


# Themes *in* *Reading*

VOLUME 



A M U L T I C U L T U R A L C O L L E C T I O N

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Acknowledgments begin on page 152, which is to be considered an extension of this copyright page.

**ISBN: 0-89061-887-9E (hardbound)**  
**ISBN: 0-89061-812-7E (softbound)**

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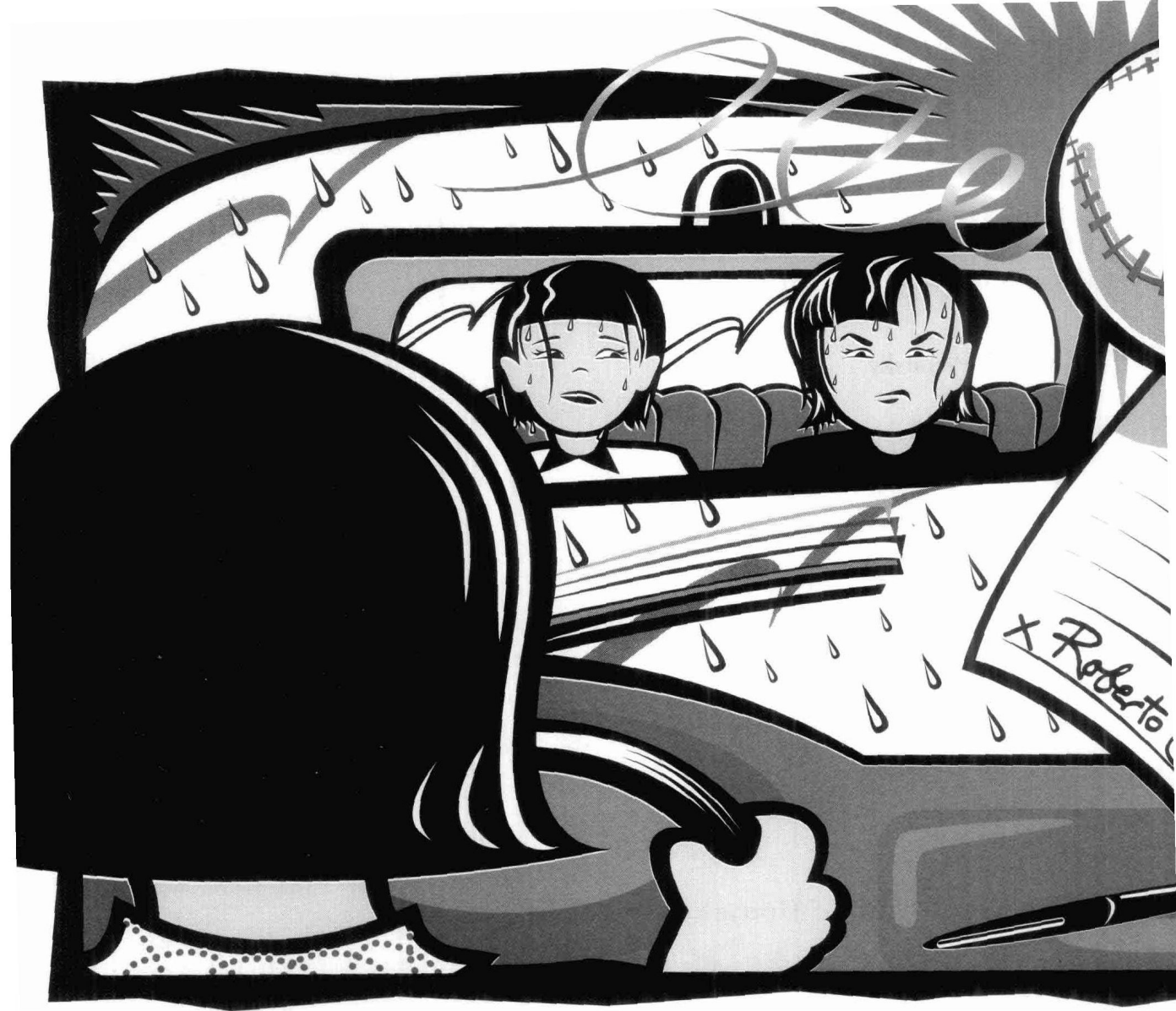
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# Themes *in* *Reading* VOLUME ②

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A DIVISION OF NTC/CONTEMPORARY  
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# Turning Points

A turning point is a change so important that everything after that time is very different than it was before. Turning points in history change countries and civilizations. Personal turning points change the course of people's lives.

