

# GRAPHIC NOVEL

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**GRAPHIC NOVEL****Background Summary**

In 1900, hundreds of thousands of American children under the age of 12 worked in factories. Concerned citizens lobbied their state legislatures until laws were passed stating that children had to be at least 12 years old before they could work in factories and that they could work no more than 10 hours a day. Employers generally ignored these laws. The laws also did not cover the more than one million children employed in agriculture. In 1916, the Keating-Owens Act, which banned the interstate sale of goods produced by child labor, was passed. It was struck down as unconstitutional two years later. In the 1920s, President Calvin Coolidge's administration overturned the remaining laws regulating child labor and wages for women. It was not until 1938, when Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act, that child labor in the United States was finally banned.

Unfortunately, millions of children in developing countries around the world work long hours for little pay in dangerous, unhealthy environments. Many of the products they make are sold in the United States. They work instead of going to school because the wages in their countries are so low that several members of their families must work in order to provide food, clothing, and shelter.

This graphic novel parallels a day in the life of an American child, who happens to be celebrating his birthday, with that of a Mexican child who works in the factory where the American child's birthday gift is made. The drawings on the page are arranged differently from what you are accustomed to seeing. The artist has arranged the drawings so that the top half of each page depicts the activities of the American child and the bottom half of each page shows what the Mexican child is doing on the same day. The Spanish dialogue used in the panels about the Mexican child is translated for you on the following page. The story follows each child through the events of his/her day. The American child is driven to school where he spends the day learning and interacting with friends. The Mexican child walks to work, gets only a short break for lunch, and spends long hard hours under the watchful eyes of a critical supervisor. Both children come from warm loving families. The novel illustrates the difference between the life of a child in the United States and the life of a child in a country without child labor laws.

**Activities****Illustrating**

After students have read the novel, ask them if they like the technique the artist used. Ask them to write a paragraph answering the following questions: *Why did the artist arrange the pages this way? What effect is he trying to achieve? Is this graphic novel effective in telling the story?*

**Opinion Writing**

Ask students to write a short paper on the subject of child labor and to include their opinions on this issue. Following are a few questions they might consider: *Should American companies who manufacture products in developing countries do more to prevent the exploitation of children? Should they pay their adult employees a higher wage so that their employees' children do not have to work?*