

Solito

A Memoir

By Javier Zamora

Guide written by R. Joseph Rodríguez

Hogarth

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Trip. My parents started using that word about a year ago—"one day, you'll take a trip to be with us. Like an adventure."

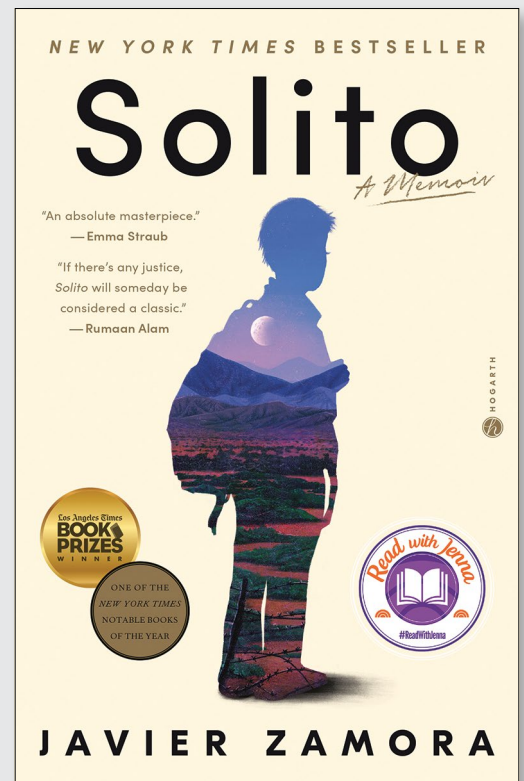
Javier Zamora's *adventure* is a 3,000-mile journey from his small town in El Salvador, through Guatemala and Mexico, and across the U.S. border. He will leave behind his beloved aunt and grandparents to reunite with a mother who left four years ago and a father he barely remembers. Traveling alone amid a group of strangers and a "coyote" hired to lead them to safety, Javier expects his trip to last two short weeks.

At nine years old, all Javier can imagine is rushing into his parents' arms, snuggling in bed between them, and living under the same roof again. He cannot foresee the perilous boat trips, relentless desert treks, pointed guns, arrests and deceptions that await him; nor can he know that those two weeks will expand into two life-altering months alongside fellow migrants who will come to encircle him like an unexpected family.

A memoir as gripping as it is moving, *Solito* provides an immediate and intimate account not only of a treacherous and near-impossible journey, but also of the miraculous kindness and love delivered at the most unexpected moments. *Solito* is Javier Zamora's story, but it's also the story of millions of others who had no choice but to leave home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Javier Zamora was born in El Salvador in 1990. His father fled the country when he was one, and his mother when he was about to turn five. Both parents' migrations were caused by the U.S.-funded Salvadoran Civil War.



"This is the mythic journey of our era, told by a hero not old enough to tie his shoes, an oracle for our troubled times. I have waited decades for a memoir like *Solito*."

—Sandra Cisneros, author of *The House on Mango Street*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

(CONTINUED)

When he was nine Javier migrated through Guatemala, Mexico, and the Sonoran Desert. His debut poetry collection, *Unaccompanied*, explores the impact of the war and immigration on his family. Zamora has been a Stegner Fellow at Stanford and a Radcliffe Fellow at Harvard and holds fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation.

NOTE TO THE TEACHER

Solito: A Memoir by Javier Zamora is an engaging, intimate account of adventure and tribulation as a nine-year old embarks on a 3,000-mile journey from his small hometown of San Luis La Herradura in El Salvador through Guatemala and México. Zamora travels alone in the company of strangers and a hired “coyote” to meet his mother, Patricia, whom he has not seen in four years, and his father, whom he hardly remembers. Through a treacherous journey that reads as the account of a young explorer, Zamora depicts dangerous boat trips and vast Sonoran Desert treks that lead to pointed guns, immediate arrests, and deceptive encounters. After two attempts, he finally crosses the U.S. Southwest borderlands to reach his parents. Ultimately, Zamora’s text is a gripping and moving account of a young migrant’s journey, which was expected to last two weeks but in reality took two months, while coming to terms with the need to leave home to join his parents. *Solito* is an important memoir that joins the contemporary classics on identity and migration, a first-person account written at ground level and through a child’s lens.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

Reading *Solito* will be a richer and more provocative experience for students if they are introduced to the Salvadoran Civil War, which took place from 1979 to 1992 and involved state funding and arms from the U.S. government that led to violence, massacres, and political unrest. Students can explore resources that detail the history of the war to inform their reading of the book. In particular, emphasizing the displacement of Salvadorans as a result of the war is key to having a rich understanding of the book. Moreover, understanding how income, ethnicity, race, language, and religion function in countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, México, and the United States will provide insight on the color hierarchies, language injustices, and discriminatory practices recounted in Zamora’s story. Last, analyzing the history of El Salvador, including the country’s name and origin, provides a powerful foundation for student understanding of the impact of colonization, exploitation, and imperialism.