A turning point may occur because a person decides to make a change, such as moving to a new city or getting married. Often, though, people have no control over events that mark turning points in their lives. Whether planned or

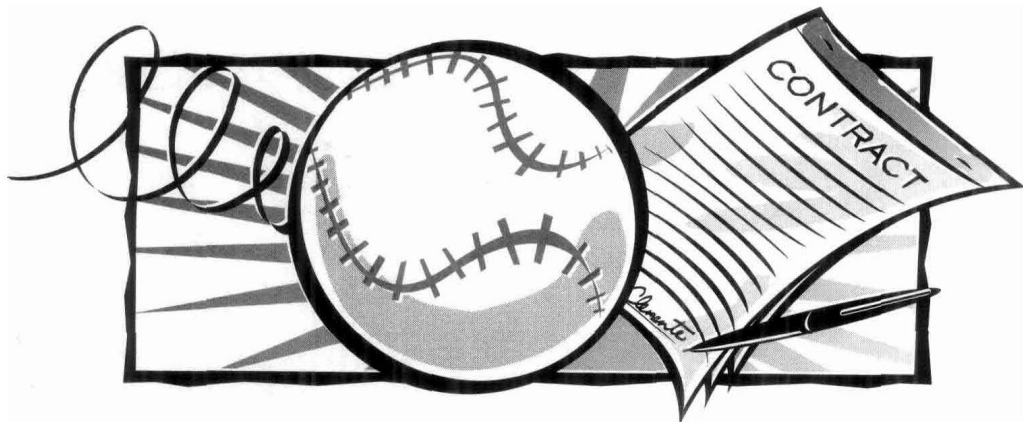




**unplanned, turning points cause people to make choices that affect their futures.**

**As the selections in this unit illustrate, a person may not even realize at the time that a turning point has occurred.**

**Think about some turning points in your life. How did they affect you? How was your life different after each one?**



# Clemente at Bat

Paul Robert Walker

**The road to becoming a major-league baseball player can take many twists and turns. How does Roberto Clemente show he's up to the challenge?**



1 Campanis stood on the playing field at Sixto Escobar Stadium and looked at the semicircle of eager young men waiting for his instructions.

Many of them were still teenagers, standing nervously in the baggy uniforms of local amateur teams. There were 72 in all. And every one of them wanted to be a big-league ballplayer.

"All right," Campanis said, "you all know why you're here. Señor Zorilla and the Santurce baseball club have been kind enough to invite me down here to take a look. There's no reason to be nervous. Just do your best and show me what you've got."

Campanis was a scout for the Brooklyn Dodgers. For the past three years, he'd been traveling to Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic looking for talented players. It was 1952, and American baseball was changing. Five years earlier, Jackie Robinson had become the first black man to play on a major-league team. In 1951, a black player from Cuba named Minnie Minoso starred for the

Chicago White Sox. Suddenly, the dark-skinned boys of the Puerto Rican barrios<sup>1</sup> had a reason to dream.

<sup>1</sup> neighborhoods in  
Spanish-speaking cities

“Everybody in the outfield,” Campanis ordered. “I want to see you throw to the plate.”

As the boys jogged out into center field, Campanis took his position in foul territory. Beside him was a coach with a clipboard. Each of the boys wore a number pinned to the back of his shirt. On the coach’s clipboard was a list of their names and numbers.

Campanis watched as boy after boy launched long lobs from deep center field. These local tryouts were usually a waste of time. Still, he thought, you never know. Suddenly one of the boys caught his attention. A skinny kid leaned back in deep center field and fired a perfect strike to the plate. Al Campanis could hardly believe his eyes.

