

The Distance Between Us

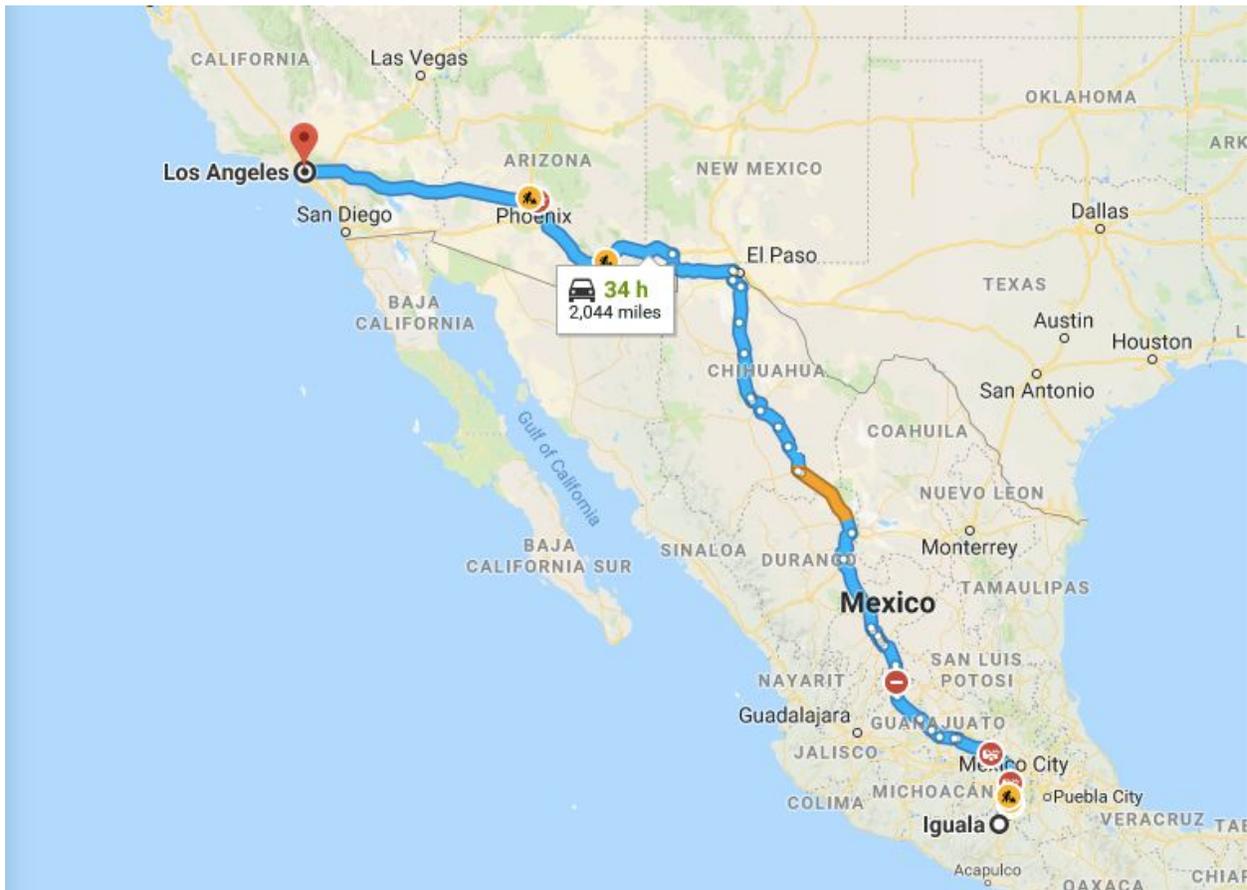
A Memoir by Reyna Grande
Presentation by Melina Telles



Photo from www.reynagrande.com

Life

Reyna Grande, 42, is a Mexican author who immigrated from her hometown of Iguala de la Independencia, Guerrero, Mexico to Los Angeles, California, USA when she was nine years old. In addition to being an author, Grande also taught and has become a motivational speaker throughout her lifetime. Her most popular novels are *Across a Hundred Mountains*, *Dancing With Butterflies*, and *The Distance Between Us*. She was a first generation student to be the first in her family to graduate with a college degree. She received her Bachelor's of Arts in Creative Writing and Film/Video from the University of California Santa Cruz and received her Master's Degree in Fine Arts from Antioch University. Her most notable awards are the *International Literacy Association of Children's Books Award* in 2017, the *Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature* in 2015, and *One of the Best Adult Books 4 Teens* in 2012. Her webpage is www.reynagrande.com.



