

The background of the cover is a photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground, a chain-link fence runs horizontally across the frame. Behind the fence, two teenagers are standing, their heads and shoulders visible. They are looking away from the camera towards the horizon. The landscape is arid with dry, brownish vegetation and a dirt path. In the distance, there are rolling hills under a blue sky with some clouds.

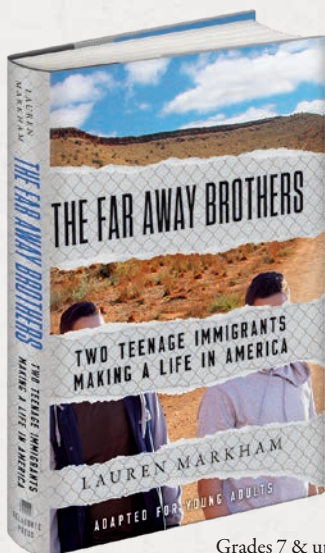
# THE FAR AWAY BROTHERS

**TWO TEENAGE IMMIGRANTS  
MAKING A LIFE IN AMERICA**

**LAUREN MARKHAM**

**ADAPTED FOR YOUNG ADULTS**

## **DISCUSSION GUIDE**



# CROSSING THE BORDER WAS ONLY THE BEGINNING.

A Junior Library Guild Selection

★ “Touching and educational.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, Starred Review

“A necessary read.” —*Booklist*

Grades 7 & up • Lexile: 890L

HC: 978-1-9848-2977-1

GLB: 978-1-9848-2978-8

EL: 978-1-9848-2979-5

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Ernesto and Raúl Flores are identical twins, used to being mistaken for each other. As seventeen-year-olds living in rural El Salvador, they are used to thinking that the United States is just a far-off dream. But when Ernesto ends up on the wrong side of MS-13, one of El Salvador's brutal gangs, he flees the country for his own safety. Raúl, fearing that he will be mistaken for his brother, follows close behind.

Running from one danger to the next, the Flores twins make the harrowing journey north, crossing the Rio Grande and the Texas desert only to fall into the hands of immigration authorities. When they finally make it to the custody of their older brother in Oakland, California, the difficulties don't end.

While navigating a new school in a new language, struggling to pay off their mounting *coyote* debt and anxiously waiting for their day in immigration court, Raúl and Ernesto are also trying to lead normal teenage lives—dealing with girls, social media, and fitting in. With only each other for support, they begin the process of carving out a life for themselves, one full of hope and possibility.

Adapted for young adults from the award-winning adult edition, *The Far Away Brothers* is the inspiring true story of two teens making their way in America, a personal look at US immigration policy, and a powerful account of contemporary immigration.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

Have students research how immigrants have recently been described by various media. What words are often used to portray them? How do these accounts compare to the way history remembers the Pilgrims? Do the differences or similarities seem fair to you?

Introduce cost-of-living calculators, such as those found on the websites Nerd Wallet or Smart Asset. Give students the task of creating a monthly budget for living independently. Include line items for housing, clothing, food, transportation, and recreation. Then calculate how much income a teenager would realistically generate working a part-time, minimum-wage job (ten to twenty hours per week). Discuss the differences in the total cost of living with actual money earned.





# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## WHY LEAVE HOME?

People have been leaving Central America for the United States for decades in what the author describes as “the endless churn of southern migration into the United States.” (p. xv) But in 2011 something new began to happen. Amid a stark increase in gang violence, the number of kids leaving without their parents and traveling alone to the United States skyrocketed. Wilber Jr., the twins’ older brother, who was already living in the US, explains the threat this way: “‘The thing is, that’s how it is in El Salvador.’ He picked up a pebble. ‘There, they’ll kill you just for doing this’—and by way of demonstration, he pitched the pebble across the lot. . . . ‘That’s how it is in El Salvador,’ he repeated. ‘And that’s why we are here.’” (p. 119)

- Describe how the Flores boys must have felt “lying on their bellies in the brush” (p. 8) after running away from a truck full of gangsters.
- There were rumors Ernesto and Raúl had been “gossiping about [their uncle] Agustín’s livelihood, his gang connections, and his guns.” (p. 40) Discuss how this is an example of what the twins call making “accidental enemies.” (p. 155)
- Before Ernesto left El Salvador, Uncle Agustín said he would “like to crush that boy’s face in with a rock.” (p. 43) Discuss whether you think this was a credible threat. Why or why not? What is meant by the word *disappeared*? (p. 33)
- Why didn’t the twins report the gangs to the police?
- Have you ever felt unsafe in your neighborhood? If you felt threatened, would you tell someone? Who? What do you think would happen?
- Have you ever traveled by yourself? Did you feel safe? Confident? If you were to travel alone, what resources would you be able to rely on if you were in danger?

