*Tree Girl* by Ben Mikaelsen Ch1

1. Highlight 5 vocabulary words that you do not know and write the definition in the margin.  Label each with a (V).

2.  Ask 5 questions in the margins.  Label each with a (?)

3.  React to 5 events in the text.  Label each reaction with a (\*).

4.  Make 5 connections to the text, text-to-self · text-to-text · text-to-world.  Label each with a ©

For as long as I can remember, trees have coaxed me to their branches in the same way light tempts a moth near on a dark night. My Mami told me that even before I learned to walk, I pushed away from the safety of her arms and crawled alone to a great Encino tree near our thatched-roof home. I sat beneath the tree and gazed up at the branches as if their leaves had called to me. As I grew, I pulled myself up among those same branches and stared even higher, hearing new voices.

"Gabriela, when you climb a tree, it takes you closer to heaven." Mami encouraged me as each month I climbed still higher. And I believed her. By the time I turned ten, I could climb to the top of any tree-even those that offered me only a few branches. Always I kicked off my sandals and socks at the bottom so that my toes could feel the coarse bark and find the hidden footholds. When I crawled very high, higher than even the boys dared, I closed my eyes and reached one hand over my head. lf I held my breath and spread my fingers wide apart, l could feel the clouds.

The canton where I lived was nothing more than a simple cluster of wood-planked huts that formed a small village, each home joined to the next by roaming children and pecking chickens who ignored boundaries.

"Climbing a tree is dangerous, Gabriela,” the old women who lived in our canton scolded me. But they worried only because they loved me and because they wished me no harm. Trees could be dangerous. If you didn't respect them and hold tightly to their branches, you could fall and be hurt. But Mami knew I respected trees. Her only warning was, "Hold on to your dreams as tightly as you hold to the branches, Gabi."

I was too young then to know how dangerous it would be to lose hold of my dreams. But I do remember well one day when I was fourteen, the day everyone in our Guatemalan canton began calling me Tree Girl, or Laj Ali Re ]ayub in my native language, Quiche. Even the boys who had called me Goat Face because I was not very beautiful, even they began calling me Tree Girl. It began innocently enough.

I was sitting beneath a small twisted cedar tree, weaving a special huipil, the blouse that I planned to wear for my quinceañera, the day when I turned fifteen. On that special day, I would become a woman and be expected to behave as one, no longer wearing socks like a child. On my quinceañera I would dress up like a bride for the priest to bless me. Mami would cook a big meal, and Papi would give me a wrapped gift. We would celebrate my entrance into womanhood with the whole canton.

The old huipil I usually wore had only red and black flowers, but this new huipil I wove especially for my quinceañera, with blue, red, yellow, and green, and the ancient symbols of my people, the Maya. Mami had taught me the meaning of the special symbols: animals and faces, squares, triangles, all telling of our beliefs, of the ancients and the ancestors. They symbols held the history of my people and told who I was. The huipil might someday be given to my children.

To weave the special huipil, I anchored the hand loom to a small cedar tree and leaned back against a waist strap to keep the colorful threads tight and straight while I worked. That’s how I was seated when two boys discovered me alone in the forest a short distance from our canton.

I didn’t recognize the older boys. They were big, with clumsy steps and (4) glassy eyes. When they kneeled beside me. I smelled on their breath the alcohol we called huj, a strong fruit liquor made in the cantons. Both boys joked and teased me, their stares making me uncomfortable.

I felt the way any girl would, alone with boys who can't he trusted, and I was ready when they began touching me and pulling at my huipil and my corte, the wrap-around skirt that I wore. "You're very beautiful," one said. "Quit weaving and give us a little kiss."

I didn't want to kiss the boys. Why would they want to kiss someone the other boys called Goat Face? I shook my head and kept weaving, but the boys were drunk. "Come with us,'' one insisted. "You're so beautiful. We'll treat you like a princess."

The boys were blind to beauty. Their eyes held the look of stray dogs who see food they think can be stolen. I kept weaving and said nothing, but then suddenly one of them grabbed at my huipil and squeezed one of my breasts. As quickly as a cat, I bit his arm and rolled free from the strap that held me to my loom.

