



Go Big Read

UW–Madison Common Book Program

Suggested Discussion Questions for Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey*

1. Enrique traveled to the United States in 2000, and Nazario first shared Enrique's story as a newspaper series in 2002. There are many indicators of change since that time, such as the authorized construction of over 800 miles of fencing at the US/Mexico border and the large increase in drug-related homicides in Mexico. Most recently, an article in *The New York Times* on July 6, 2011 indicates how changes in both the United States and Mexico have contributed to the drop in illegal immigration from Mexico, and perhaps from Central America as well. The article mentions:
 - improved opportunities, as well as a much lower birth rate in Mexico
 - increased legislation in the U.S. that makes unauthorized status here more difficult
 - a large increase in the use of agricultural visas to legally provide work in the U.S.
 - an increase in cost to cross over to the U.S.Had the events of the book taken place in the last year or so, do you think these factors would have affected Enrique's decision to come to the United States? Would Lourdes have come?
2. Recalling *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (the 2010 Go Big Read book selection), some would say that Nazario, like Rebecca Skloot, takes narrative liberties. For instance, Nazario reconstructs conversations based on her interviews with Enrique, his family, and the people he encounters along his journey. What are the strengths and dangers of this kind of approach? How does Nazario's approach or writing process differ from Skloot's? What about Nazario's background gives her empathy for her characters?
3. The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that in 2010 there were 11 million unauthorized immigrants in the United States, with 100,000 in Wisconsin. Without sharing names, of course, are you aware of these immigrants in Wisconsin? Had you considered their path to Wisconsin before reading this book? Do you think you'll view them differently now?
4. Mexican officials' reactions to immigrants range from pragmatic to brutal. For example, Nazario tells us of a small town mayor who weighs the costs to the government of burying Enrique if he goes untreated vs. driving him to a small-town hospital where the government will foot the bill for his care. Police take bribes in exchange for not deporting immigrants. 'Madrinas' deliver savage beatings to 'help' the police and get to share a portion of what they steal. Taken together, these examples paint a very negative picture of the Mexican government. Do you think some readers will extend this picture to Mexico generally, viewing it as a brutal and unsafe place due to the book's focus on these treacherous journeys? Would any of this happen in America? Could a journalist find similar stories here?

5. Along his journey, Enrique encounters people who exhibit compassion and kindness towards the migrants. Are there people in particular that you remember, and why does their kindness stand out to you? Contrast the descriptions of the first attack Enrique endures with the first kindnesses he is shown.
6. There are many complicated issues surrounding immigration, some directly affecting the state of Wisconsin. For example, under a short-lived program that recently expired, Wisconsin was one of 12 states that allowed unauthorized immigrants to pay in-state tuition at University of Wisconsin System schools. What do you think are the pros and cons of this type of legislation? Are there other examples of legislation that come to mind, specific to Wisconsin?
7. Nazario does extensive reporting on the dangers of the journey north, including riding the tops of trains. Did it surprise you to learn that so many women and children take this dangerous journey to the United States? What do you think drives children to take such a journey? Is it that they are unaware of the danger? Are they so desperate to see their mothers that they will do almost anything? Why is this Enrique's journey, and not his sister, Belky's? Might it be fair to call the book *Lourdes' Journey* as well?
8. In Honduras, Lourdes' life is one of extreme poverty. "She can barely afford food for [Enrique] and his sister. She's never been able to buy them a toy or a birthday cake. Lourdes, twenty-four, scrubs other people's laundry in a muddy river. She goes door to door, selling tortillas, used clothes, and plantains." While most of us are aware of the extreme poverty in other parts of the world, how did reading an up-close account of one extended family change your understanding of the way other people live? Lourdes leaves her small children at home in Honduras, yet she ends up caring for someone else's small children in the United States. Does America's prosperity depend on an underclass? Do you think Lourdes is part of that underclass? What would happen if we didn't have people like Lourdes, her boyfriend and Enrique working in America? Would our standard of living change? Who would do the work they do?
9. How does the reunion between Enrique and Lourdes compare to their expectations? Nazario writes, "Children like Enrique dream of finding their mothers and living happily ever after. For weeks, perhaps months, these children and their mothers cling to romanticized notions of how they should feel toward each other. Then reality intrudes." As readers, we are privy to details of Enrique's life and feelings that Lourdes didn't have. Did you expect a different outcome? If Lourdes had known more about Enrique's life without her in Honduras, how might their reunion have been different? Despite their continued conflict, why does Enrique want to stay in the United States?
10. How does Enrique's addiction influence his relationship with his mother? Enrique reunites with his mother at an age when many American teenagers are pushing away from their parents. What facets of Enrique's life influence his treatment of his mother? Is he in some ways a typical teenager coming into his young adulthood? Are his addictions a factor? His feelings of abandonment? How and why does he begin to change?
11. There are many moving, poignant moments in the story. Are there moments that stand out to you? What makes them so powerful and meaningful?

Questions courtesy of Madison Public Library and University of Wisconsin-Madison. August 2011



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