## THE LURE OF EL NORTE

Wilber Sr. wanted his kids “to understand how to make a living off the land” (p. 13), but Ernesto dreamed of going to “a place with jobs, more stuff, opportunity.” (p. 28) “The North offered everything he wanted—success, belonging, respect, something better.” (p. 37)

- How does popular culture (books, film, and television) portray the United States of America? How might that influence someone’s desire to live in the US?
- The twins thought more about earning money to buy “stuff” than about paying for life’s necessities. Why do you think that was?
- Who pays for your school supplies, clothes, and cell phone (if you have one)? Imagine if those funds went away. Discuss how your life would change.
- According to the twins’ mother, “The dream is always more difficult when you’re awake.” (p. 25) What do you think she meant by this statement?

## STRESS AND MONEY

Like many immigrants, Ernesto and Raúl arrived in the United States deeply in debt. Their father put up two plots of land as collateral for a \$14,000 loan to pay a *coyote* (a guide) to transport the boys across the border. By the time they set foot in the US, interest meant the debt had grown significantly. If the boys couldn’t pay, their family would lose the land—their source of food and income. Ernesto and Raúl’s “guilt ate away at them in pieces.” (p. 166) Raúl described it this way: “I’ve got a bomb inside my head. . . . I can feel it in there. It’s like I can hear it clicking.” (p. 165)

- Think about how you might feel if you were under the same kind of pressure. What emotions might you experience? Have you ever felt stress or guilt? How did it impact your behavior?

- Instead of sending all their earnings home, the boys initially chose to buy iPhones and other luxuries. (pp. 134–135) Why do you think they made this decision? Does it seem reasonable that the boys spent \$75 on a Nike jacket? (p. 157) How might you react if you had cash in your pocket and went to the mall for the first time?

## TRAUMA

The journey from El Salvador to the US is dangerous for migrants, especially unaccompanied children. They are often raped, beaten, or robbed and sometimes murdered. If they survive the journey, they can be traumatized. Raúl thought he was going to die when Agustín's henchmen stopped the car in which he was traveling. (pp. 56–58) After crossing the border, Ernesto fell onto a decomposing body in the desert (p. 72) and witnessed the murder of a fellow migrant. (pp. 131–132)

- How did these experiences impact the boys emotionally and physically? Ernesto was particularly distraught. Discuss why.
- The boys experienced horrible things on their journey. Discuss whether they had any other options, including how circumstance can force people to make impossible choices.

## IT'S THE LAW AND IT'S COMPLICATED

People from many countries around the world who are in dire situations apply to be granted refugee status by the United States, meaning they come here legally and may be permitted a path to citizenship. They have usually been in refugee camps for lengthy periods of time and have to similarly prove that they require asylum to state asylum officials, judges and tribunal members, and UNHCR staff. Migrants from Central America, on the other hand, continue to have to apply for immigration relief, such as asylum, from within the US borders. A judge in a courtroom decides their fate.

- Unable to afford an attorney, many unaccompanied minors appear in court alone. Does it seem reasonable to expect children to represent themselves in court? Why or why not? What does this tell you about US immigration law?
- How does the experience of the Flores brothers illustrate the importance of having legal representation?

## SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO BE LUCKY

"You boys are lucky," said the border patrol agent when he picked up Raúl and Ernesto in the desert. "We just found five dead bodies not too far from here." (p. 75) Because the brothers were under eighteen, they couldn't be deported right away, and while they were waiting for the case to be decided in court, they were required to enroll in high school.

- How did being in high school help the boys? How would it feel to be a student in country where you did not speak the language?
- How were things different for Wilber Jr.? (p. 86) Why didn't he go to college as planned?
- Wilber Jr. is happy for the twins, but he is also jealous that they were eligible for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status. (p. 129) Discuss how the lives of documented migrants are different from those of undocumented migrants. Reread the section where Ernesto receives his Social Security card. (p. 175) Consider and discuss the rights and privileges that come with a Social Security number.

