



About the Author



Luisa Valenzuela (b. 1938) was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She first pursued a career as a painter, but she soon discovered her true calling as a writer. Like many contemporary Latin American writers, Valenzuela takes an experimental approach to literary style and language. She believes that writers derive their power and influence from the way they use and define words. Influenced by the political turmoil in Argentina, Valenzuela examines the repression of speech and identity in much of her fiction.

STANDARDS

RL.9–10.10 By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9–10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

L.9–10.4.a Use context as a clue to the meaning of a word or phrase.

L.9–10.4.d Verify the preliminary determination of the meaning of a word or phrase.

The Censors

Concept Vocabulary

As you perform your first read of “The Censors,” you will encounter the following words.

sabotage intercept subversive

Context Clues If these words are unfamiliar, try using **context clues**—other words and phrases that appear nearby in the text—to help you determine their meanings. There are various types of context clues that you may find useful as you read.

Synonyms: The newspaper editor **incited** the rebellion, stirring up the government’s opponents.

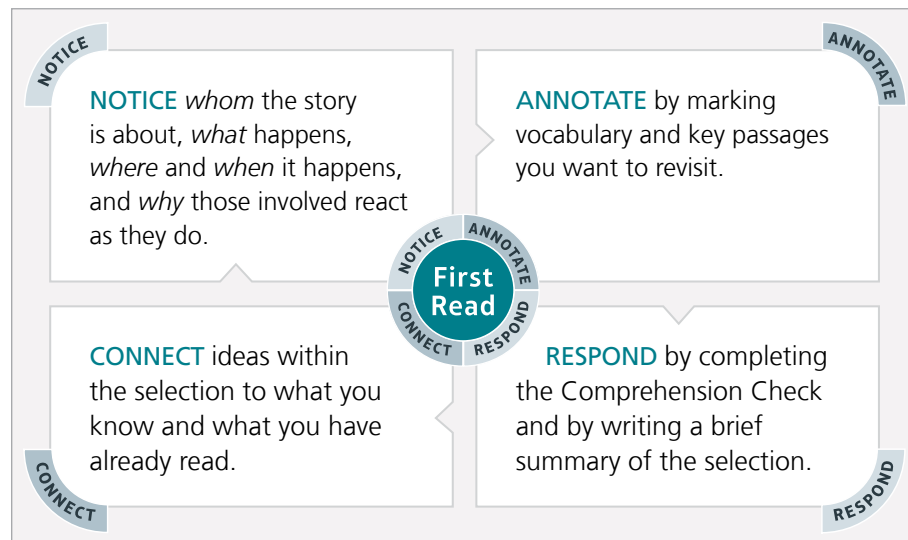
Restatement of Ideas: Periodically, Sam grew **nostalgic**, as he yearned to see his homeland once more.

Contrast of Ideas: Abandoning her customary **nonchalance**, Sofia felt anxious and tense that afternoon.

Apply your knowledge of context clues and other vocabulary strategies to determine the meanings of unfamiliar words you encounter during your first read. Use a resource such as a dictionary or a thesaurus to verify the meanings you identify.

First Read FICTION

Apply these strategies as you conduct your first read. You will have an opportunity to complete a close read after your first read.



The Censors

Luisa Valenzuela
translated by David Unger

BACKGROUND

Like many other Latin American writers, Luisa Valenzuela often addresses political issues in her fiction. Her native country, Argentina, now a democracy, has had a troubled history of censorship and extreme human-rights violations. In the 1970s, a military regime took power, brutally hunted down suspected political foes, and censored news and mail. In “The Censors,” Valenzuela explores the absurd aspects of life under such oppression.



- 1 **P**oor Juan! One day they caught him with his guard down before he could even realize that what he had taken as a stroke of luck was really one of fate’s dirty tricks. These things happen the minute you’re careless, as one often is. Juancito let happiness—a feeling you can’t trust—get the better of him when he received from a confidential source Mariana’s new address in Paris and knew that she hadn’t forgotten him. Without thinking twice, he sat down at his table and wrote her a letter. *The letter that now keeps his mind off his job during the day and won’t let him sleep at night (what had he scrawled, what had he put on that sheet of paper he sent to Mariana?).*
- 2 Juan knows there won’t be a problem with the letter’s contents, that it’s irreproachable, harmless. But what about the rest? He knows that they examine, sniff, feel, and read between the lines of each and every letter, and check its tiniest comma and most accidental stain. He knows that all letters pass from hand to hand and go through all sorts of tests in the huge censorship offices and that, in the end, very few continue on their way. Usually it takes months, even years, if there aren’t any snags; all this time the freedom, maybe even the life, of both sender and receiver is in jeopardy. And that’s why Juan’s so troubled: thinking that something might happen to Mariana because of his letters. Of all people, Mariana, who must finally feel safe there where she always dreamt she’d live. But he knows that the *Censor’s Secret Command* operates all over the world and cashes in on the discount in airfares; there’s nothing to stop them from going as far as

