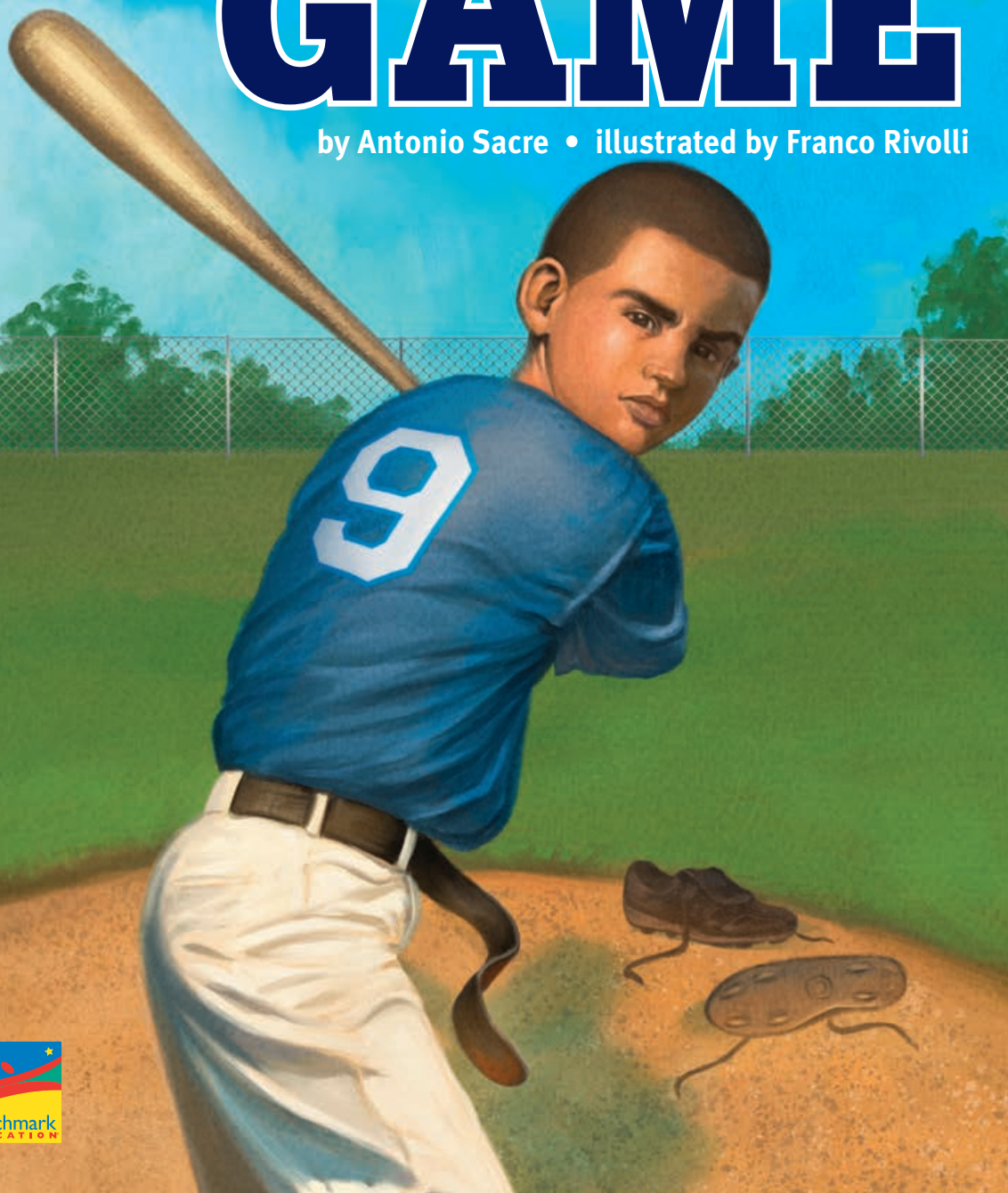


The LOVE of the GAME

by Antonio Sacre • illustrated by Franco Rivolli

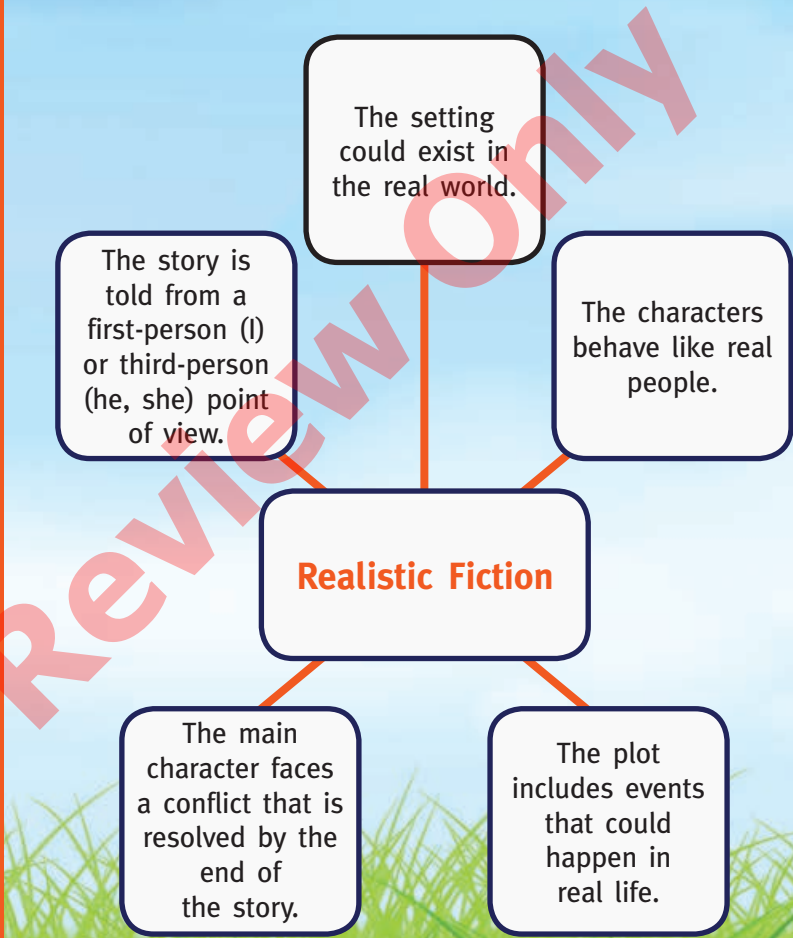


REALISTIC FICTION
LITERATURE

Level **Q/40**
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Realistic Fiction

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Homesick

“But you love baseball!”

Pablo sits on the edge of a bare mattress, his feet sticking out on the cracked tile floor. He squeezes his foot into a stiff shoe and shoves down into it hard.

“These shoes are too tight.” Pablo stands up and winces as he walks around two bare mattresses on the floor. He picks up a belt, and carefully threads it through his crisp, new pants. The belt is too big.



“Mi’jo, my son, look at me,” Papá says.

Pablo digs the pin of the belt buckle through the leather, trying to make a new hole.

“I’m not playing,” Pablo says.

The pin pokes through the leather, and he twists it until he has a hole.

“Pablo,” Papá says.

He tightens the belt into the new notch. Perfect.

“Pablo Emmanuel.”

Pablo looks at his father.

“I can’t run in these shoes. I can’t play shortstop with my bare hands. I’m going to look like a clown playing in my uniform. I’m not going to tryouts.”

Papá sighs, and envelops his son in a hug. Pablo pushes back and then settles in, his eyes shining with tears.

“The coach said he has extra gloves. After my first paycheck, I’ll get you shoes you can run in.”

“I need my glove and my shoes,” Pablo cries. “It’s not the same.”

Now the tears fall, staining his brand new blue Lincoln Elementary baseball jersey.



“Oh, *mi’jo*. I miss Mamá too. I miss Havana. I even miss Uncle Tito. I never thought I’d say that. But you need to go to the baseball tryouts. I can’t pick you up after school, I’m working two shifts. You were born to play baseball. You could play barefoot, and with no glove, better than any kid in this city.”