“*Uno más!*”<sup>2</sup> he shouted.

<sup>2</sup> Spanish: one more

Once again, the boy cocked his right arm and fired. The ball flew on a perfect line and smacked the hard leather of the catcher’s glove.

“Who is that kid?” Campanis asked.

The coach standing beside him looked at the number on the boy’s back and compared it with the list on his clipboard. “Clemente,” he said. “Roberto Clemente.”

When all the boys had taken their throws, Mr. Campanis took out his stopwatch and timed them in the 60-yard dash. The world’s record was 6.1 seconds. In his full baseball uniform, Roberto ran the distance in 6.4 seconds. Once again, Al Campanis could not believe his eyes.

*“Uno más,”* he said. Roberto walked back to the starting line and ran again. Campanis stared at the stopwatch in amazement—6.4 seconds twice in a row.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” Campanis said to the rest of the boys. “You may go. Clemente, I want to see you hit.”

Roberto stepped into the batting cage. Campanis watched as the skinny kid in the baggy uniform smashed line drives all over the field. After a few minutes, the scout noticed that Roberto was standing too far from the plate. He ordered the pitcher to keep the ball outside.

The way he’s standing, Campanis thought, he’ll never be able to reach it.

The pitcher leaned back and fired a high outside fastball. Roberto swung with both feet off the ground and smashed the ball up the middle.

“What do you think?”

Al Campanis turned to look at the man who had spoken. It was Señor Marín, the man who had first discovered Roberto’s talent. Both Campanis and Marín knew that Roberto was major-league material. But Campanis did his best to hide his excitement. Roberto was still in high school, and the Dodgers could not yet legally sign him to a contract.

“He has great tools,” Campanis said, “but he needs polish.”

*“Caramba!* What a pair of hands!” Pedrín Zorilla eyed the skinny, quiet boy standing in the living room of

Zorilla's beachfront home in the town of Manatí. It was a few months after the tryout in Sixto Escobar Stadium. Roberto Clemente had just turned eighteen.

"I tell you, Pedrín, he's a gem. An unpolished gem," said Señor Marín.

Zorilla continued to stare at Roberto's hands. Zorilla was the owner of the Santurce Crabbers, one of the top teams in the Puerto Rican winter league. He had seen many great ballplayers in his time, but he had never seen a young boy with such long, powerful fingers.

"Shots, Pedrín. You remember the tryout. He hit nothing but line shots."

Zorilla looked at his friend, Señor Marín. Then he looked again at Roberto Clemente. "A tryout is one thing," he said. "A game is another. I would like to see him play."

A few days later, Pedrín Zorilla watched Roberto in action with the Ferdinand Juncos team in the Puerto Rican amateur league. In the second inning, Roberto knocked in two runs with a long double. Two innings later, he followed with a 400-foot triple. In the seventh, he smashed another double. In the top of the ninth, his perfect throw from center field nailed a runner at the plate.

"Well, Marín," said Señor Zorilla, "we can give him a \$400 bonus and maybe \$40.00 a week until he learns to wear a uniform."

Roberto sat silently on Señor Zorilla's flagstone patio. It was a warm sunny day, and a fresh breeze was blowing off the Atlantic. Although he listened respectfully as the two older men discussed his contract, inside Roberto

was bubbling over with excitement. A professional baseball player! He could hardly believe his ears.

“What should I do?” Roberto asked as Señor Marín drove him to Barrio San Antón. “What should I do?”

The older man watched the road ahead as he considered Roberto’s question. It had been three years since he first saw Roberto hitting tin cans in Barrio San Antón. He had done his best to help the young boy develop his natural talent. He drove him to and from the games. He praised him when he played well, and he encouraged him when he did not. He cared for Roberto as if he were his own son. But this was a decision he did not have the right to make.

“We’ll discuss it with your father,” he said finally. “We’ll talk it over, and he’ll decide.”

That evening, Don Melchor looked over the piece of paper in his hand. “Very interesting,” he said. “I must think about this.” Don Melchor showed Roberto’s contract to one of his neighbors. “They are offering Roberto \$400 to play baseball,” he said.

