

THE
DISTANCE
BETWEEN US

REYNA GRANDE

A TEACHERS GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK

Reyna is two when her father leaves the family in Mexico and crosses the border into the United States, hoping to earn enough money to build a home in Mexico when he returns. When he sends for their mother but leaves Reyna, Mago, and Carlos behind, the siblings suffer great hardship and poverty under the unforgiving hands of their father's mother, Abuela Evila. Abandoned by both parents, the three endure but long for the return of their mother and a father of whom they have little memory. Their mother returns with a baby sister, Elizabeth, setting off a chain of on-again and off-again contact with her children. When their father returns after an eight-year absence and takes Reyna, Mago, and Carlos with him across the border, a new window of opportunity presents itself; however, Reyna, Mago, and Carlos must also deal with their father's alcoholic rages. Recounted in astonishing detail, this memoir narrates one girl's journey out of poverty and her infinite capacity to forgive and love.

PREREADING QUESTION

Describe a time in which you felt abandoned or separated from a loved one. How did you resolve your feelings?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Reyna is two years old when her father leaves Iguala for El Otro Lado (the other side). Why does he leave? Why do Reyna, her mother, and her two siblings—Mago and Carlos—stay behind?
2. When Reyna turns four, her father sends for her mother. Reyna, Mago, and Carlos are left to live with their father's mother (Abuela Evila). Describe Reyna's feelings regarding her mother's leaving and her mother's absence during these early years.
3. Who is "The Man Behind the Glass"? What does he symbolize?
4. Reyna wishes to stay with Abuelita Chinta instead of Abuela Evila. Compare and contrast the two grandmothers and their attitudes and behaviors toward their grandchildren. Are Reyna, Mago, and Carlos better off once they begin living with Abuelita Chinta? Why or why not? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
5. Who is Élica and why is she favored by Abuela Evila? Is her behavior toward Reyna, Mago, and Carlos justified? Why or why not?
6. In what way does Tía Emperatriz come to the aid of Reyna, Mago, and Carlos? Could she have done more for the three siblings? Why or why not?
7. Describe Reyna's relationship with her sister Mago. Why does Mago feel responsible for Reyna?

8. Describe the hardships Reyna, Mago, and Carlos face growing up in Iguala.
9. What reactions do the three siblings have when they learn they have a younger sister, Elizabeth? Who seems the most impacted by this news and why?
10. Why does Reyna's mother, Juana, return alone from the United States? How does life change for Reyna, Mago, and Carlos when she returns?
11. Who is Rey, and why do Reyna, Mago, and Carlos not like him? What happens when he visits the family during the holidays?
12. Compare and contrast Mago's and Reyna's feelings toward their mother as time after time she chooses her own needs over those of her children. Does she love her children? Use evidence from the text to support your response.
13. As Carlos matures, he has a need for a father figure. Identify the male role models in his life and explain the influences they have on his development.
14. When Reyna's father returns from the United States after an eight-year absence, Reyna is almost ten. How does she feel about his return? Why does he return, and why does he offer to take Mago back to the United States with him? Why does he want to leave Reyna and Carlos behind?
15. How does Reyna feel about the possible separation from Mago? Why does their father decide to take all three children back with him? Describe their harrowing journey. Is life better for them once they reach the United States? Support your answer with evidence from the text.
16. Mila is Natalio's second wife. What are Reyna's earliest perceptions of her? What influence does Mila have on Reyna, Mago, and Carlos?

17. Reyna attends school in both Mexico and the United States. Compare and contrast her experiences in both places. What can readers learn about the challenges poor children have in negotiating school?
18. Reyna does not speak English when she enters school in the United States. How does she overcome this challenge? How is she received by her teachers? By her classmates? What accounts for her ability to succeed?
19. Reyna's father believes in education and supports Mago and Carlos when they enroll in college. Why does he not help Reyna? How does his refusal impact Reyna?
20. To whom does Reyna owe thanks for her success? Why? Do you agree or disagree and why?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What does Grande's memoir tell us about the struggles of second-language acquisition students in American schools?
2. *The Distance Between Us* is a memoir. What characteristics of a memoir can you identify in the story?
3. Compare and contrast Mago's experiences as a student in Mexico and the United States. What drives her to succeed despite her challenges?
4. Despite her on-again, off-again relationship with her father, Reyna yearns to make her father proud. In what ways did this desire serve her well? In what ways did it not? How is she able to release her guilt and anger toward her father? Identify and discuss a passage or scene in which she grows the most in her understanding of his capabilities.

5. How do Reyna's perceptions of her mother evolve with time? Use examples from the text to support your response.
6. How might this story be different if it were written from another character's point of view (e.g., Mayo, Carlos, either parent, or either grandparent)?
7. When Reyna returns to Iguala to visit her family, how does she reflect on her youth living in Mexico? How do her attitudes differ from those of her sister Mago? What accounts for their differences?
8. Compare and contrast the ways in which Reyna, Mago, and Carlos deal with the on-again, off-again relationships with their parents? What accounts for their different responses?
9. As Reyna matures into a young woman, how does she resolve her feelings of being abandoned by both her mother and father? Does she view one parent as having been better than the other? Why or why not?
10. How does *The Distance Between Us* contribute to a growing body of literature about immigration to the United States? About the challenges facing children for whom English is a second language?

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