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# Freshman Year Reading/ Common Reading Guide

## The Far Away Brothers

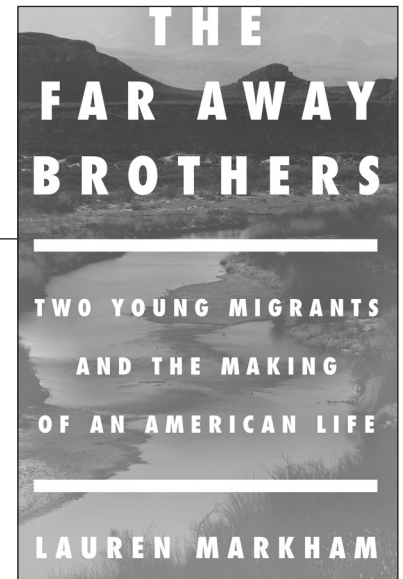
### Two Young Migrants and the Making of an American Life

by Lauren Markham

Crown | HC | 978-1-101-90618-7 | 320pp. | \$27.00

Also available as an E-Book and Audio Download

"*The Far Away Brothers* is impeccably timed, intimately reported and beautifully expressed. Markham brings people and places to rumbling life; she has that rare ability to recreate elusive, subjective experiences—whether they're scenes she never witnessed or her characters' interior psychological states—without taking undue liberties. In many ways, her book is reminiscent of Adrian Nicole LeBlanc's *Random Family*. It's about teenagers who raise themselves." —Jennifer Senior, *The New York Times*



#### • about the book •

Journalist Lauren Markham follows the seventeen-year-old Flores twins as they make their harrowing journey across the Rio Grande and the Texas desert, into the hands of immigration authorities, and from there to their estranged older brother's custody in Oakland, CA. With intimate access and breathtaking range, Markham offers a coming of age tale that is also a nuanced portrait of Central America's child exodus, an investigation of U.S. immigration policy, and an unforgettable testament to the migrant experience.

#### • about the author

Lauren Markham is a writer based in Berkeley, California. Her work has appeared in *VQR*, *VICE*, *Orion*, *Pacific Standard*, *Guernica*, *newyorker.com*, on *This American Life*, and elsewhere. Lauren earned her MFA in Fiction Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and has been awarded the Middlebury Fellowship in Environmental Journalism, the 11th Hour Food and Farming Journalism Fellowship, and fellowships from the Mesa Refuge and the Rotary Foundation. For the past decade, she has worked in the fields of refugee resettlement and immigrant education.

#### • discussion questions

1. What inspired the author to write about the Flores twins and the migrant experience? What questions does Markham say that she had to ask and answer in order to "better understand [her] students, [her] country, and . . . migration into the United States" (xv)? Was she able to find answers to these questions? What does Markham say that she wanted her book to offer? Would you say that she succeeded in this?

2. What does the term *hermano lejano* mean? Who in the book is an *hermano lejano* and how and why do they earn this title? In addition to the literal translation of this phrase, what are some of the ways in which this titular term encapsulates the book's major themes and subjects?
3. The author reports that a number of people approximately equivalent to one-third of all Salvadorans now live in the United States. What caused Salvadorans to migrate to the United States in such large numbers? Discuss political, cultural, and historical context. Why do the Flores twins ultimately leave El Salvador for the United States even though it will mean tremendous hardship for them and their family back in El Salvador? Would you say that they had a choice?
4. What is a *coyote*? What must families sacrifice in order to hire a *coyote* and what are some of the risks families take in hiring and working with one?
5. What is the journey north like for migrants? What surprising facts does the author reveal about the demographics of El Salvador's migrant population? What challenges and hardships must migrants endure as they make their way north? In addition to the physical demands of the journey, what are some of the psychological and emotional effects of such a journey?
6. What does the author mean when she says that "the history of the Rio Grande was one of shifting borders" (70)?
7. What challenges and obstacles are Ernesto and Raúl confronted with once they make it to the United States? What kinds of responsibilities must they take on that are unusual for minors? How do they handle these responsibilities? Would you say that their success is possible given these burdens? How is success defined for and by them?
8. Consider the treatment of women in the book. For instance, what happens to the Flores's sister, Maricela after the twins depart? What does Maricela observe when she compares the male and female experience in El Salvador? How does Maricela's story compare to those of her brothers? Do they have equal opportunities? Why or why not? What actions does Maricela take in order to secure a better life for herself? Is she successful?
9. According to Markham, what do the classrooms in schools like hers represent or reflect? What biases or hierarchies does she observe in this environment and what causes them? Are they avoidable? How do the Flores twins do in school and what challenges do they face as they try to graduate? Why does the author say that education is so important for them despite their need to work?

