



Sonia Nazario Believes It's an Educator's Role to Expand Students' Horizons

Nazario Will Be a Keynote Speaker at NCTE's Annual Convention

Speaking to a high school class in Chicago, author Sonia Nazario was approached by a young African American girl. The student had read *Enrique's Journey*, a national bestseller drawn from Nazario's Pulitzer Prize-winning series on a young man's treacherous expedition from Honduras to the United States in search of his mother. The book, the girl said, made her realize how similar her Latino classmates' history is to her own.

"We're so separate, Black and Latino," the girl said of her school. "But I read this book and I thought about how my grandmother came north during the Great Migration and left my mother behind. I get this. I have a bridge now to relate to my classmates."

The anecdote is similar to hundreds of others Nazario has heard since the book's 2006 publication. Now listed as a common read at more than 70 universities, *Enrique's Journey* has seen a spark of interest as headlines focus on the growing number of young, unaccompanied Central American immigrants crossing the Mexican border. Publication of a young adult version of the book, which Nazario said came upon overwhelming request from middle school teachers, only added interest.

Enrique's story is one of desperation, idealization, and an indomitable spirit. As an increasing number of immigrants enter the United States—there has been a 10-fold increase in Central American immigrants entering the country in the last three years and projections indicate minority populations could outnumber the White population by 2050—more students are reading their contemporary family history in Nazario's book.

"Yes, Shakespeare is great, but the canon is all dead white guys," Nazario said. "Not to knock the classics, but there are a variety of great books that go beyond the standards that have been used over and over again. What makes this book popular is the sense that the story told is that of so many people who make the story of this nation. In the last 20 years migrants have gone to nearly every county in the union. This is a wave the likes of which has not been seen in 80 years, when Italians and Germans were coming over."

Multiple Viewpoints

Nazario believes an educator's role is to expand students' horizons through the use of multiple viewpoints. While immigration is a divisive topic, Nazario's story remains true to journalistic standards. The result of five years of reporting, it is in no way a polemic. Instead, it lays bare the story of a 17-year-old boy struggling with drug use, loneliness, and resentment.

Nazario initially felt uncertain about using Enrique as her protagonist. However, a talk with her editor at the *Los Angeles Times* changed her view. Enrique was no saint, and that made the story more relatable.

"My editor said the best characters in literature are deeply flawed," Nazario said. "So I reluctantly went with Enrique, and I am glad I did. It makes educators feel like I am giving it to them straight. I am not taking a stance. I am showing the fallout of removing children from their parents. Sometimes, they turn to drugs. These are the real consequences of separating families."

While researching the book, Nazario retraced Enrique's path twice. The 1,600-mile voyage is littered with criminals, crooked police, and atavistic immigration officials. Much of Enrique's travel was conducted on top of a Mexican train network known as La Bestia, or The Beast. Every step of the expedition is precarious. At best, a slip atop a train will lead to a painful visit with Earth; at worst, the fall will throw passengers under the tracks, where they are often sliced by the train's wheels.

Enrique's mother, Lourdes, left her son when he was five years old. She hoped she could find work in the United States and send enough money back to pay for Enrique's schooling. As with so many other families, the dreams fell apart. Enrique tried to understand his mother's ambitions, but he missed her, a lot. School, and eventually everything else, became second to reuniting with his mother.

"It is a universal story of a child seeking his mother in a hostile world," Nazario said. "I went to Lou Dobbs's show, and he was kind to me. I almost fell out of my chair, but it is hard to beat up on a kid like Enrique."

Nazario believes 90 percent of good writing starts with a strong idea. While she considers herself a natural reporter, she rewrote *Enrique's Journey* 12 times. She believes teachers must dissuade students from believing writing is always easy. Like any worthwhile pursuit, she said, good writing [can be] difficult.

"You build a house one great brick at a time," Nazario said. "I work to make my writing as clear and simple as possible. If you have powerful scenes and powerful details in the narrative, you can take readers on a powerful ride. Sometimes the most powerful stories are simply told."

While riding the train that carried Enrique north, Nazario would stop to smell, feel, and see. Rather than concerning herself with the who, what, where, and when of the immigration issue, she aimed to sit readers right beside Enrique on his journey. The result is a book that leaves readers wanting more.

While visiting colleges, Nazario is both exhilarated and terrified when first-year students say her book is the first they ever read cover to cover. She views literacy as a top priority for the immigrant population.

Succeeding with Literacy is Critical

"Immigrant children or the children of immigrants are the fastest growing demographic K-12," Nazario said. "These kids are the future workforce of this country. Nearly half of Latino students drop out of high school. That is the highest percentage of any ethnic group. Succeeding with literacy is critical, and we are obviously failing."

Nazario believes it is imperative for educators to understand the trauma their students bring to the classroom. Illiterate parents working two jobs to make ends meet cannot provide the same support other students expect. She praises the University of California system for forming dedicated classes for immigrant students. The program provides students with Latino mentors that Nazario, an Argentinian American who thought she was going to flunk out of her first year in college, could have benefited from.

"Immigrant students are not seeing a future with college," Nazario said. "They think, 'Why bother with high school if I am not going to be able to pay for college?' That is why we need to push for more newcomer schools—schools designed to help immigrant students handle the unique challenges they face in a new culture. These places provide teachers with the tools to help their students deal with separation issues. Many kids feel resentment toward their parents for leaving them behind."

When teaching *Enrique's Journey*, Nazario encourages teachers to use the text to foster critical discussion. At one point in the book, it is revealed that Lourdes had another child in the United States. One teacher Nazario

visited told how some students in her classroom were critical of Lourdes. How could she have another child when she hardly provide for her children in Honduras? Another student countered by asking the class to demonstrate by a show of hands how many students had never made a poor decision or a mistake.

After a long newspaper career that included the privilege of being the youngest reporter ever hired by *The Wall Street Journal*, Nazario now serves on the advisory board of Catch the Next (catchthenext.org), a nonprofit aiming to double the number of Latino students enrolling in college. She is also a board member for Kids in Need of Defense (supportkind.org), a nonprofit providing free legal representation to children like Enrique.

In a July 2014 opinion piece for *The New York Times*, Nazario argues that the United States should view the current immigration influx as a refugee situation. In her typical fashion, she leads by describing the confounding situation of an 11-year-old Honduran named Cristian.


His father was murdered by thugs. His mother used the life insurance money to get to Florida. Left to his own devices, he is determined to escape his country's violence; chances are he will be captured and turned around.

"This is a life-or-death matter for children," Nazario said. "Honduras has the highest murder rate in the world after Syria. We have 7,100 attorneys working to represent these children, but that is not enough. Somewhere between 70 and 90 percent of these immigrant youth are facing deportation without legal representation."

After surviving a particularly dangerous stretch of his journey, Enrique travels through Veracruz, Mexico, a region known for its hospitality toward migrants despite its own economic hardships. Strangers toss bread to a beaten and starved Enrique. After so many obstacles, the path seems clear. After so many failed attempts, perhaps this is the time Enrique will make it to the US border. Nazario believes readers can learn a lesson from the goodwill.

"Always remember," Nazario says, "one of our first instincts should be compassion, to try to put ourselves in other peoples' shoes. It does not mean we always agree with their choices, but before you judge you should try to see things through their eyes. We have to be open to being transported to different places with an open heart."

Philip Johnson is a freelance writer based in Libby, Montana.

 <p>ANNUAL CONVENTION NCTE WASHINGTON, DC 2014</p>	Sonia Nazario will speak at the NCTE Annual Convention in Washington, DC, on November 20, 6:30 p.m. in Gaylord National Resort, Potomac A/B.
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