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Review: A courageous voice emerges in 'The Distance Between Us'

Reyna Grande's memoir is of a family's drawn-out Mexico-to-L.A. transition.

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The Distance Between Us

A Memoir

Reyna Grande, Atria: 325 pp., \$25

Reyna Grande's umbilical cord is buried under the ground of her grandmother's home in Iguala, Mexico.

We learn this fact early in Grande's unforgettable new memoir, "The Distance Between Us." Grande is a girl of about 6 when her big sister shows her the spot. Their mother, the woman once linked to Reyna by that cord, has set off for the U.S. to join their father, leaving three kids behind with their severe and cruel grandmother.

"My umbilical cord was like a ribbon that connected me to Mami," Reyna's sister tells her. "She said, 'It doesn't matter that there's a distance between us now. That cord is there forever.'"

Immigration has opened a divide between the members of the Grande family that's 2,000 miles wide. But even when Reyna crosses this divide to live with her father in California, the metaphorical link binding her to a tragically poor corner of Mexico will not die. Iguala and its unpaved streets, its rural superstitions and its hunger never let go of either young Reyna, her parents or any of her siblings in "The Distance Between Us," a heart-wrenching account of her impoverished childhood and violence-tinged adolescence.

The pain of Mexican memories feeds her father's L.A. dreams, and his drinking. In L.A. he's a maintenance man who pushes his children to never miss a day of school — when they disobey him, he humiliates and threatens them.

"The minute you walk through the door with anything less than A's," he tells his three children as they begin school in Los Angeles, "I'm sending you straight back to my mother's house." Grandmother Evila's house in Iguala is infested with scorpions. She doles out verbal abuse and keeps the children dressed in rags. The young Grande children will do just about anything not to return there.

The narrative of Latin America poverty and the "broken beauty" of places like Iguala is buried deep in the psyche of Los Angeles and other U.S. cities. Our recent history has been shaped by Latino immigration. We live amid a million unknown tales of family longing, loss, ambition and dysfunction.

Grande relentlessly mines this thematically rich terrain in "The Distance Between Us." With two deeply flawed adults at its center — her embittered father and her less-than-reliable mother — it's a brutally honest book that avoids the sentimentality that permeates many Latino immigrant narratives.

"The Distance Between Us" is instead something akin to being the "Angela's Ashes" of the modern Mexican immigrant experience.

Grande, the author of two previous novels, doesn't always reach for

the artistic heights of that bestselling memoir of an Irish American family. Her prose is often more expository than lyrical, and the translated dialogue can sound stilted. But like Frank McCourt's book, hers is a story of children crossing borders with an alcoholic father at its center.

Natalio Grande is neither the hero nor the villain of "The Distance Between Us." Rather, in Grande's deep and nuanced portrait, he emerges as a deeply wounded human being whose desire to escape poverty and to be fully human leads him to inflict pain on the people he loves the most.



At first, Natalio hurts his children simply by being absent. When her memoir opens, Reyna is in Iguala and hasn't seen him for more than two years. She's too young to have any memory of him. He exists only as a framed photograph: "The Man Behind the Glass," she calls him.

When Reyna's mother heads for L.A. to be reunited with Natalio, the neighborhood kids in Iguala tease young Reyna and her siblings, calling them "orphans." Mago, Reyna's 11-year-old sister, emerges as a kind of surrogate mother, protecting Reyna and her little brother from hunger and roundworms.

When the local river floods, the two sisters and their brother have a harrowing encounter with death. But mostly it's her father's absence that eats away at Reyna's 8-year-old soul.

"I felt I had a kind of scorpion inside me that was stinging my heart again and again," she writes. "I wanted to reach inside my body and yank the scorpion out."

Eventually, Reyna and her siblings cross the border illegally to begin a new life with their father. To Reyna's young eyes, L.A. is a strange and magical place with impossibly fast traffic and goblins roaming the street on a day the locals call Halloween.

At school, Reyna dedicates herself to making her father proud. But Natalio, she soon discovers, is a tormented man of quickly shifting moods. Eventually, he wounds all of his children and the women who love him with his hurtful words — and his fists.

His children escape home as soon as they are old enough and able. To a teenage Reyna, taking her first steps to becoming a writer, Natalio finally offers the only explanation for his violent outbursts. He tells a story that takes us, fleetingly, to the suffering of his own boyhood, which ended when his father made him plow fields with an ox.

"I was nine years old," he tells Reyna. "Do you understand?"

Grande works hard to understand. Her memoir is in many ways a ground-breaking addition to the literature of the Latino immigrant experience. "The Distance Between Us" is a book that deserves to be celebrated for its candor and for the courage of the woman who overcame so many obstacles to write it.