10. Many of the characters in the book suffer from guilt. What do they feel guilty about? How would you say the characters handle taking care of themselves versus bearing the burden of feeling a responsibility to help others? Is it possible for them to do both well?
11. How does Wilber's immigrant experience compare to that of his brothers? What is different about his immigration status and why? What causes tension to grow between Wilber and his brothers, particularly Ernesto? Would you say that the brothers are ultimately more united or divided by their experience?
12. What has caused so many people in El Salvador to join local gangs? Who joins these gangs and what incentives are there for joining? To what does Wilber Flores, Sr. attribute the current conditions in El Salvador and the increase in gang activity? What steps does the government take to remedy this problem and what is the result of their action?
13. The twins discuss whether it is better to live in the United States or El Salvador. How do they answer this question? How is their life improved by being in the United States? Alternatively, what do they miss or lose by not living in El Salvador?
14. Through the stories of the Flores family members, the author reveals many myths about the immigrant experience. What are some of these myths? How does the actual experience of migrating and being an immigrant compare to the stories people hear about going to El Norte? What does Esperanza mean when she says that "The dream is always more difficult when you're awake" (26)? Alternatively, what myths about immigration seem to be prevalent within the United States and how does Markham dispel them?
15. In addition to being a story about the migrant experience, *The Far Away Brothers* is a coming-of-age story. How does the story of the Flores twins compare to other coming-of-age stories with which you are familiar? What universal problems do the Flores twins share with others their age? Alternatively, what sets the twins' story apart? How do the boys change or grow as the story progresses?
16. What sacrifices or losses do the migrants in the book and their families suffer in their quest for safety and a better life? Why is Wilber Sr.'s sacrifice particularly difficult for him? Would you say that the sacrifices of the family are ultimately worthwhile? Why or why not?
17. Ernesto, Raúl, and Maricela all use social media—particularly Facebook. How do they use these sites? What purpose does it serve for them? What kinds of sentiments do they post and with whom are they sharing them? Do their posts accurately reflect reality or are their posts more fantastical and escapist in nature? What risks are associated with their use of this medium?

18. While many, including the author, expressed their doubt that a Trump presidency was possible, Ernesto and Raúl seemed certain that he would be elected. What made them feel this way? What were they perhaps able to see that the author and others were not?
19. Would you say that *The Far Away Brothers* is ultimately a hopeful story? Why or why not? How do the Flores brothers cultivate and maintain hope even in the face of unending obstacles? Where else is hope suggested within the book? How is hope—or the loss of hope—connected to the larger problem of gang activity, according to the author? Does the book ultimately suggest what people require in order to maintain a sense of hope?
20. Did the ending of the book, which leaves the fates of the Flores twins and Wilber open-ended and unresolved, surprise you? Why or why not? What questions does this ending raise? Did the book ultimately support your beliefs about immigration and the migrant experience or did any of your thoughts or beliefs about immigration change or evolve by the book's end? Discuss.
21. Considering Trump's campaign promises, what are some of the implications of a Trump presidency for immigrants like the Flores brothers? What does the author think of Trump's campaign cry for the necessity of a (new) wall? How does the author propose that we begin to solve the problems and difficulties associated with immigration? What does she feel the role of the United States should be and why does she say our country has this responsibility?

### — about this guide's writer

**JE BANACH** is a senior member of the Resident Faculty in Fiction at the Yale Writers' Conference. She has written for PEN, *Vogue*, *ELLE*, *Esquire*, *Granta*, *The Paris Review*, *Electric Literature*, and other venues and was a long-time contributor to Harold Bloom's literary series. She is the author of more than sixty literary guides including guides to works by Maya Angelou, Salman Rushdie, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Haruki Murakami, and many others.



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