

A Life Worth Fighting For ***How Enrique's Journey Teaches Students to*** ***Be Grateful Citizens***

by Sonia Nazario

Students who read *Enrique's Journey* come away with one overriding reaction: it makes them grateful. Grateful for the sheer luck that they were born in the United States. Grateful that being born here brought with it incredible economic and democratic opportunities. Grateful that they didn't have to go through the searing hardships that drive millions of mothers and children north out of Central America and Mexico. Grateful that they didn't have to make the desperate and dangerous journey so many children have to make through Mexico alone, gripping the tops of freight trains, to reunify with their mothers in the United States.

The lesson of the book, students have said, is simple but powerful: what they have is so extraordinary that others are willing to die to obtain it, so valuable it is worth fighting for and protecting.

For me, that lesson began one morning in my kitchen in Los Angeles. I had asked my housecleaner an innocent, off-the-cuff question: "Do you plan on having more children?"

Always chatty, she suddenly went silent. She started sobbing. She told me about four children she had left behind in Guatemala. Her husband had left her, and she simply couldn't feed them more than once or twice a day. They would beg her for food. Many nights they went to bed without dinner. "Sleep face down, so your stomach won't growl so much," she would say, gently coaxing them to turn over. Finally, she made the only choice she felt she could: she left her two sons and two daughters with their grandmother and came to work in *El Norte*. Her youngest daughter was one year old, still breastfeeding, when she walked away. She hadn't seen her children in twelve years. She had left her children out of love, for the children's sake, and sent money home so they could eat and study past the third grade.

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Still, her answer stunned me. How could a mother walk away from her children, travel two thousand miles, not knowing when or if she would see them again? What kind of desperation drives a mother to leave her children?

Her choice seemed a horrible one, one I wouldn't wish on any parent. But soon I learned it is an unbelievably common choice—with more family disintegration in Latin America, more single moms are finding themselves facing her dilemma. In fact, these women are transforming the face of who comes to America. If illegal immigration was once overwhelmingly male, they are changing that—millions of women, often single mothers, come to the United States from Mexico and Central America and leave their children behind. Throughout the United States, they have become our neighbors, the people who clean our offices and homes, who care for our children. In Los Angeles, one study showed, four out of every five live-in nannies have a child who still lives in their home country.

The women explain that they left their children with one promise: I'll come back or send for you quickly—one or two years, max. But life in America turns out harder than they imagined. Despite sleeping in converted garages or crowded apartments and working two jobs, saving to go home or to pay a smuggler to bring their children to the United States is very difficult. Typically, the separations stretch into five or ten years—or more.

These children become desperate to be with their mothers. They get an idea: the only way I'll see my mother is if I go find her myself. Each year, a small army of children—nearly a hundred thousand—head north alone, without either parent, from Central America and Mexico into the United States. Some come to work, but most are coming to reunify with a parent, usually a mother.

In *Enrique's Journey*, we learn of a boy whose mother left him when he was five to work in the U.S. At first, he was bewildered by her absence, constantly asking for her, begging, "When is she coming for me?" He was devastated without her, and he transitioned from a lonely boy into a troubled teen. He idealized her, convincing himself that if he had his mom, all else that's wrong in his life would be all right.

After eleven years apart, Enrique eventually set off to find her, to see if she really still loved him. He left with little more than a tiny scrap of paper, with her

phone number in North Carolina scrawled on it. He didn't really know where North Carolina was. But he headed north.

Penniless, he traveled the only way he could through Mexico—clinging for dear life to the tops and sides of freight trains. Thousands of children ride through Mexico to find their mothers this way each year—some of them as young as seven years old. It is an incredible adventure. But it is also a harrowing one, and dangerous beyond belief. Enrique risked his life to try to make it to his mother in North Carolina. Despite the danger, Enrique and children like him come armed with their faith, a resolve not to return to Central America defeated, and a deep desire to be at their mother's sides.