“Papá, again, why did we have to leave Cuba?”

“What number do you want to hear?”

Pablo almost smiles and whispers, “Number 47.”

Papá says, “Reason number 47, why we left Cuba: Tia Maria’s soup always stank up the whole house for days.”

“I love number 47.”

“I know you do.”

Tryouts

A grizzled man with a gray beard carefully steps over the foul line toward the boys. He cups his hands over his mouth and yells, “This is Coach Randy, otherwise known as the King of the Bat! WARM-UPS! Get in your groups! Second and third graders at first base, fourth and fifth graders at second, sixth graders around home, and if you step on the foul line, you give me ten push-ups! It’s bad luck!”

The players sprint to their places. Pablo stays near the rusty dugout in his too-tight shoes and school uniform, no hat, no glove. He looks at the three groups of players forming around the bases. He’s way smaller than any of the kids out there.

He recognizes one of the boys from his school that day, a tall, wiry kid with a big smile. He nods his head toward him and starts toward second base. The kid waves a long arm to say hello. The coach steps in front of him.



Coach Randy tosses an old, tattered glove to Pablo, and Pablo grabs it before it hits the ground. He stares at the coach. “Hey, kid, nice catch. Go join the younger group.”

Pablo doesn’t understand and just looks at him.

Coach Randy tries again in terrible Spanish, “*Tu. Juega, hugo, ummm, vamoos!*” He points a finger to the younger children around first base.

Pablo says in terrible English, “I for gray?”

“What in the wild world of sports are you saying?” Then he gets it. “Oh, you mean fourth grade.” Coach smiles and says, “Okay, second base!”

Pablo holds the glove out to the coach, trying to give it back. Coach Randy says, “That’s for you. *Para ti.*”

He puts the glove on his hand. It fits perfectly. He pounds his hand into the pocket. Pablo smiles for the first time and says, “For me.”



After warm-ups, Pablo's group goes to the batting cage. Coach Randy sets up the protective fence in front of the mound inside the cage. He slams a white plastic bucket filled with baseballs next to the mound, and balls spill everywhere.

The boys crowd the cage and really notice Pablo for the first time. They are talking and laughing and nudging to be first in line.

"Hey, get outa my way!"

"Hey, Coach Randy, this kid should be with the younger kids!"

"Hey, Coach Randy, this kid forgot his shoes!"

"Hey, Coach Randy, can I go to the bathroom?"

A boy named Gary steps toward Pablo. "Oh, man, this is the kid from Cuba!"

Frank, a tall muscular boy in sparkling cleats and a crisp hat, straps and unstraps brand-new leather batting gloves onto both of his hands in a complicated ritual, tightening them, undoing them, and strapping them even tighter. When he hears "Cuba," he stops and turns toward Pablo.

"Cuba, huh? Can you speak any English?"

Pablo looks at Frank, his mouth slightly moving, yet makes no sound.

“Hey, kid, I’m Gary. You sat behind me in math class.” When he sees that Pablo doesn’t understand, he says it again, but this time, in pretty decent Spanish. “*Soy Gary, tú te sentaste detrás de mí en la clase de matemáticas.*”

Pablo’s face lights up, and he answers back in Spanish. “*¡Guau, hablas español! Mi nombre es Pablo. Encantado de conocerte, Guy Ree.*” Wow, you speak Spanish! My name is Pablo. Nice to actually meet you, Guy Ree.

Gary starts to laugh. “Hey, guys, this is Pablo, from Cuba, where real ball players come from! Do they high-five in Cuba?” Gary holds his hand up in the air in front of Pablo’s face. It hangs there for a few seconds, and Pablo turns his hand into a fist.

Gary smiles even broader and he shouts, “*Orale vato! Hit it! A Cuban fist bump!*”

They bump fists.

Pablo says, “You oat! Omm ron!”

All the boys laugh, except for Frank, who is on his way to the batting cage.



Frank spits on the ground just like Coach Randy. He looks at Pablo's feet and sneers, "Nice shoes, kid." He goes to the gate, pulls it closed, and walks to the plate.