and the pages they are found on include the following: bolted (2), warily (14), strut (47), lurking (78), disturbance (110), cringe (113), stunned (122), blushed (127)

The authors use a lot of *similes* in this story. A *simile* is a comparison (usually using the word “like” or “as”) between two things that are otherwise dissimilar, but having certain qualities in common. Common examples of *similes* might include: *As white as the driven snow; soft as a baby’s bottom; as blue as the sky; as cold as ice.* As you read the book Brothers in Arms, **make a list of all of the similes that you come across**. See if you can recognize some of the similes that Martin uses to describe his feelings. Samples include the following:

p.1 Her eyes beaming like a cop’s spotlight.

p.1 Still looking at me as if I was some kind of a puzzle

p.2 I bolted like the roaches in the basement

Chapter 1

1. (p.5) A member of Martin’s gang, Jesus says “I got Huero at 11:00”. What does this phrase mean? Think of movies or television shows, especially those with military expressions.
2. (p.7) Huero offers to share his gum, resulting in Chago and Frankie shaking their heads “and glanced away embarrassed”. Why do you think the boys were embarrassed? What is it about having a little kid around that makes them uncomfortable?
3. (p.7) “The kid looked at me like I was a superhero or something”. Huero worships his older brother Martin. When you were around Huero’s age, who were some of the people that you looked up to? What was it that you admired about them?
4. (p.7) “Go Home, Huero – now!” I ordered. Martin turns his back on someone he loves dearly, his younger brother. Two pages later Huero has been shot dead. We never know when death will come. Do you think that Martin would have treated his brother differently if he had known what was about to happen? Has there ever been a time in your life when you wish you could turn back the hands of time?
5. (p.11) Whoever shot him tore a hole through my heart too, a black hole that, instead of blood, gushed only a desire for revenge”. Have you ever been so filled with an emotion, like hatred or revenge that it became all consuming, making you unable to think about anything else?

Chapter 2

1. Describe for me your understanding of Martin’s home life at this point in the story. What was his family like?

2. (p.16-18) While at a party Frankie allows Martin to witness a gang initiation, and then says “It’s your turn, Martin”. What did you think of this initiation? Have you had a similar experience in your life?
3. Martin tells his mother, and her friend, police officer Ramirez, nothing about how he had been beaten in the gang initiation. This results in Martin’s mom making the decision to move away from the neighborhood, in order to escape the influence of the gang activities. “All I wanted was the blood of the person who shot my brother” (p.21). Martin storms out of the house, “Martin! she yelled, but I closed the door. I could still hear her voice when I got to Frankie’s car. She screamed the same way she did when she learned that Huero was dead. (p.23) It was like I was gone already, the walking dead. What does the phrase the walking dead mean? Martin meets up with Frankie and his gang. He tells them of his mom’s plans to move out of the neighborhood. (p.23) Frankie asks Martin how his mom’s plan to move would save him. He asks “How’s taking you away from your family gonna save you?” Who is the family that Frankie refers to? “My family. I didn’t even know what that was anymore.” (p.24) In your opinion, who is family?
4. (p.27-28) “But I knew, not far away, my mom was home worrying about me”. “I could have called her to let her know I was all right”. “Instead, I let her worry all night long. I was showing her that she wasn’t going to control me”. Have you ever done something that deliberately caused pain to someone that loved you?
5. (p.28-30) While Martin was out all night, his mother was busy cleaning out the apartment, and preparing to move that next day. (p.29) “Where’s all our stuff, Ma?” “What did you do, Ma?” (p.30) “I ain’t going nowhere. This is my home, and this is where I’m staying! I said stepping right into her face like she was just another kid on the street looking for trouble”. “No, this is my house! I pay the rent. I pay the bills. And you are my son. I’m taking you, and we are leaving right now. End of story.” Again she yanked on my arm to take me out. Have you ever had a similar situation, where you wanted desperately to do something, but did not have the independence and capability to do what you wanted? How did that make you feel?

Chapter 3

1. (p.32) “I hate this. It’s like I’m in prison or something”, Martin says, in explaining that his mother will not allow him access to a telephone, resulting in the need to use a pay phone. How do you feel about the restrictions that have been placed on you since you have been at IYC St. Charles?
2. (p.33) The new neighborhood was completely different from back home. It is a mix of Chicanos, Mexicans, blacks and whites. How does the IYC St. Charles population compare to the neighborhood you came from? Does the difference cause you any concern?
3. (p.36) “When people start treating you like you’re a criminal, you start believing you are one”. Have you ever experienced having feelings like that? What happened?
4. (p.38) Martin’s fourth grade teacher failed him with “attention and behavioral problems”, but she did not know that it was at that time that Martin’s dad left.