Most children who embark upon this journey don't make it through Mexico. Some are killed along the way—torn apart by train wheels. They are hunted down like animals all along the way by bandits, gangsters, and corrupt cops. Enrique and other migrants call Mexico's southernmost state, Chiapas, *La Bestia*. "The Beast."

In southern Mexico, gangsters control the tops of the trains—it is their turf, and there are usually ten or twenty on a train. They carry machetes, knives, wooden bats—even guns—and are, more often than not, hopped up on crack cocaine. A pack of gangsters goes from car to car, and on each car, they surround the migrants aboard. "Your money or your life," they say. They strip off the migrants' clothes and steal the few coins the migrants carry. Often, they beat them. Sometimes, they toss someone off the train, feeding the poor soul to the churning wheels. The migrants call it *El Tren de la Muerte*. "The Train of Death."

One night, Enrique was sitting on top of a tanker car when six men crept up the ladders. They grabbed him and slammed his face down. He was nearly beaten to death, but managed to escape. And this was just the beginning of many challenges he faced in his eight attempts to get through Mexico.

Those who read *Enrique's Journey* are stunned by how viciously the boy was preyed upon all along the way. But they are equally moved by how he is visited by so many acts of kindness along the rails.

Chiapas is the heart of darkness. Migrant children emerge from that state robbed and beaten, afraid that anyone who approaches them wants to do them harm. But in south central Mexico, in the state of Veracruz, the people restored Enrique's faith in humanity. In small towns along the tracks, villagers ran out of their homes with small bundles in their arms.

Sometimes twenty or thirty people would stream out of their houses. They would wave, smile, and shout. Then, they would throw the bundles, filled with food, to the migrants as they rolled by on the freight trains. Bread, or tortillas, or whatever fruit was in season. Bottles of water. If they didn't have that, they would come out and say a silent prayer along the tracks.

The people who live along the rails are among Mexico's poorest—they barely have enough to eat. But having themselves seen suffering up close, they give some of what they have to strangers from other countries. They know this is the Christian thing to do. One woman in Veracruz, more than one hundred years old, said that in harder times she had been reduced to eating the bark of a plantain tree. She would force her knotted hands to prepare little bags of beans and tortillas so her seventy-year-old daughter could run to the tracks and give. The old woman said, "If I have one tortilla, I give half away. I know God will bring me more." Often, migrants who haven't eaten in days sob when a bundle lands in their arms.

Enrique's story is ultimately about a desperate longing for something better. About being willing to die to for it. About a level of determination that is inspiring to students—and to all who read his story.

Students in high schools from across the United States have written to me to say that they normally have trouble reading, but that they devoured my book. They have also sent Enrique mountains of letters.

In some of these letters students talk about projects that have started after reading the book. Students at schools where the overwhelming majority are poor and qualify for free lunches have written about their fundraisers to support people who help migrants along the rails in Mexico. Upper classmen at La Jolla Country Day School—a school located in a very high income section of San Diego County—have established a microloan program to help women in Olopa,

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Guatemala expand their coffee business, create jobs, and help these women become more self-sufficient so they don't have to leave their kids. The project has just started, and already students have raised \$1,800 (you find out more on their website: <http://pci.kintera.org/faf/home/>). Other students have launched creative activities to help build awareness. At the University of San Diego, college students worked with a local high school to create huge pop-up books with scenes from *Enrique's Journey*.

All of these students felt the message of the book was so important that they needed to take action, to share this immigrant story. To share their gratefulness. I am always amazed by what students take away from the book, what they do with it. I hope that you have had—or will have—a similar experience.

About the Writer

Sonia Nazario, *author of Enrique's Journey*, is a projects' reporter for the Los Angeles Times, has spent more than two decades reporting and writing about social issues, earning her dozens of national awards. The newspaper series upon which this book is based won the Pulitzer Prize for feature writing, the George Polk Award for International Reporting, and the Grand Prize of the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Awards. For more information, visit www.enriquesjourney.com.

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