



Grande, R. (2007). *Across a Hundred Mountains: A Novel*. Washington Square Press. ISBN-13 978-0743269582 (paperback). 266p. \$16.00

## Two Girls' Perilous Journey of Immigration

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**Abstract:** *Across a Hundred Mountains* weaves the tale of two young girls, Juana Garcia and Adelina Vasquez, and poignantly details their incredible journeys of immigration. Each chapter is told from the perspective of one of the two girls, switching back and forth between each one. Grande explores poverty, migration, and sacrifice in this thought-provoking tale. In this book review, the author analyzes Reyna Grande's portrayal of an immigrant's journey to the United States.

**Keywords:** immigrants, migration, poverty.

*Across a Hundred Mountains: A Novel*, by Reyna Grande (2007), which was the winner of the American Book Award, is set in Southern California and Mexico. This moving tale details living in poverty, the difficult journey of illegally crossing the border, and the complications faced once across the border. Through two heart-wrenching stories detailing immense loss, Grande's writing allows the readers to take an inside look into what drives a family to make the decision to leave their country in search of a better life. Grande invites the reader to become immersed in Mexican traditions, values, and lifestyles. *Across a Hundred Mountains* will bring the reader on a journey of self-reflection and discovery while reading about the uncomfortable topic of illegal immigration.

### Summary

The book is written in the third-person describing the lives of Juana Garcia, a young girl living in Mexico, and Adelina Vasquez, a young woman living in California. Each chapter switches back and forth between Juana and Adelina. Grande details Juana's journey to find her father from

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her poverty-stricken home in Mexico to California and eventually back to Mexico as an adult. Adelina's story is told in reverse, starting with her journey as a young woman traveling to Mexico to retrieve her father's remains. This keeps the reader interested and involved in trying to determine how these two girls are going to cross paths.

Juana's story reveals that her family is living in poverty in Mexico, two of Juana's younger siblings have tragically died, and her family is struggling to pay back an insurmountable debt. Juana's father makes the difficult decision to travel to 'El Otro Lado', the other side (the U.S border) in hopes to earn money to send back to his family. Juana's father does not return and the family refuses to accept that he has abandoned them. It is at this point that Juana decides to travel to "El Otro Lado" in search of her father.

While the reader is reading about Juana, every other chapter details Adelina Vasquez, who is a young woman living in California who is traveling to Mexico to retrieve her father's remains. Her story works its way backward and explains how she got to the border and how she came to find her father's body, who had gone missing 19 years earlier. Adelina's chapters are much shorter, giving only snippets of her life in California working in a woman's shelter and her life as an adult.

Finally, Grande intersects Juana's life with Adelina's, and it is at this point in the book, that the reader uncovers a surprising truth about these girls. The reader learns about the two girls' journeys and how they are connected. From this moment on, the reader is taken on a journey of salvation and courage.

## Review

Humanizing the controversial topic of immigration is at the forefront of this novel. It is not surprising that immigration is a worldwide phenomenon that increases racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity in nations around the world (Banks, 2011). According to Banks (2011), "the number of people living outside their country of birth or citizenship grew from 120 million in 1990 to 160 million in 2000" (p. 244). When reading about immigration, oftentimes, there is prejudice. Even though Grande never labels the girls as either Mexican or Mexican-American, the reader assumes that Adelina would identify as Mexican-American, given her birth country is Mexico, and that she has resided in America for several decades. Research has shown that Mexican-Americans, as well as other minority groups, in the United States experience discrimination in school because of their cultural, ethnic, racial, religious, and linguistic differences (Banks, 2011). However, missing from this book is any mention of prejudice towards the girls.

Framed with a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework, this novel examines the dichotomy between culture and power. CRT is a framework that examines society and culture as they relate to categorizations of race, law and power. This novel utilizes one of the aspects of CRT, and that is the use of storytelling to challenge racial and other types of oppression (Ladson-Billing, 2004). CRT raises questions about quality of the content of curriculum, highlighting that "poor, immigrant, bilingual children of color are usually confined to the basics" (Ladson-Billings, 2004). Unfortunately, the reader was not privy to Adelina's educational experiences. But, considering she was new to the U.S and spoke very little English, we can expect that she was placed in remedial classes and not enrichment classes.