Teachers can guide students to identify and consider the misinformation and stereotypes they’ve encountered in media and everyday conversations about people from the hemispheric Américas, such as Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Méxicans. First, remind students to be humane and considerate of their peers before sharing. As an educator, practice inclusion and compassion to guide the conversation toward a safe, brave space for all your students. Second, establish expectations for an engaging dialogue and use prompts from the media to critically think about misconceptions and stereotypes about people living in the Américas. Third, seek to build up the students’ knowledge about Central Americans, specifically Salvadorans, by introducing them to the Zinn Education Project: Teaching People’s History (zinnedproject.org), which includes content on Central America and the post-U.S. Civil Rights era. Teachers can also show Diana Sierra Becerra’s TED-Ed talk, “The Rebel Radio That Brought Down a War Criminal” ([tinyurl.com/BecerraTED](https://www.tinyurl.com/BecerraTED)), and lead students in a discussion about how Salvadorans combated misinformation and

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

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stereotypes by telling their story through Radio Venceremos (We Shall Overcome Radio). Finally, provide students with information about valuing the cultural knowledge of all communities and people to build context and raise their awareness.

Finally, Zamora is a celebrated poet and author of *Unaccompanied*, his 2017 debut poetry collection chronicling the impact of war in his homeland and his family's immigration. After reading some of his verses, teachers may choose one or two poems to provide students a glimpse of Zamora's poetic sensibilities, which appear in his memoir as rich details and imagery. Additionally, watching conversations and interviews with Zamora is another means to consider his experiences growing up in El Salvador and the United States.

Solito is organized into nine chapters, which chronologically span from March 16, 1999, to June 11, 1999. In a coda dated April 5, 2021, the reader learns that for seven weeks no one knew Zamora's whereabouts or if he was alive. Although the chapters are lengthy, the dated entries and vignette-style approach allow close, critical reading and opportunities to introduce additional mentor texts for writing prompts and seminar-style discussions. Teachers are strongly encouraged to read the book in advance and determine passages that are appropriate for adolescent readers. Be mindful of any students or families who are adjusting to a new way of life in the United States and of memoir content that may resonate and possibly create discomfort, pain, or unease for readers. Emphasize the need for human rights and humane treatment of migrants, including children and elders, as outlined in international agreements and by a conscientious citizenry that cares about and values the humanity of people around the world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does the word "trip" mean to you? How does the word take form in the young Javier Zamora's imagination in the opening of Chapter 1 and subsequent chapters?
2. Names reveal who we are to those who know and love us. Which nicknames does Javier have throughout his journey?
3. Leaving home can create moments of agony and despair. What does "La USA" mean to Javier? How does he imagine his parents live and how he will live after joining them?
4. The nine-year-old Javier is telling the story. What makes this memoir different from others you've read, especially when it comes to the narrative voice, which offers a blend of curiosity, observation, and omniscience?
5. The Spanish language is prominent in the memoir, including the use of the upside-down question mark. When and how does Spanish—or forms of translanguaging between Spanish and English—appear in the text? How about the upside-down question marks? Which liberties does the author take to tell his story and show bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate communication, knowledge, and understanding? How is your understanding of the memoir influenced as you read two languages?
6. The reader learns about the role of coyotes and polleros. How are their names revelatory about their respective roles in Javier's journey? Does your perception of the coyote or pollero change over the course of the memoir? If so, how? How is the kindness of strangers viewed or interpreted by Javier and the migrants as they travel through Guatemala and México and later in "La USA"?
7. Javier's grandparents are prominent in both his upbringing and his preparation for his journey to the United States. What is his relationship with his