## RACISM

According to Wilber Jr., racism is "everywhere on Earth but perhaps strongest in the United States." (p. 129) To him, Donald Trump "represented the dark but very real side of the United States, filled with subtleties of racism and classism and xenophobia that often only immigrants could see." (p. 201)

- Have you ever witnessed or experienced racism in your community? How did it make you feel?
- It is harder to hold negative feelings about a group of people when you know individual members of the group. How do you think knowing the specific details of Ernesto and Raúl's story might change the way some people view immigrants in general?
- How do you see racism being reinforced by the media or in your community? How does it make you feel about your country?

## FAMILY OF MAN

Oakland International High School is part of a network of public schools designed for newly arrived immigrant students. It is a microcosm, with students from countries such as Mexico, China, Yemen, Iraq, and Afghanistan, as well as many unaccompanied minors from Central American countries.

- While discussing their circumstances, Ernesto and an Iraqi student arrived at an insightful conclusion. What was it? (p. 139) What impact did it have on Ernesto? (p. 148)

Ernesto had taken to "camping out in [the author's] office, overwhelmed, looking for help tracking down Raúl." (p. 189) He was also worried about his parents, who were ill. Seeing his distress, a group of Yemeni mothers asked him what was wrong. Ernesto began to sob uncontrollably.

The women offered words of comfort, teared up themselves, and said they would pray for him.

- What does this scene tell us about our shared humanity?
- Why do you think the women were moved to tears?
- Why is it significant that this exchange took place in English?
- Who helps you when you are in distress? Whom could Ernesto rely on for support?

## CHILDREN HAVING CHILDREN

The Flores family barely scraped by, yet Wilber Sr. and Esperanza had thirteen children, something Wilber Jr. viewed as "irresponsible." (p. 19) Wilber Sr. was himself the child of an unmarried fifteen-year-old. The twins' sister Maricela has two babies and is described as "trapped" by her circumstances at only age twenty. (p. 111)

- In what way was Maricela "trapped"?
- What immediate impact does fathering a child have on Ernesto's life? What did it mean for Raúl and the extended family in El Salvador?
- If you became a parent as a teenager, what would you have to give up?

## US IMMIGRATION POLICY

"Many politicians, including President Trump, have made border protection a central issue, the notion being that securing the border would make immigration go away." (p. 232)

- Do you think a secure southern border will stop immigration? Why or why not?
- What does the Flores brothers' story tell us about the will to survive?
- Discuss the role of the US in creating the violence in Central America. How have past actions and current foreign and trade policy choices exacerbated the problem? (pp. 232–234)
- What would you say to Americans who simultaneously want to keep immigrants out while also enjoying the benefits of an international economy, such as cheap imports and labor?



# COMMON CORE STANDARDS CORRELATIONS

The Common Core State Standards can be used to shape discussions and activities inspired by this novel. The applicable anchor standards are listed below.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.3

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.10

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ben Gucciardi



**Lauren Markham** is a writer based in Berkeley, California, who is focused on issues related to youth, migration, the environment, and her home state of California. Her work has appeared in outlets such as *Harper's*, the *New Republic*, *Orion*, the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, and *VQR*, where she is a contributing editor. Lauren earned her MFA in fiction writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. For over a decade, she has worked in the fields of refugee resettlement and immigrant education.

📷 🐦 [LAURENMARKHAM.INFO](http://LAURENMARKHAM.INFO)

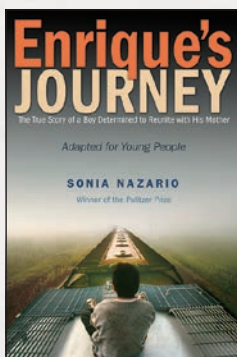
## RELATED TITLES



**Americanized:  
Rebel Without a Green Card**

Sara Saedi

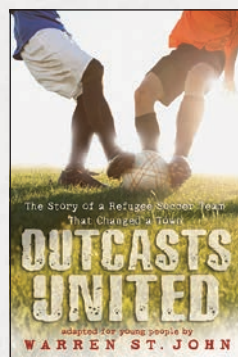
PB: 978-1-5247-1782-7



**Enrique's Journey  
(The Young Adult Adaptation):  
The True Story of a Boy  
Determined to Reunite  
with His Mother**

Sonia Nazario

PB: 978-0-385-74328-0



**Outcasts United:  
The Story of a Refugee Soccer  
Team That Changed a Town**

Warren St. John

PB: 978-0-385-74195-8

Guide prepared by Colleen Carroll, literacy specialist, reading teacher, curriculum writer,  
and the author of the twelve-volume series *How Artists See*