



# The Things We Didn't Know

A NOVEL

Elba Iris  
Pérez

READING GROUP GUIDE

This reading group guide for *The Things We Didn't Know* includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.



---

The inaugural winner of Simon & Schuster's Books Like Us contest, Elba Iris Pérez's lyrical, cross-cultural coming-of-age debut novel explores a young girl's childhood between 1960s Puerto Rico and a small Massachusetts factory town.

Andrea Rodríguez is nine years old when her mother whisks her and her brother, Pablo, away from Woronoco, the tiny Massachusetts factory town that is the only home they've known. With no plan and no money, she leaves them with family in the mountainside villages of Puerto Rico and promises to return.

Months later, when Andrea and Pablo are brought back to Massachusetts, they find their hometown significantly changed. As they navigate the rifts between their family's values and all-American culture, and face the harsh realities of growing up, they must embrace both the triumphs and heartache that mark the journey to adulthood.

A heartfelt, evocative portrait of another side of life in 1960s America, *The Things We Didn't Know* establishes Elba Iris Pérez as a sensational new literary voice.

## Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. *The Things We Didn't Know* is inspired by the author's own experiences growing up between Woronoco, Massachusetts, and Puerto Rico. How do you predict that her connection will impact your reading experience? As you read, reflect on how the author writes about these places that are extremely meaningful to her.
2. The book opens with a conflict between Andrea and Pablo's parents, as their mother hopes to return to Puerto Rico and their father wants to stay in Woronoco. How do these opposing viewpoints affect Andrea and her brother?
3. On page 16, Andrea explains that her father permitted bike-riding and playing after school, a monumental difference from their previous isolation. What do you think this shift felt like for Andrea and Pablo? How does the author show these emotions in the text?
4. We meet Aunt Cecilia at the airport on page 23. Raquel is taken aback by her appearance, but Andrea and Pablo watch their interaction with confusion, since they "couldn't imagine her being any other way" (27). How does the children's point-of-view impact your experience of this scene? What might it suggest about how people can be more inclusive in real life?
5. Many dishes are written in Spanish with English descriptions, such as "*viandas con bacalao*, a codfish stew with root vegetables" (37). Why do you think the author chose to use language in this way, and how does this affect your impression of the food?
6. On page 42, Andrea proclaims that Tito is her hero. Who was your hero when you were growing up? Was it a family member, neighborhood friend, book character, or someone else?
7. Andrea describes her excitement to wear her school uniform with complete exhilaration: "*The hours couldn't go by fast enough. All I could think of was wearing my uniform on Monday. Life was the best it had ever been*" (61). What were some of the simple pleasures you were excited about as a child (such as, Halloween candy, new school supplies, jumping into piles of leaves)?
8. Pause on page 93, when Andrea and Pablo are about to return to Woronoco with their father. What do you think will await them back in the Beehive? How would you feel if you were Andrea and Pablo?
9. On page 101, Andrea learns some upsetting news. How has the author written this scene to embody the mind of a child? Are there any specific words or phrases that stick out to you as being particularly good examples of how this news affects Andrea?
10. Two characters experience a delightful reunion on page 251. How has time changed their relationship, and what aspects have endured despite the distance?
11. How do you think Julio's childhood compares to Andrea's and Pablo's experience growing up? How do all three compare to your own experiences?
12. At the end of the book, Andrea and Pablo have been on quite a journey. Which twists and turns did you predict, and which surprised you?

## Enhance Your Book Club

1. When Andrea and Pablo first meet Tito, he teaches them how to help with chores around Titi Machi's farm. Andrea and Pablo absorb these lessons with wonder and delight. Create a schedule of your own childhood chores, then describe them to your book club. Refer to page 38 for inspiration. How does your perception of these tasks change after teaching them to someone else? After learning about them, does your book club's perspective on them differ from your own?
2. The beginning of Chapter 9 describes Andrea and Pablo living out a perfect summer day, from cartoons to baseball and beyond. Design your own perfect day! What activities do you incorporate, what foods do you eat, and who do you spend it with? As you share with your book club, think about how this current perfect day compares and contrasts what your childhood perfect day may have been.
3. Two characters discuss the importance of music on page 284, with one saying the following: *"Sometimes you don't know how to say something, and you hear your heart in one of his songs."* Create a playlist of songs that evoke this feeling in you and play it on shuffle in the background of your next book club meeting.