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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- grandparents? How is it sustaining for him, since his parents have already immigrated to the United States? Which trusting adults do you have in your life that guide and support you?
8. Chino, Patricia, and Carla help Javier in his journey to the United States and also protect him from danger and harm. Describe their camaraderie, pretending, and planning throughout the memoir and how their relationships develop and expand. Recall that Zamora adapts to having a mother figure with the same name as his actual mother, Patricia. How did Javier gain more resilience as a traveler and son?
 9. Every segment of the journey is challenging, dangerous, and unpredictable. How is Javier's experience of the trip impacted as he travels by boat, bus, van, and on foot?
 10. Javier describes various landscapes, moon cycles, plants, scenes, sunrises and sunsets, terrains, and weather patterns he observes and experiences firsthand. In particular, he meets animals and insects, such as ants, deer, grasshoppers, and bees, that are as much a part of his adventure as the natural elements of the worlds he encounters along the way. How are the animals, insects, and elements interacting with human migrants in the search for safety, shelter, and a new life?
 11. Javier becomes an interpreter and translator of the immigrants hoping to reach "La USA." As a young child, he is schooled by his grandparents, parents, and strangers to study maps, language, political facts, and historical events to be able to either acculturate or assimilate in three countries: Guatemala, México, and the United States. How does Javier negotiate his formal Catholic schooling with the education he receives from his family to prepare for the "trip" northward?
 12. How does the prose that Zamora creates blend poetic sensibilities like catalogues, imagery, and synesthesia?
 13. What are some shocks or surprises in the memoir that changed how you view a particular character or larger concepts such as immigration or humane treatment?
 14. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs places a strong emphasis on possession of feelings of love and a sense of belonging. How does Javier relate to the need for love and belonging before, during, and after his "trip"?
 15. Consider Maslow's hierarchy of needs in relation to the following topics from Javier's memoir: having clothing to change into, staying clean and presentable, and seeking privacy while using the restroom. How are each of these significant for one's sense of dignity?
 16. Javier's self-talk includes Spanish language interrogation marks: "¿" and "?". What is revealed to the reader in each of his instances of self-talk and reflection? Note the craft of self-questioning that he possesses and shares with reader.
 17. The migrants on the journey often line up and are described like a centipede. How is this description symbolic of the task at hand?
 18. Forms of human defeat and pain appear in the memoir. How is Javier able to cope and remain resilient in the face of adversity, humiliation, and setbacks?
 19. In some cultures, a symbol of protection or luck is significant for its ability to bring good fortune or news. The memoir opens on a town in El Salvador named San Luis La Herradura. In Spanish, "herradura" means "hoof" or "horseshoe." What does a hoof, horseshoe, or Cadejo figure symbolize in some cultures? Why is a hoof or horseshoe valued and even displayed prominently in some homes or businesses? What can a hoof or horseshoe represent or symbolize across time and cultures?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. Various songs entertain and enliven the young Javier throughout this journey. Listen to a selection of the songs and read the lyrics in the Spanish language or in translation. What do you notice about the songs that appear in the memoir? How is the story enhanced by the songs, including the memories Javier recalls in relation to them? Some of the songs that appear include those by the following artists: Javier Solís, Los Temerarios, Los Bukis, Grupo Bronco, Los Yonic's, and Grupo Límite, among others.
2. Trace two or more of the following themes throughout the book, noticing examples of where they appear in the timeline of the text: identity, masculinity, language, nature and animals, pretending versus reality, religion, safety, schooling and education, and visibility. Analyze each theme on its own, and then compare it to another theme, seeking evidence from the text. Determine or conclude what these themes suggest about Javier's coming of age.
3. On a map, follow Javier's journey from San Luis La Herradura in El Salvador through Guatemala, México, and the Sonoran Desert. Take note of the travel and treatment he is experiencing. Pay attention to the route Javier must take in the hands of adult strangers who know little about him but genuinely care about his well-being.
4. Consider the animations, characters, music, and myths that Javier mentions in his memoir. For instance, the memoir opens with the framing of a trip as "an adventure. Like the one that Simba goes on before he comes home" (p. 3). Think about the words associated with a trip and what this comes to mean for Javier as he references cartoon characters such as Aladdin, Simba, Superman, the legend of El Cadejo, classic and contemporary music artists, and his very own imaginative dreams of other worlds and visions of flying. How does Javier's imagination enliven his journey and offer him hope? How does El Cadejo, a supernatural spirit or ghost, appear to Javier on his travels and offer him comfort and hope?
5. Various foods and cultures appear in the memoir as Javier travels from one country or community to another. Which foods does he associate with home or his grandmother's cooking? How is he able to adapt for sustenance and survival?
6. In the coda of the memoir, Javier explains that he spoke a "few times about what happened to [him] those seven weeks" to his parents (p. 380). He adds that he "began writing poetry and started to process all of my emotions about—and the repercussions of—my migration. When I confronted [my parents], they both cried as they remembered what I smelled like when they first saw me." Think about how the five senses appear in the memoir. How does each of the senses communicate aspects of Javier's migration and his struggles to reach his parents?
7. The theme of leaving home appears prominently in literature across various beliefs, cultures, and traditions. For instance, Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey* recalls Odysseus's departure from Ithaca to fight in the Trojan War and the journey he takes in its aftermath. In the memoir *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, Eva Hoffman and her family leave their native Cracow, Poland, for Vancouver and later New York City. In the autobiographical stage plays *Simply Maria*, *Or the American Dream* and *Real Women Have Curves*, both by the actor and playwright Josefina López, characters consider leaving home to realize their goals and dreams. Consider your own journey as an adolescent who is coming of age. How is your journey influenced by your own self-knowledge, role models in your family or life, or literary works you've studied?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