During his many years of hard work in the sugar fields, Don Melchor had never found time to learn how to read. He listened carefully as the neighbor read the whole contract out loud. “What do you think?” he asked.

“When they offer \$400,” the neighbor replied, “it means he is worth much more. Don’t sign a thing.”

The next day, Don Melchor and Señor Marín went to the house of Pedrín Zorilla. Don Melchor looked around the beautiful living room. There are many

fine things in this house, he thought. This Señor Zorilla is a wealthy man.

"I think you can give more money for my boy," said Don Melchor. "He is a fine player."

Pedrin Zorilla looked at the wiry black man who stood before him. Don Melchor Clemente was 71 years old, but he had the strength of a much younger man. Zorilla admired Don Melchor's faith in the talents of his son. But he also knew that \$400 was a good bonus for a Puerto Rican player. Many boys signed for \$100 or less.

"Frankly," said Señor Zorilla, "if you want more money, I have no interest in him. I think he's good, but he's got no record to prove it."

That night, the Clemente family sat around the dinner table. They were all very excited about Roberto's chance to play professional baseball. "Don't worry," Don Melchor said. "They will offer more. We will just have to wait."

Roberto stared down at the roast pork on his plate. He did not feel very hungry. All his life he had dreamed about playing professional baseball. Now he was offered a chance. What difference did a few dollars make? Slowly, he looked up from the plate and directly into his father's eyes.

"Papá," he said, "I don't want to wait. I want to play."

Don Melchor stared at Roberto. In eighteen years, his youngest son had never spoken to him like this. It was always, "Yes, Papá" or "Your blessing, Papá."



For a moment, Don Melchor was angry. “What do you mean you do not want to wait? If I say you wait, then you wait.”

“But, Papá,” Roberto replied, “you always say a man must work for what he needs. Their offer is fair. When I prove myself, then they will pay me more.”

Don Melchor silently considered Roberto’s words. No, he thought, there is no reason for anger. Roberto has learned his lessons well. It is good for a boy to become a man.

“All right,” he said seriously, “tell the man I will sign.”

Roberto sat on the hard wooden bench and held his head in his hands. The Santurce Crabbers were playing the team from Ponce, a city in the south of Puerto Rico. The Crabbers were leading 7–5 in the bottom of the eighth inning, but Roberto was not very happy. It was already two months into the season, and so far he had only played in a few games as a pinch hitter or a late-inning defensive<sup>3</sup> replacement.

<sup>3</sup> the type of sports  
player whose job is to  
prevent the opposite  
team from scoring

If this is professional baseball, Roberto thought, I would be better off buying a ticket and watching it from the grandstand. At least there I’d have a comfortable seat.

Santurce had many fine players from the major leagues. The Puerto Rican fans take their baseball very seriously, and Santurce was fighting for the league championship. There was not much opportunity for an

eighteen-year-old rookie who was still in high school. But this didn't make Roberto feel any better. He was good at playing baseball. He was not very good at sitting on the bench.

That night, Roberto spoke to Señor Marín as he drove him home from the game. "If I don't play tomorrow," he said, "I quit."

"Chico!" said Señor Marín, "what are you talking about?"

"I mean it," said Roberto. "I am here to play, not to sit."

"Hmmm," said Señor Marín. "I will speak to Señor Zorilla."

"The young one wants to play."

"You know how I feel about rookies," said Pedrín Zorilla. "We have many great pitchers in this league. I tell you, Marín, a boy like Clemente strikes out three or four times in a row and suddenly he starts asking questions. 'Can I hit? Can I really play?' It is important he does not give himself the wrong answers."

"But the boy is desperate,"<sup>4</sup> said Señor Marín.

<sup>4</sup> has little or no hope

"You cannot keep him on the bench."

"Listen, Marín," said Señor Zorilla. "I am the man who pays his salary. Clemente plays when I say he plays."

That night, Señor Marín drove Roberto to the ballpark. "Take it easy, Chico," said the older man. "Your day will come. Señor Zorilla says he will play you soon."