A picture of how far Reyna's father was from their hometown, Iguala, Guerrero. Screenshot from: www.maps.google.com

Synopsis

Immigration is an inevitable topic when discussing the US and its' inhabitants. In California, often times, it is people from Latin American countries who come to escape economic hardship, political hardship, or both and this often includes the sacrifice of separation of parents from their children.

Reyna Grande experienced first hand what it meant to have a parent in "El Otro Lado"(a term that translates to "The Other Side", referring to the United States). Her father had left Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico when she was two years old, and when she was four, her mother decided to join her father in Los Angeles, California to accomplish their goal of having a dream home for their three children Magloria, Carlos, and Reyna. But a dream home was only a *dream* when their mother returned with bad news. Having left the children behind, the three siblings experienced public humiliy, a cold shoulder from close family members, and the effects of parental absence. All the suffering had ended when their mother came back—or had it?

Once the family was separated, the distance between the family wasn't only in physical miles, but continued as an emotional one when having to pick a side to live on and who they would live with. In Mexico, most people's perception of families who have a family member in the US assume life is perfect, but how do you explain the long term effects of a broken family as the ultimate sacrifice for the *American Dream*?

Significant Quotes

Quote from page 28-29.

"It was Mami who talked, who gave us the worst news of all..."

After six months of being separated from their parents, Reyna and her siblings received news that they'd have a new sibling -- one who was born in the United States. The commentary Reyna provides allows readers to understand how the siblings felt abandoned by their parents. Often times, there are parents who start "new lives" in the US and don't go back to their homeland to actually see the children they left behind, grow up. Reyna and her siblings stayed with their grandmother who dictated what they could and could not do or say. This quote demonstrated the sense of abandonment, hopelessness for the return of their parents, and the loneliness they experienced at their grandmother's home.

Quote from page 118-120

"I am not coming back here, kids," Papi said.

At this point in the text, Reyna's father had returned from the United States, only to give them the news that he was not coming back. The children were living with their maternal grandmother and their mother was not caring for them on a daily basis. Reyna realized the "Man Behind the Glass" was before her eyes and they did not want him to leave. In the previous chapter, Mago reproached her father telling him he didn't need to leave because their dream house was finally made. The quote shows the powerful meaning the United States had for their father; the US was a symbol for the freedom, the economic stability, and the opportunity to prosper, but for the children it was now a place that they had no access to if their father left. In this scene, the children begged their father to take them so they would no longer be separated. This scene is part of the rising climax that will eventually take them on to the next phase in their life.

Quote from page 292-293

"You see. That's how much she cares."

This quote is found toward the end of the memoir where we get a glimpse at the physical abuse the siblings experienced. Once Mago was old enough to work and maintain herself in the US, she decided to move out of her father's house, but he made it clear that if she left, she no longer existed. The significance behind her father's anger could make a reader ponder about why Natalio would act this way. Was he still trying to recuperate the time he had missed with his kids and want to keep them in the house longer? Did he just want to have control over the household?

The part I decided to type above shows how Natalio wanted to make a point he was the only one who cared for his children while also making others who were significant to Reyna seem like they'd abandoned her in a second. Natalio had finished beating Reyna because seconds before she was making a rebellious act to meet her sister (who he prohibited her to see) in the car. Mago couldn't have prevented her father's beating, but this scene also emphasizes her father's alcohol abuse, her stepmother's submissiveness to her father, and what appears to be the excessive protection of Reyna.

How do I plan on teaching this book?

