

LEVELED BOOK • Z

# A Place for Wild Things



MULTI  
level  
T•W•Z

Written by Marvin Bird and Rus Buyok  
Illustrated by Carol Heyer

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## Focus Question

What is Alejandro's problem, and how does he hope to solve it?

## Words to Know

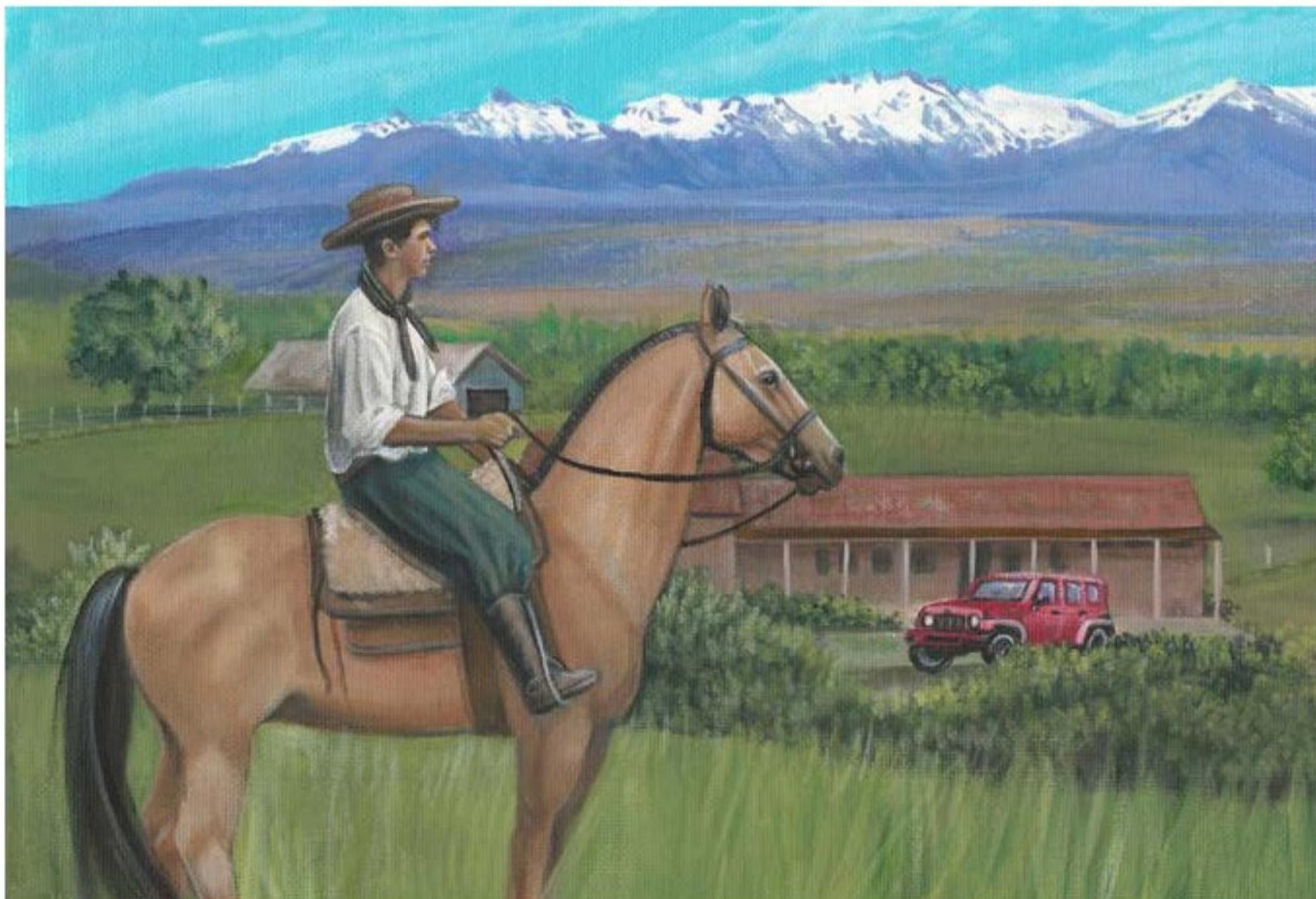
bombacha  
pantaloons  
demeanor  
desertification  
dissipated  
estancia  
facón

foreboding  
gauchos  
guanaco  
mate  
Patagonian  
tradition

A Place for Wild Things  
Level Z Leveled Book  
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### Correlation

LEVEL Z	
Fountas & Pinnell	U-V
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	50



Alejandro was returning from a long day riding the **estancia** with the **gauchos** when he spotted a luxury SUV parked in front of the main house. The heavy wooden door swung open, and his mother, Melissa, appeared alongside a tall, fair-skinned man Alejandro didn't recognize.