- “After that, people started treating me like I was stupid, and I stopped taking school seriously”. Did you ever have a time when you felt the same thing? Have you ever quit trying, because you felt that no one expected you to even try to succeed?
5. On his first day at his new high school, Bluford High School, Martin finds a great many things that he dislikes. The English class was especially difficult. (p.45) The chapter ends with the sentence “At least there was one thing about Bluford that I liked”. What was that?

Chapter 4

1. What are your impressions of football star Steve Morris, whom Martin has in both English and gym class?
2. Martin’s mom asks him about his first day at his new school. (p.50) “I didn’t feel like talking to anyone. I came late to every class, and I almost started a fight with some big dude. That was my day”. (p.51) “You did this to me, Ma! Now you’re acting like everything is supposed to be perfect. Well, it’s not perfect.” I snapped. Martin’s mother then responds “Martin, I did this for you.” “Well, it’s not what I wanted!” Martin’s mom then goes on to list the things that Martin wants. Why did Martin’s mom take the action that she did in moving them to a new neighborhood? Have you ever had a situation where someone did something that you did not want, yet it really was the best thing for you? Explain.
3. (p.52) Martin’s mom ends her argument with Martin by saying that “Maybe Huero wouldn’t have been out on the street looking for you”. “I had to get out. Away from her eyes that told me I was guilty”. This section ends (p. 53) with the comment “no place on earth was dark enough for me, the brother who failed”. What does Martin mean when he refers to himself in that manner?

Chapter 5

1. Despite having written his English homework assignment, Martin decides to skip school, and catch a bus to his old neighborhood (p.64-65). On the bus Martin offers his seat to an elderly lady who seems scared of him. Why do you think that Martin offered his seat to this lady? Martin and the old lady are both going to the cemetery to visit deceased relatives. When the old lady learns that Martin’s younger brother is also buried there she gives Martin a rose from the bouquet of flowers that she had brought with her (p.67). Martin does not thank her. Why not?
2. After the cemetery visit, Martin goes on to visit with his old gang friends. He tells them that his mom thinks that it was Martin’s fault, “if I hadn’t been out on the street, Huero wouldn’t have been shot”. (p.70) He goes on to tell Frankie, “And you know what, Frankie? She’s right, man”. What is Frankie’s response in hearing this? (p.70-71).
3. Frankie goes on to tell Martin “I never said this to you, but I guessed you’d figure it out ‘cause you’re smart. But that bullet was probably meant for me”. (p.71) “Frankie’s words made too much sense.” What do you think?
4. (p.72) “I was thinking that Frankie should have told me people were after him. If he had, I would have found a way to keep Huero away. Maybe I could have saved him”. What if Frankie had in fact told everyone that people were after him?

Do you think that the other gang members, including Martin, would have really done anything differently? Why, or why not?

5. (p.74) Frankie cautions Martin “if there is something you need to tell me, you should do it. It ain’t good to keep things hidden from your brother”. His words seemed false to me. If he had followed his own advice, maybe Huero would still be alive. Have you ever kept anything a secret, when it had the possibility of having disastrous results?

Chapter 6

1. (p.76-77) English teacher Mr. Mitchell seems like a teacher who truly cares about his students, even though Martin keeps pushing him away. Can you identify a teacher who was especially caring about you? Give specific examples of several things this teacher did that made him or her stand out in a positive way. How did you respond to this teacher?
2. After skipping school, Martin is confronted by his mother and Officer Ramirez. There is still a lot of friction in Martin’s home. He returns to Bluford High, and in English class he is asked to share his paragraph about “heroes” in a small group setting. Martin was afraid to share his paragraph with Vicky, the girl who has treated Martin so kindly. (p.83) The author uses one of his similes here saying “I felt naked like a newborn baby”. All babies come into this world naked, and babies are often seen naked as they must be cleaned and bathed constantly. This simile is an extremely effective comparison, because as adults we often times view nakedness as an example of demonstrating our vulnerability, since everything can be seen, and we can hide behind nothing. Have you ever had a time in your life when you made yourself extremely vulnerable to someone, perhaps more so than you had intended? How did it turn out, as it is not always a bad thing?
3. Why do you think that Steve Morris behaves the way he does in gym class?