The author continuously illuminated how poverty shaped Juana and Adelina's life experiences and the decisions they were forced to make. According to the Global Education Monitoring Report (2016), poverty is by far the most significant barrier to education. Additionally, poverty limits the "educational, social, and recreational choices a family can make for their children, so it is no small wonder that poorer children do less well academically than middle-class children" (Banks, 2004, p. 131). Grande takes the reader into the depths of poverty, giving us a

first-hand look at the devastation it causes. Poverty is systemic, and unless there is a champion pushing an immigrant towards education, it can get pushed to the back burner. In a unique book about poverty, Ruby Payne revealed that after a successful transition from poverty into the middle class, nine times out of ten, students will cite that their successful journey out of poverty was due to a powerful relationship (Payne, 2005). When Adelina said she didn't know anything about school, Don Ernesto, a retired school teacher who was her landlord, became a mentor to her and encouraged her to attend school.

Another component lacking from this book was the educational journey that Adelina experienced. Although it is known that education can be a vehicle for opportunities, there was no mention of Juana and her education while in Mexico, or Adelina's experiences as an English Language Learner (ELL) in an American school. As the reader, I was left wondering how Adelina ended up working at the women's shelter and if she ever went to college. As research shows, we as teachers have much work to do in improving the educational processes for and outcomes of low-SES, non-White, and linguistic minority students (Bartolome, 2004). Additionally, in a study done at a high school 18 miles north of the Mexican border, Bartolome (2004) examined how the educators at this school were able to create and sustain a caring, just, and level playing field. One particular finding of this study was that the educators saw themselves as cultural brokers or advocates for their students. Grande portrayed Don Ernesto as a cultural broker and an advocate who wanted to help Adelina when she arrived from Mexico.

Conceivably there was a turning point in Adelina's life when she realized that she needed an education. Although this book does not describe that moment, it told how she initially turned down Don Ernesto's suggestions to attend school, only to finally admit defeat six months later after having no success finding her father. Her realization was probably similar to Annette, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) who had relocated to Uganda (Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Strangely, this book did not identify Adelina as a refugee; they highlighted her more as an immigrant, which leaves the reader why. However, her temporary journey to the U.S was similar to that of a refugee. As Dryden-Peterson (2016) described, in the case of Annette, she "hoped, truly believed that she would soon return to her home country. That was until the day her father planted bananas, a long-to-mature crop. Annette knew then that she would be in Uganda for a long time, so she set about planting for her future" (p. 473). The author leaves it up to the reader to make sense of how Adelina made the decision that education was what she needed. Educators know that education is essential to the life chances of individual refugees (Dryden-Peterson, 2016).

To use these experiences to justify a student's low-academic achievement or to rationalize that their home-life is another barrier to their success is counter-intuitive to Grande's intentions of this novel. This novel's purpose is to shine light on immigrants and their incredible journeys. Sadly, some readers might find Juana and Adelina's stories as the explanation as to why their students might be doing poorly, not as the reason they should pursue ways to better support these types of students. But hopefully, those readers have colleagues or peers who can direct them more towards the ultimate goal of this novel, empathy for immigrants. While reading the similar experiences of both girls, it was clear that at some point, Adelina was an adult in California and had a job working in a women's shelter. And as the reader, I started speculating how Adelina got herself out of poverty and her life as a prostitute to turn her life around.

Although this book was published in 2007, it appeals to teachers all over the world. I am a teacher in a Title I school where a large population of our families have immigrated to the United States from other countries, and this book grabbed my attention immediately. This book was a quick read and was written in everyday language. This book is meant for anyone looking to learn about working with immigrants, refugees, or poverty-stricken individuals. It could also be aimed

at educators working with students from migratory families or families with parents who have emigrated from another country. Educators might use this as a book study with their colleagues, and universities might use it with their teacher preparation courses in areas with high migratory rates. Overcoming insurmountable obstacles and being surrounded by devastating losses, appeared to be a few of the main themes of this book. Thus, teachers with high populations of migrant students or high populations of students who are monolingual in a language other than English could learn a lot. Additionally, anyone whose family experienced a similar experience with immigration might find this book interesting. This book aims to help the readers understand more about people who make sacrifices and risk their lives pursuing a better life for themselves and their families.

Perhaps if teachers learned to understand the difficult journey that some of their students and their families make in order to be in their classrooms, they can help build stronger relationships. These relationships are what can help students from poverty and students who are monolingual in a language other than English find mentors, resources, advocates, and allies who can help them be successful. Grande's tale of poverty, immigration, and hardships illuminate how educators and educational leaders need to draw attention to the inequities that exist for some of our students, build and maintain strong relationships with students and families, all while having compassion for their unique situations. This book tugged on heart strings and really allowed the reader to walk in a mile in someone else's shoes. Not only did Grande place emphasis on how devastating poverty can be, she examined the struggles immigrants face in their journey to 'El Otro Lado', or the other side.

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