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Mark context clues or indicate another strategy you used that helped you determine meaning.

sabotage (SAB uh tozh) *v.*

MEANING:

intercept (ihn tuhr SEHPT) *v.*

MEANING:

Mark context clues or indicate another strategy you used that helped you determine meaning.

subversive (suhb VUR sihv) *adj.*

MEANING:

that hidden Paris neighborhood, kidnapping Mariana, and returning to their cozy homes, certain of having fulfilled their noble mission.

3 Well, you've got to beat them to the punch, do what everyone tries to do: **sabotage** the machinery, throw sand in its gears, get to the bottom of the problem so as to stop it.

4 This was Juan's sound plan when he, like many others, applied for a censor's job—not because he had a calling or needed a job: no, he applied simply to **intercept** his own letter, a consoling albeit unoriginal idea. He was hired immediately, for each day more and more censors are needed and no one would bother to check on his references.

5 Ulterior motives couldn't be overlooked by the *Censorship Division*, but they needn't be too strict with those who applied. They knew how hard it would be for the poor guys to find the letter they wanted and even if they did, what's a letter or two when the new censor would snap up so many others? That's how Juan managed to join the *Post Office's Censorship Division*, with a certain goal in mind.

6 The building had a festive air on the outside that contrasted with its inner staidness. Little by little, Juan was absorbed by his job, and he felt at peace since he was doing everything he could to get his letter for Mariana. He didn't even worry when, in his first month, he was sent to *Section K* where envelopes are very carefully screened for explosives.

7 It's true that on the third day, a fellow worker had his right hand blown off by a letter, but the division chief claimed it was sheer negligence on the victim's part. Juan and the other employees were allowed to go back to their work, though feeling less secure. After work, one of them tried to organize a strike to demand higher wages for unhealthy work, but Juan didn't join in; after thinking it over, he reported the man to his superiors and thus got promoted.

8 You don't form a habit by doing something once, he told himself as he left his boss's office. And when he was transferred to *Section F*, where letters are carefully checked for poison dust, he felt he had climbed a rung in the ladder.

9 By working hard, he quickly reached *Section E* where the job became more interesting, for he could now read and analyze the letters' contents. Here he could even hope to get hold of his letter, which, judging by the time that had elapsed, had gone through the other sections and was probably floating around in this one.

10 Soon his work became so absorbing that his noble mission blurred in his mind. Day after day he crossed out whole paragraphs in red ink, pitilessly chucking many letters into the censored basket. These were horrible days when he was shocked by the subtle and conniving ways employed by people to pass on **subversive** messages; his instincts were so sharp that he found behind a simple "the weather's unsettled" or "prices continue to soar" the wavering hand of someone secretly scheming to overthrow the Government.

11 His zeal brought him swift promotion. We don't know if this made him happy. Very few letters reached him in *Section B*—only a handful passed the other hurdles—so he read them over and over again,


passed them under a magnifying glass, searched for microprint with an electronic microscope, and tuned his sense of smell so that he was beat by the time he made it home. He'd barely manage to warm up his soup, eat some fruit, and fall into bed, satisfied with having done his duty. Only his darling mother worried, but she couldn't get him back on the right track. She'd say, though it wasn't always true: Lola called, she's at the bar with the girls, they miss you, they're waiting for you. Or else she'd leave a bottle of red wine on the table. But Juan wouldn't overdo it: any distraction could make him lose his edge and the perfect censor had to be alert, keen, attentive, and sharp to nab cheats. He had a truly patriotic task, both self-denying and uplifting.

12 His basket for censored letters became the best fed as well as the most cunning basket in the whole *Censorship Division*. He was about to congratulate himself for having finally discovered his true mission, when his letter to Mariana reached his hands. Naturally, he censored it without regret. And just as naturally, he couldn't stop them from executing him the following morning, another victim of his devotion to his work. 🐼

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Comprehension Check

Complete the following items after you finish your first read. Review and clarify details with your group.

1. Why does Juan take a job as a censor?
2. Why is the Censorship Division not particularly careful about whom it hires?
3. What is the result of Juan's enthusiasm on the job?
4. What does Juan do when he finds his letter to Mariana?
5.  **Notebook** Confirm your understanding of the story by writing a summary.

RESEARCH

Research to Clarify Choose at least one unfamiliar detail from the text. Briefly research that detail. In what way does the information you learned shed light on an aspect of the story?