"Please consider the offer, Señora Ortega. I'll return in two weeks to discuss our future plans," the man said with a broad smile. "Together we can save this beautiful place." New cars and British accents were unusual on the rugged **Patagonian** steppe, so Alejandro was curious.

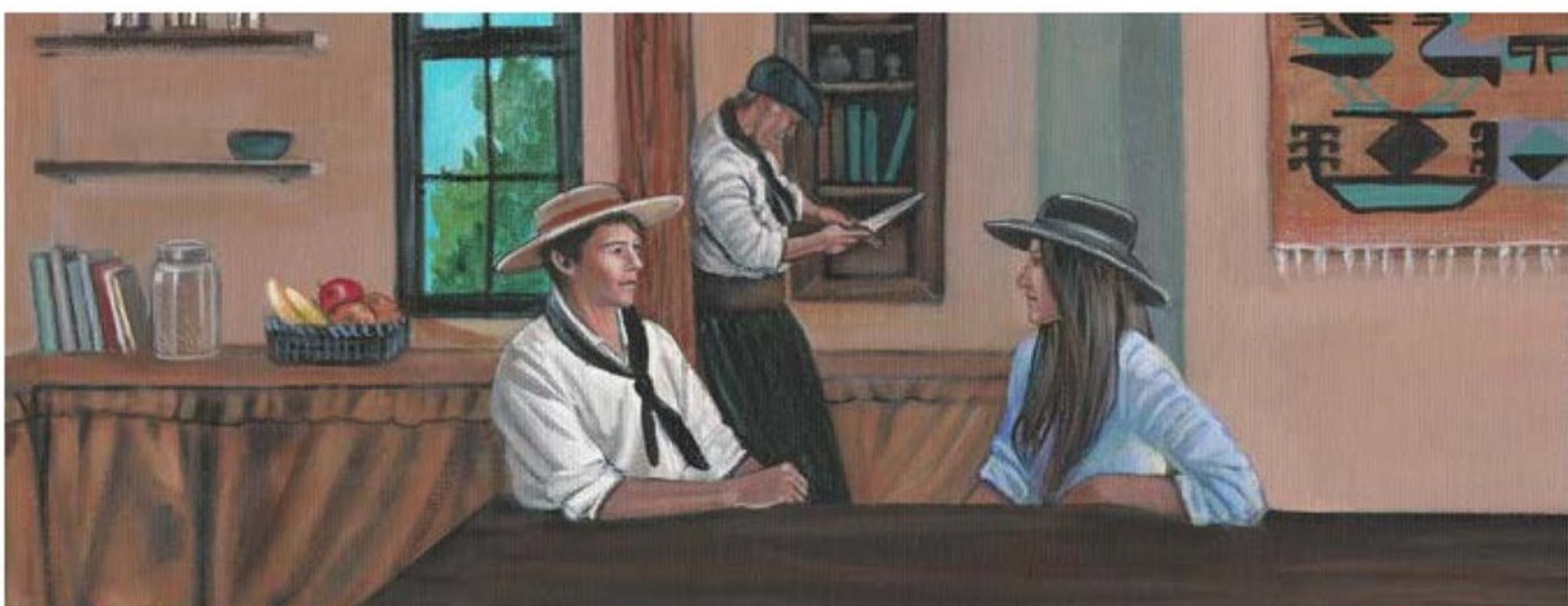
"Who was that?" he asked his mother as the SUV sped away in a cloud of dust along the old road.

"Someone with an idea," his mother replied as she turned to go inside. "Please go find Martín—we all need to have a talk."

She had never spoken to him in that tone before, and Alejandro couldn't shake a sense of **foreboding** as he searched for the old gaucho.

"What is it?" Martín asked when Alejandro found him. The boy could only shrug and start walking to the house, where they found his mother at the dining table. Martín leaned against a post and sharpened the long blade of his **facón**.

"I have received an offer to sell the estancia to Mr. Somerset on behalf of Eco-Tours International," Melissa began. Alejandro was surprised, not only by the offer but also that his mother was including him in the conversation. Since his father's death two years ago, she had relied solely on Martín. Alejandro fought back a small smile.