Chapter 7

1. Chapter 7 is mostly about a fight between Martin and football star Steve Morris. Do you know anyone who is a bully like Steve Morris? How do you respond to them when you see them? When you are around them? An incident starts on the basketball court and continues into the locker room. Both boys are brought to the Principal’s office. Steve Morris clearly started the fight, yet when given the opportunity to give the principal his side of the story, Martin says nothing. Why did he not tell her about how Steve Morris started the fight? (p.96-98)
2. (p.101-102) While waiting in the principal’s office Martin rewrites his paragraph homework assignment in English class about heroes. What do you think about the revision that Martin has now made?

Chapter 8

1. (p.105-106) Martin has a terrible nightmare where he is about to shoot the driver of the car that had killed his brother. In his dream, who is the driver? What does this mean? What is the worst nightmare that you have ever had?

2. English teacher Mr. Mitchell asks Martin “Why are you so angry, Martin?” (p.115) “In that instant, I hated Mr. Mitchell. He just kept coming at me, making me think when I just wanted to stop. I don’t know if he was serious, and I didn’t care if he was trying to help”. Have you ever hated someone like this, who was truly trying to just help you? It gets to the point where Martin almost considers hitting Mr. Mitchell. Have you ever hit a teacher, or a person in a position of authority like this, or even considered doing so? If so, how did you resolve this anger issue?

Chapter 9

1. Martin meets Vicky at the football game, after having served his Saturday detention session with Mr. Mitchell. (p.124) Vicky tells Martin “Mr. Mitchell is the best”. “I wasn’t about to tell her that I nearly lost it during detention and almost hit him”. Have you ever been in a situation where you and someone you trusted had real differences of opinion about someone else? Explain.
2. (p.128) On Sunday Martin went to Mass with his mother. Can you think of any reason why Martin did this, seeing as he had not attended church with his mother in a long time? Do you ever go to church, and if so, does it bring you any special feelings of hope or joy, or any other emotions?
3. Mr. Mitchell tells Martin to see him after class. (p.131) “Your essay was outstanding and powerful. It took a lot of courage to write it, and I am giving it an A. Good job”. Martin was speechless upon receiving this praise from his teacher. (p.132) It was the first time I can remember a teacher saying something good about me—Martin Luna!” Have you ever had a time when someone really made you feel good about yourself, especially when it might have been at a time when you were not feeling so good about yourself? If so, tell me how it happened.

Chapter 10

1. (p.135-142) While Martin and Vicky are walking and talking they are approached by a car driven by Steve Morris, who is ready to beat up Martin for getting him in trouble with the principal when Martin’s friends told the truth about the earlier fight in the locker room. What is it that prevents Martin from being severely beat up? (p.141) When the tables are turned, and Steve Morris is now about to get seriously hurt, Martin steps in and says, “Not this time, Frankie. He ain’t worth it”. Before Frankie could do anything, I stepped in between him and Steve”. Why do you suppose Martin prevented Steve from being hurt by Frankie? When Frankie is prevented from beating up Steve do you think that this caused any embarrassment to Frankie? How does it make Frankie feel?
2. (p.142) Martin is told that Frankie and his boys have found the punk that shot Martin’s brother Huero. Arrangements are made to pick up Martin at 9:00am the next day for the purpose of shooting Hector Maldonado, the man who had killed Huero. When Martin is picked up he has all of his equipment. He also has something else with him that is significant. What is it? (p.144). Martin then questions why his brother Huero was killed. (p.145) “There had to be a reason. Frankie always knew more than he said”. “Why was this guy shooting at us this

summer, Frankie?” Martin asked. (p.145-146) “Check under your seat, Frankie said to me as we got into the car and he revved the engine. I reached down and touched the smooth cold metal of a gun. Of course, Frankie made sure we each had guns. Now everyone was armed. Everyone except him. It was all making sense. Too much sense”. Why would Frankie, the leader of this gang, be unarmed when they were about to shoot and kill someone?

3. (p.146) “I knew why Frankie hadn’t answered my question. I’d known it for days now. Knew it all night as I thought of a plan. Knew Frankie would never tell. He was too smart to give out information that could bust him, but I knew the truth.” What was the truth? What exactly did Martin figure out?
4. (p.147) “Now Frankie was using us to clean up his mess, take out his enemies. Arming us to make him stronger. Bringing in new blood to give him more muscle. Waiting until he was sure we could do things right. Making us pull the trigger while he sat back and watched. We were his pawns”. What does that phrase mean that we were his pawns?
5. How does Martin resolve this power struggle between Frankie with the rest of the gang and himself?

What did you think of this book, and why?

ALTERNATIVE ENDING: Go back to page 147, where Martin realizes that he and the other gang members were being taken as pawns by Frankie, to do his dirty work for him. Write an alternative ending for this story that is different from how these authors ended their story.