(CONTINUED)

8. In his memoir *Vivir para contarla* (*Living to Tell the Tale*), Gabriel García Márquez notes, “Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how one remembers it in order to recount it.” How would you describe Javier’s remembrances and how he sequences his narrative both as an imaginative nine-year-old and as an adult author who looks back to “recount it” with fervor, as García Márquez observed?

PROMPTS FOR
WRITING & RESEARCH

1. Think about the terms used to describe people who immigrate to a new country. For instance, the Associated Press, a global news agency, dropped the use of “illegal immigrant” from their media reporting in 2013 unless it is used to describe an action rather than a person. Why was the use of the term removed? Examine the *Associated Press Stylebook* and study how language use keeps changing to ensure descriptions and treatment of people are humane and dignified. On the other hand, terms such as “gabacho” and “gringo” appear. How are these terms part of hierarchies and bias?
2. The U.S. Border Patrol is referred to as “La Migra” in the memoir. What is “La Migra”? What is the role of “La Migra” as part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security? How is their complex role and presence described and negotiated by Javier? How has the role of the U.S. Border Patrol agency changed over the years in the borderlands—pre- and post-9/11? How are travelers treated by immigration officials and agents in Guatemala, México, and the United States, among other countries? What are the similarities and differences? What has changed in the U.S. immigration system from 1999 to the present?
3. Zamora possesses a deep knowledge of etymology as a speaker of Spanish and English. A coyote explains, “You’re pinches migrantes. Locals can call the cops, who will take you, rob you, or kill you” (p. 110). Javier notes in a self-reflective manner, “*Matar*. That’s the word. Like a plant. Una mata de aguacate. Una mata de limón. Una mata de cristal. *Cadejo*, *Cadejito*. I don’t want to die.” In these sentences, Zamora reveals migrant discrimination, police brutality, word meaning, and survival instincts. How do these four realities merge in the memoir for Javier, such as when people are called “ilegales,” “mojados,” “criminales” (p. 123)?
4. A question to consider when visiting a new country is: Who are the natives? The young Javier says that at the age of four he learned from his mother, “Somos indios” (p. 58). What are the indigenous histories of El Salvador, Guatemala, México, and the United States? Study the contributions and human inventiveness of indigenous people in the hemispheric Américas before the arrival of the Spanish and other colonizers. How were these influential in numerous societies—in the past to present? Examine the treatment of indigenous people and their sovereignty in these four countries. How are human rights ensured and maintained for indigenous people and their descendants today?
5. The nonfiction work *Enrique’s Journey: The Story of a Boy’s Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with His Mother* was written by Sonia Nazario, a journalist, and was first published in 2006. Some similarities are shared between these narratives, except Enrique immigrated from Honduras at 17 years old after trying eight times to enter the United States. Who can best tell and honor stories like Enrique’s or Javier’s? Explain your perspective and provide examples from film, literature, or media to make your argument about who owns or tells one’s story.