The immigration of children is common, especially in California. To guide the class into an open safe environment free of judgement, I would start off by asking questions such as: How many of you speak another language? How many of you know someone who is from another country? How many of you are from a different country? What country are you from?

For those who answer that they aren't from the US, I would ask if they'd like to share where they are from and why his/her family decided to come to the US. I would continue by introducing how many countries there are, what it meant to be in economic or political hardship, which are the two common reasons families immigrate, a description of the American Dream, and open the classroom discussion up about why it's important to see the diversity in a classroom and why it might be that others come to the United States. The book also has to do with effects of hiding in the shadows because of the legal status, physical and emotional abuse and the effects of absence of parental figures, which teens could potentially relate to if they were experiencing this in their household.

Keeping in mind this book is for the ages of 10-14, an assignment I would have students complete before reading the book is assigning each student a country and having students report on the country's education costs, culture, language, and the statistics of that country's presence in the US(ex. what percentage of the US population is Ethiopian).

This memoir would go under the category of "Books about Courage and Survival" in *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning*. If I were teaching this to students who are 14 years and older, I would discuss what emotional abuse, physical abuse, and trauma is. The topic of immigration could elaborate by asking students about their knowledge of it, what it means to be deported, a conversation about unlawful crossing of the border and the reasoning behind it that considers it as a crime.

Taking into consideration that a student in the class may be experiencing some of the forms of abuse, a general announcement that this book may include disturbing scenes that happened to someone in real life could help him/her find courage to find help. As a teacher, I would announce I would be open to discussing any experience as confidential. It is a courageous act to leave the country you were born in, and it is even more difficult to survive somewhere you are completely foreign to. When Reyna and her siblings arrived, they had to adapt to the language and the problems they saw in their neighborhood and between their families.

Furthermore, the parts that create a story are perfect in *The Distance Between Us*. Nonetheless, I would remind students we are reading a memoir, but it does have the elements of a story. A handout with the parts of a story and their definitions could serve students by allowing them to understand what a climax, resolution, characters, plot, setting, is and assigning them to create a visual timeline of Reyna Grande's departure from Iguala to Los Angeles looked like.

To wrap up the book, my class would have an open discussion about the most important thing they learned from the book or their research, how they felt, and how the book ties into everyone's lives. I would have a small exam on the definitions of a story — where they could include examples of the story to help them remember terms — and what the difference between a

novel and a memoir are, but how the elements of a story remain the same.

Text Complexity

Quantitative

According to Lexile.com, the age range *The Distance Between Us* is for 8-12 year old students. It is expected that students will comprehend 75% of the book. The Renaissance Accelerated Reader Bookfinder gives the book three and a half stars, qualifies it as appropriate for grades 9-12, and the book level is 5.4 in difficulty.

Qualitative

In reference to *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, the exeter qualities this memoir would go under includes themes that allow students to respond emotionally and academically through the exposure of the personal experiences of the characters, personal experiences are included in the text that can allow students to see themselves reflected in the book, and the quick pace, revelations, and tension that allows student to remain hooked onto the book. As for literary appreciation, this book would suit middle school and high school students. Respectively, this book could be one to help students find themselves in a book and in life if they are experiencing similar situations and learning beyond themselves with different perspectives of people their age and social issues that are common in the US.

Student could be motivated to read this book by understanding what it is about before beginning the whole reading process. Bringing up the essential topics covered in the book could help students comprehend the point of view of the characters before hand. There are a few Spanish phrases in the text, so that would require student to have access to the translation of these terms. As a teacher, I could provide copies of the list. The structure of the novel isn't difficult to comprehend, but could be surprising to students who aren't knowledgeable about what divorce or a separated family could be. The text does not excessively demand the knowledge of cultural celebrations, but could require researching poverty and its' effects in Mexico. It is a book that demonstrates the struggles of Latin Americans who immigrate.

Complexity

The language used is easy to understand and could be a reading practice for students who are still learning English. I was able to read this book in a day, so it wasn't easy to put the book down. The plot of the story was engaging in every step. The quantity of the memoir matches it's quality when it comes to plot development and the reading practice students can get.