“I’ve always hoped to maintain our land in the true gaucho **tradition** and keep it in the family, as it has been for generations, but we have to face the reality that we’re still losing money. I just don’t know how much longer we can keep the place going.”

Alejandro’s heart dropped as he thought of his father, who had always said the estancia—the land, people, and animals—was a family. He couldn’t bear to think of losing another family member.

“What about the new rotation patterns and the smaller flocks?” Martín asked.

Alejandro’s mother gave the gaucho a comforting smile. “They’ve helped—but it’s not enough, and it may be too little, too late. The land is overgrazed.”

With a sigh, she explained, “Eco-Tours International wants to buy the land, build a resort, and create a—how did he put it?—‘a destination for travelers to experience the legendary gaucho way of life and the stunning beauty of Patagonia.’”

“Not travelers—tourists!” Martín almost spat the words.

"You thought the same of me when Gerson brought me down from Santiago, but I was in awe of you gauchos, with your traditional berets, **bombacha pantaloons**, and leather boots," Melissa said. Martín grunted and focused on his facón, his expression the closest to blushing that Alejandro had ever seen. "They just want to experience a bit of this culture, and I can't say I blame them."

For a moment, Melissa had a faraway look in her eye, but it disappeared as she snapped back to the reality of their situation.

"Other estancias have already gone under from mismanagement, **desertification**, or people just giving up," she continued. "This is a hard life." She rubbed her forehead and sighed. "Somerset said Alejandro and I could stay on for five years if we wanted, with me assisting with the management."

"What would we do after that?" Alejandro asked, trying to keep his anxiety in check. "What would happen to Martín and the other gauchos? Some of them have been here more than thirty years!"



“I’m not sure,” his mother said almost in a whisper.

“But Dad said—” Alejandro stopped himself, as the words caused his mother to wince as though someone had struck her. He didn’t need to say the estancia was family—she knew, and this was just as agonizing for her.

“Do we have to decide right now?” Martín asked.

“Two weeks,” Melissa replied.

“Then we have two weeks to find a solution,” Alejandro said, trying to sound upbeat. Even the thought of selling the ranch felt like a stab in the gut from a facón.

“All right, then.” Martín’s expression was unreadable as he sheathed his blade. “Don’t be late tomorrow, Alejandro.”

When the grizzled man was gone, Melissa stood and went into the kitchen, somehow looking older to Alejandro.

“We’ll figure this out, Mamá,” he said.

\* \* \*



The next few days were filled with the hardest work Alejandro had ever done. He saddled horses, herded sheep, fixed fencing, and hauled feed. He befriended an old sheepdog named Lucinda that followed him around like a long-lost sister. In the hot afternoons, he would listen to the gauchos sing and tell stories while passing around **mate** prepared over a small fire. In the evenings, he would sit with his mother, who would ask, “What did you learn today?”

Alejandro excitedly told her everything, but when he was done, the fatigue would creep back into his body, and a well of sorrow would begin to fill his heart. When his mother asked the question, he wanted to say he had learned how to save them all from this horrible uncertainty and loss.

On the fourth day, Alejandro and Martín came across a **guanaco** with its leg stuck in one of the fences. The animal was terrified and exhausted, weakly thrashing its long neck and thin legs. Martín took the lead, creeping slowly, making soothing sounds, his callused palms spread close to his body. Alejandro did his best to imitate the old gaucho's **demeanor** from a few steps behind.

Martín kneeled beside the animal, which was breathing heavily and watching him with large brown eyes. As Martín reached out with a small pair of wire cutters and snipped a few times, he talked to the animal calmly, like a doctor explaining a procedure to a child. The guanaco, sensing the tension release in its leg, climbed up and limped away as fast as it could.



"These are wild animals," Martín said as he repaired the hole. "They don't understand fences. In the old days, we didn't have any fences on the estancia. We followed the flock all over the mountain. It was harder to protect the sheep, but at least there was always enough grass."

Alejandro was silent. Something churned in his mind, but he couldn't figure out what it was exactly.

That afternoon, as they drank mate, Alejandro listened as a gaucho told them about seeing a large puma stalking one of the flocks. "I'd never seen one so close to the main buildings," he said. "I frightened it away with a few shots."