The boy howled with pain as I jumped to my feet and ran. I didn't run because I feared the boys. I could bite and kick like a donkey if cornered. I had a better plan and I ran toward a large avocado tree that I had climbed many times. Even at night I could climb that tree faster than the moon shadow of a passing cloud.

The boys jumped to their feet and chased me, their anger demanding more than kisses. Purposely I slowed to make them think they could catch me. They were only steps behind when I reached the tree, but that was all I needed to climb above their heads to safety. The tree reached out its branches to me as I climbed, taking my hands and helping me to escape the ground. Each branch lifted me safely to the next, passing me higher and higher.

The boys swore loudly as they scrambled after me. "We d id n 't h hurt you," one shouted.

"You bit me, you ugly toad!" the other growled.

I kept climbing.

The boys kept shouting angry threats as they climbed farther up into the tree after me. When we had crawled high enough for the wind to sway the branches, they paused to look back at the ground and their voices weakened. The cowards didn't like being so high, and suddenly their angry threats turned to empty chattering like two scared monkeys.

"Come down, you ugly toad, or we'll hurt you," one shouted.

Now it was my turn to laugh. "What's wrong?" I called down. I spoke sweetly, the way a mother talks to a baby. "You said I was beautiful. Do I look so different up in a tree? What's wrong? Are you afraid to climb as high as an ugly toad?"

The boys' angry faces reddened like peppers as they stared up at me. To coax them even higher, I swung my feet in front of their faces, letting them almost catch me. I hoped their anger would make them even more foolish.

When the boys stopped climbing again, I reached out and picked several hard, unripe avocados and threw them like rocks, hitting their heads. They screamed with pain and swore and reached up to try and grab me, but I crawled even higher. Now I was up higher than I had ever climbed before. The branches in my hand were no larger than broomsticks. With the extra weight, the tree bent dangerously.

One of the boys reached for an avocado to throw back at me, so I held tightly to the tree and swung my body from side to side. The tree swayed as if the earth were moving. The boy dropped the avocado, and he and his friend clung desperately to the tree, their faces pale.

I hoped the thin branches were strong enough to hold a short fourteen-year-old girl and two drunk and angry boys. One started to crawl back toward the (7) ground, so I swung the tree harder. Once more they both clung to the branches as if held by glue. The fear that froze their bodies made them my prisoners. “Move and I’ll swing even harder,” I warned them.

Already the sun hovered low over the trees. I knew that if I didn’t return to the canton by sunset, Mami would come into the forest calling my name softly. “Gabriela,” she would call. “Come home now. Your mothers, the earth and me, we’re waiting for you. Come home now, Gabi.

Always, when I heard Mami's voice, l would climb from my tree as quickly as any monkey. Those days where I had climbed very high among the branches and needed more time to crawl down, Mami's sweet voice would float through the trees a second time like a song: "Come now, Gabi. Come home, my daughter. Even dreamers need sleep."

The day the boys chased me, I didn't need to wait for Mami. A sound from below caught my attention. There, on the trail nearby, walked Don Guillermo, an old man who lived near our canton. He moved deliberately, his body bent forward against a head strap that (8) bore the weight of a large bag of corn on his back

Don Guillermo had heard the boys shouting and cursing. He dropped the heavy load from his shoulders to come and investigate. I think he knew when he found us what had happened, but to make sure, called out to him. "Don Guillermo, the boys don't think I’m as beautiful now as when they caught me alone weaving. Now they don't think l'm as beautiful as when they grabbed me and chased me. When you get back to the canton, please tell my father and mother to come here I want them to meet these brave boys:"

Don Guillermo frowned. "It isn't safe to leave ·you alone, Gabriela,'' he called.

I laughed and yelled, "I'm not alone. The boys are with me. They're the ones who might fall."

The old man chuckled and swung his bundle onto his back again, continuing toward the canton less than one kilometer away.

Now the boys tried desperately to crawl down from the tree and escape, but even stupid boys know not to let go of a tree that swings and bends and threatens to break with each movement. (9)

“Quit swinging the tree,” pleaded the boy who had grabbed at me. “Let us down, and I won’t tell anybody that you bit me.”