**PROMPTS FOR
WRITING & RESEARCH**
(CONTINUED)

6. The young Javier tells the reader, “I like naming these weird-looking bushes and trees [in the Sonoran Desert]. I’m an explorer. Javier Cousteau. I like looking up at the sky while lying down in the dirt. The tree branches look like a squid’s tentacles reaching for the sky” (p. 308). Jacques-Yves Cousteau was a French naval officer, oceanographer, filmmaker, and author, whose name Javier has co-opted to compare himself with someone whose journey resembles his own. Like Cousteau, Javier is navigating a new world as he observes, imagines, and writes. What other connections can you make from the memoir to other literary or historical works you’ve read? How are there similarities among the authors and texts you’ve studied?
7. In *The Account: Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca’s Relación*, a Spanish explorer documents the personal chronicle of his journey of hardship and misfortune from 1528 to 1536 across a large portion of what is now the United States. The chronicle was first published in Zamora, Spain, in 1542. Cabeza de Vaca is considered the first Spaniard to traverse a large portion of territory in North America—and on foot. Read the chronicle and consider how the land, natural world, and indigenous inhabitants are described in the 16th century by Cabeza de Vaca as compared to in the 21st century by Zamora.
8. The title of the memoir refers both to Javier’s literal solo journey to the United States and his parallel inward journey. By adding the Spanish diminutive “-ito,” Zamora offers an affectionate form of endearment through language for young Javier. How would you translate the title to English? Would the terms aloneness, loneliness, or solitude suffice in translation? Search for textual evidence that shows these three words vacillating in translation for Javier as he moves throughout his “trip” to “La USA.”
9. In the dedication to his memoir, Zamora writes, “To Patricia, Carla, & Chino & all the immigrants I met along the way to the U.S. & never saw again. I wouldn’t be here without you.” Why do you think Zamora expresses this gratitude while acknowledging the people he met are possibly lost or missing? Find out about the recent efforts led by citizens in the borderlands to find missing migrants and reunite them with their families.
10. Think about the following terms: documented, undocumented, emigrant, immigrant, migrant, expatriate, legal, permanent resident, temporary or permanent worker, visitor, and visa holder. What do these terms mean? How are they used to claim identity or difference and by whom? For categorization or exclusion? Who can claim or apply these terms to humans with or without their consent? Explain in detail with both historical and contemporary examples.

**RESOURCES FOR
FURTHER READING**

BOOKS

- Bui, Thi. *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir*.
- Cabeza de Vaca, Álvaro Núñez. *The Account: Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca’s Relación*. (Translated from the Spanish and edited and annotated by José Fernández and Martin Favata)
- Forché, Carolyn. *What You Have Heard Is True: A Memoir of Witness and Resistance*.
- García Márquez, Gabriel. *Vivir para contarla*.
- García Márquez, Gabriel. *Living to Tell the Tale*. Translated by Edith Grossman.
- Hoffman Eva. *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*.
- Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Emily Wilson.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING (CONTINUED)

- Latin American Youth Center. *Voces Sin Fronteras: Our Stories, Our Truth*.
- López, Josefina. *Real Women Have Curves*.
- López, Josefina. *Simply Maria, Or the American Dream*.
- Luiselli, Valeria. *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions*.
- Manwaring, Max G., and Court Prisk, editors. *El Salvador at War: An Oral History of Conflict from the 1979 Insurrection to the Present*.
- Mayers, Steven, and Jonathan Freedman, editors. *Solito, Solita: Crossing Borders with Youth Refugees from Central America*.
- San Francisco Bay Area Students. *We the Dreamers: Youth Authors Explore the American Dream*.
- Torres Sanchez, Jenny. *We Are Not from Here*.

ARTICLES

- Blitzer, Johnathan. "An Immigrant Who Crossed the Border as a Child Retraces His Journey, in Poems." *The New Yorker*. (tinyurl.com/ZamoraTNY)
- Ottesen, KK. "Poet Javier Zamora on Immigrants Who Roll Their 'Dice at the American Dream.'" *The Washington Post*. (tinyurl.com/ZamoraWP)
- Russell, Benjamin P. "Javier Zamora Carried a Heavy Load. He Laid It to Rest on the Page." *The New York Times*. (tinyurl.com/ZamoraNYT)

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Education Justice Project. *A New Path: A Guide to the Challenge and Opportunities After Deportation*. (tinyurl.com/EJPANewPath)
- Re-Imagining Migration. (reimaginingmigration.org)
- Sierra Becerra, Diana. "The Rebel Radio That Brought Down a War Criminal." TED-Ed. (tinyurl.com/BecerraTED)
- Zinn History Project: Teaching People's History. "Dec. 15, 1992: 'Civil War' in El Salvador Ended." (www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/civil-war-el-salvador)
- Zinn History Project: Teaching People's History. "Teaching Central America." (www.zinnedproject.org/materials/teaching-central-america)

ABOUT THIS GUIDE'S WRITER

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