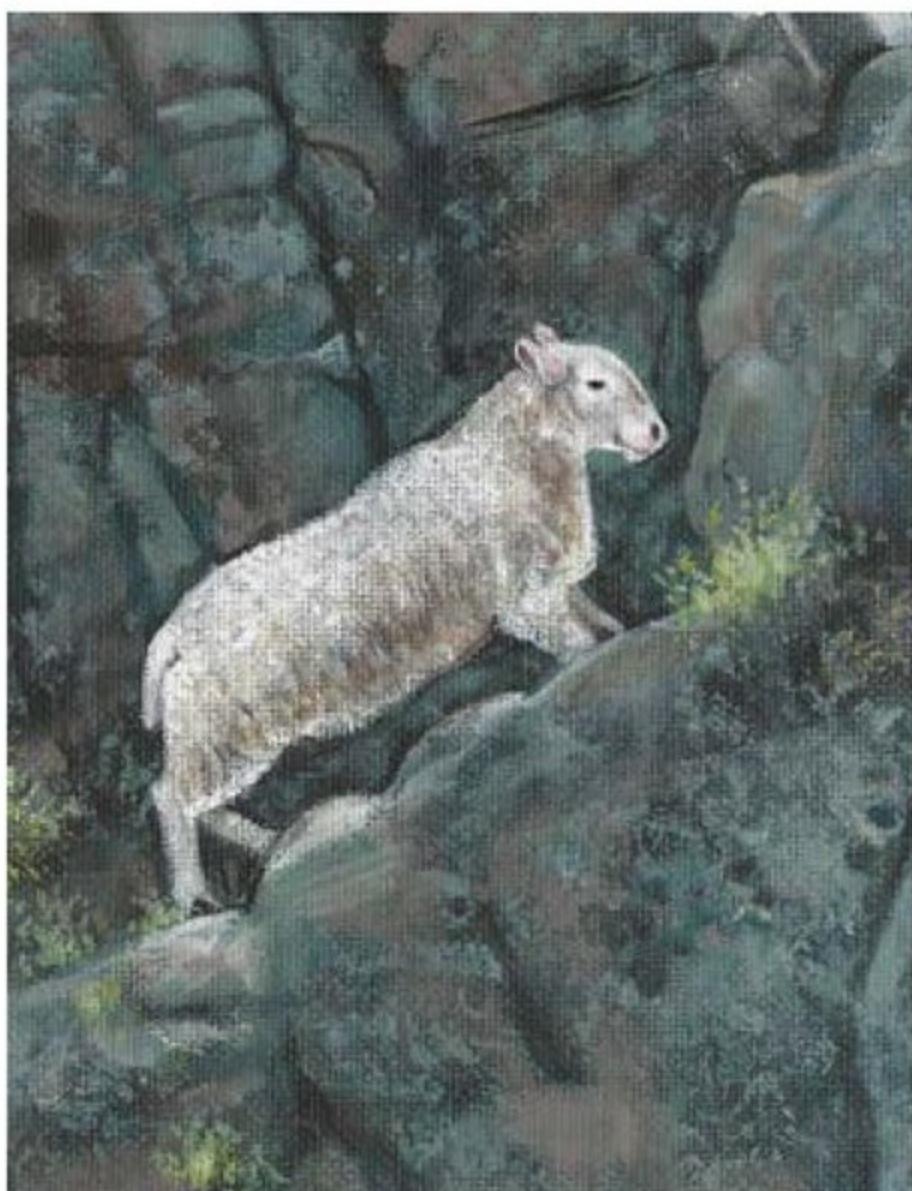
"So you missed," another gaucho said, and they all laughed.

"She's hungry," Martín said quietly. "The changes to the steppe affect us all."

When Alejandro's mother asked him what he had learned that day, he told her about the guanaco and the puma, but he didn't feel the usual excitement. Something felt strange, as if his brain were trying to tie together two wires that weren't quite long enough.

The feeling **dissipated** over the next few days as Alejandro's mind and body became engrossed in caring for the estancia. Each night the well of sorrow in his heart filled more and more. They did not have much time left.

Five days before Mr. Somerset was due to return, Martín sent Alejandro on his own to seek out a sheep that had wandered off while the flock was moved to a new pasture.



Alejandro set off on horseback with Lucinda in the direction Martín had indicated. After searching along the fence lines, he caught a glimpse of something that looked like a sheep scrabbling through an opening in a rocky outcropping some distance away.

"How did she get on the other side of that fence?" he asked Lucinda, who barked and panted happily. He left his horse at the fence to graze and walked the rest of the way, Lucinda bounding back and forth and becoming more excited.