I laughed loudly. “When my parents come, I’ll be the first to tell them I bit you and why I bit you. I’ll quit swinging only if you don’t move. If you even pick your nose, I’ll swing this tree so hard you’ll both fall like piñatas to the ground.

The boys looked up at me in silence with scared eyes and waited obediently until my parents arrived along with half of the canton. Word had spread faster than fire, and some villagers even left their fields so that they could see the two boys I had trapped in the tree. Everyone on the ground picked up sticks and waited.

"Climb down," I ordered the boys.

They looked at the waiting crowd below and hesitated. I held up a hard avocado as if to throw it, and they began descending.

On the ground, my brother Jorge stood boldly in front of everyone else, waiting with the biggest stick. Jorge always felt he needed to ·protect me. No boy had (10) ever dared to tease me when Jorge was near.

When the two boys reached the ground, Jorge and the others beat them hard before allowing them to escape. I doubted they would ever return to our canton. Humiliation was not a poison that cowards needed to taste twice.

"Come down, Laj Ali Re Jayub," one of the men called to me. "You're safe now."

I had been · safe even before everyone else arrived, so I smiled to myself as I crawled slowly from the tree. I liked the name Tree Girl. When l reached the ground, I glanced back up into the branches and felt the twinge of sadness one feels when leaving a close friend.

As we returned to the canton, Mami stopped to pick a red Christmas flower. She tucked it gently into my hair. "Have you done your schoolwork, Gabi?” she asked.

"Yes," I answered truthfully. "I've memorized my lessons."

I was the only child my parents could afford to send to school, and they worked harder than other (11) parents in our canton so I could have the opportunity to learn. Though they had never gone to school themselves, my parents possessed ·a dignity and wisdom that I respected.

"I don't want you to just memorize your lessons," Papi said to me as we walked toward the canton "I want you to understand them as well. Then you can explain what you've learned to the rest of us. If all you are going to do is learn to repeat your lessons, I might as well send a parrot to school."

"I try to understand what I learn," I assured him. Papi smiled patiently before answering, "You're

Maya, Gabi, and your world is changing even as we speak. You must learn to survive change or you'll be destroyed by it. Your education will teach you how to survive. ·Sending you to school has given our family hope. Someday you must come back and teach the rest of us. Promise your Mami and me that you will"

"I will," I promised. Hesitantly, I asked, “Why did you choose me instead of Jorge, when he's the oldest?" As much as .he loved me, I knew that Jorge had felt betrayed and hurt that he was not the one.

Mami smiled gently. "It's because you think differently than the other children; Gabi. You look up ·at the sky when the other children stare at the ground. Why do you think you love to climb trees? You see beauty the other children are blind to. You ask questions the other children in the canton never think to ask. You sing and dream and love poetry. We never taught you those things. You have a gift, and that gift must be shared. In your heart you're a teacher. Even as a young child, each time you learned how to do something new I would catch you trying to teach someone else how to do it." Mami paused and then added, "You're also brave, Gabi."

I nodded. Few things frightened me, but I didn't know if that meant I truly had courage. I did know the gift Mami spoke of; it was ·like a quiet and patient voice inside of me, telling me things I didn't think the other children heard. The voice made me question who I was and what I was becoming. It made me impatient.

We walked in silence the rest of the distance to the canton. That day was not the first ·time my parents had spoken of changes that were coming, though they (13) always s refused · to say what those changes might be. I could sense their fear growing like a great storm building on the distant horizon, and I wondered what sort of danger was coming.

All my life our canton had known only the seasons and the changing of night and day to mark the passing of time. We understood that time came to us as a gift. There was no reason to rush and make changes. We had today what our ancestors had, and that was enough. Tomorrow would arrive when it was ready. Why should that change?

Mother turned to me as we reached our small home in the canton. "You weren't afraid of the boys, were you, Gabi?" I shook my head. "They were cowards."

"Remember, Gabi,” Mami said, her voice fearful and filled with warning. "Cowards can be very dangerous when they have guns."

"The boys didn't have guns," I said.

"No, but soldiers and guerrillas do. Gabriela, war is coming to out great country."