When they reached the rocky outcropping, Lucinda refused to go through the opening. "Fine," Alejandro said, "you wait here." The passage was narrow, but he could easily squeeze through by turning to the side. He quickly realized what had attracted the sheep: a small area of deep green grass dotted with wildflowers.

The sheep was reluctant to leave her feast, but Alejandro managed to coax her through the passage, where Lucinda barked, ready to care for her charge. Before he followed, he stopped to pick one of the flowers—a yellow-tongued porcelain orchid. He remembered his father bringing them to his mother after working on the estancia. Back then, the orchids had been much more common, but these were the first Alejandro had seen since his father died.





He was about to leave when he noticed movement out of the corner of his eye. A puma stood on a ledge overlooking the patch of grass, its figure lithe and regal, and stared at Alejandro with yellow eyes. It paced back and forth, never taking its eyes off the boy.

Alejandro returned the hunter's gaze, clutching the flower in his hand like a weapon, slowly backing toward the opening. Then, as if resigning itself to something, the cat lay down with a low grunt, its eyes lazily half closing. He almost felt sorry for the beast. It had been stalking the sheep and was ready for a meal, but he had ruined it. He squeezed his way through the tunnel as quickly as he could, not waiting to find out if the puma was willing to attack a human.



Lucinda had herded the sheep to the fence where the horse grazed. Alejandro felt comforted by the sight as he made his way toward the animals, but his heart still thundered in his chest.

Placing the flower in his pouch and taking a deep breath, he lifted the bleating sheep and then himself over the fence. On the other side, looking back at the rocks that hid the puma and the orchids, he finally felt safe again.

Alejandro climbed into the saddle and nudged his horse forward, but he couldn't push the blooming pasture and the puma from his mind. They were wild, strong, and healthy. The estancia was no longer a place for wild things, but instead a land controlled, supervised, and managed. The fence had protected him just as it protected the sheep, but the fence was also the problem. It was keeping the sheep from the rich pastures beyond.

Alejandro imagined an estancia with no fences. Some of the sheep might fall victim to predators like the puma, but the flock as a whole would survive and grow stronger. Watching Lucinda herd the sheep toward the flock far in the distance, he realized that he could tell his mother that he had truly learned something today.

Alejandro urged his horse into a gallop. He had to talk to Martín and the other gauchos. It was time to return to the old ways. They could fix this. There was still time.



## Glossary

<b>bombacha</b>	long pants with baggy legs gathered at the ankle, typically worn in Argentina and Uruguay for working outdoors (p. 6)
<b>pantaloons (n.)</b>	
<b>demeanor (n.)</b>	the way or manner in which a person behaves (p. 9)
<b>desertification (n.)</b>	the process by which land that once was able to produce a lot of vegetation becomes a desert (p. 6)
<b>dissipated (v.)</b>	disappeared by spreading out or separating into parts (p. 11)
<b>estancia (n.)</b>	a South American farm or ranch used for raising livestock (p. 3)
<b>facón (n.)</b>	a large knife used in South America by gauchos (p. 4)
<b>foreboding (n.)</b>	a sense that something bad will happen; a bad feeling about future events (p. 4)
<b>gauchos (n.)</b>	cowboys of the South American grassy plains (p. 3)
<b>guanaco (n.)</b>	a South American mammal with a long neck and soft brown fur that is related to llamas and camels (p. 9)
<b>mate (n.)</b>	a traditional beverage of South America that is made from steeping yerba mate leaves in hot water (p. 8)
<b>Patagonian (adj.)</b>	of or related to the barren plateau region in South America covering the southern parts of Argentina and Chile (p. 3)
<b>tradition (n.)</b>	a belief or custom that is passed down from year to year and generation to generation (p. 5)

# A Place for Wild Things

*A Reading A-Z Level Z Leveled Book*

*Word Count: 1,853*

## Connections

### Writing

Make a list of the glossary words in the order in which they appear in the story.

Write your own passage that uses all of the words in that order.

### Social Studies

Research the Patagonian region of South America. Create a trifold brochure that gives details about the region's location, climate, and culture.

The logo for Reading A-Z features the word "Reading" in a large, bold, red sans-serif font. The letter "R" has a small sun-like icon above it, consisting of a yellow circle with radiating lines. To the right of "Reading" is the letter "A-Z" in a smaller, bold, red sans-serif font.

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