

A Reader's Guide for *Across The Great River* by Irene Beltrán Hernández

Themes:

Immigration

Violence

Family

Adjusting to a new environment

Book Synopsis

Kata's father believes a better life awaits him and his family across the border. But he accidentally becomes separated from his family while illegally crossing the Rio Grande river into the United States. The two men hired to do the job are left with Kata, her little brother Pablito, and Kata's mother who has been shot and needs help quickly. They take their illegal charges to a local healer, Doña Anita, and promise to return later.

Kata is left in charge of Pablito and tends to her lucky-to-be-alive mother at Anita's rancho near Eagle Pass, Texas. Kata's mother finally gets better and moves her family to town. But danger lurks where they live. Kata's mother ends up in the hospital for several weeks under the care of Doctor Mendez. With no sign of their father, Kata and Pablito end up living with Doctor Mendez who owes Anita a favor.

Kata creates change in the Doctor's household which results in his happiness and her mother's recuperation. With her mother well, Kata shares a discovery that ends up being very valuable money-wise. As a family, they are able return by bus to their small village in Mexico. Kata's father soon joins them as a free man from jail. The Commandante owed Anita a favor.

Critic's Praise

". . . the story is an affecting coming-of-age tale, young Kata's narrative is direct and, though written in English, its cadence evokes a sense of the Spanish language." —*Booklist*

Teaching Overview

Across the Great River is an adventure story that explores "Immigration" as a topic. In this novel, the central theme revolves around the Rio Grande River as a border between Mexico and a better life in the United States. Kata's family experiences the challenges and dangers of an illegal border crossing, hardships of family separation and survival in a strange land. The teacher is encouraged to use these sub-themes for examining Immigration-related issues.

For the teacher's convenience and lesson-plan accountability, this Teacher Guide offers Language Arts activities which satisfy generalized content standards. Teachers are invited to creatively substitute and/or incorporate their own instructional ideas.

Comprehension Strategies

The following Before, During and After Comprehension strategies contain activities which have been designed to improve upon the Language Art skill areas of reading, writing, listening, and/or speaking. Where appropriate, the specific skill area addressed by each of the activities will be noted in parenthesis.

Before Reading:

Working with the book cover, ask students what they see and what they believe the Campos family sees. How does the title relate to their impressions of the cover? What does the title mean? What do they think the story will be about (**Reading:** comprehension, prediction skills, prior knowledge and experience).

Talk about the word river. What comes to mind (i.e. swimming, boating, rafting, fishing, floods, drowning, ducks, songs, skipping stones, etc.). Encourage students to share their experiences and associations (**Listening/Speaking:** connection with experience of others).

Expand upon the discussion to include the aspects of “crossing a river” (i.e. inherent dangers and difficulties). Lead students to the concept of rivers as borders. Brainstorm names of rivers or use the Atlas to find rivers that create borders between cities, states and/or countries. Emphasize that the Rio Grande River represents a border between the United States and Mexico, and that people have been crossing the Rio Grande in both directions for thousands of years (see “rivercommunities.org” and “riogrande.org” sites in the “Connecting with the Internet/Technology” section for Rio Grande regional information).

Pose and explore with students the following discussion concepts and questions before assigning the story* (**Listening/Speaking:** connecting one’s own experiences, information, insights and ideas with the experiences of others):

1. Why do people flee to the United States? Have students come up with reasons why people flee (political, economical, etc.).
2. Explore what is meant by the “American Dream” or the idea of a “better life.” What do those fleeing expect will happen “on the other side?”
3. What can be dangerous about illegally crossing an international border? What can go wrong?
4. Explore the particulars of a river crossing (see above discussion on aspects of “crossing a river”). How is crossing a river different than crossing a fence or other barrier?
5. Raise the notion of “Separated Family.” What can cause separation? How do people feel in those situations? What awaits them next?

*Pose these questions again after completion of the story (see “Other Follow-up/ Extension Activities” section).

As Reading Progresses:

Assign Across The Great River during a silent reading block for three different sessions and/or incorporate into assigned reading at home (**Reading:** fluency, reading silently). Hand out copies of glossary (attached), and have students to refer to it regularly while they read (**Reading:** vocabulary development).

Pose your own or the following questions to students designed to improve or assess reading comprehension as story progresses (**Reading:** comprehension). The questions can serve as prompts for group discussions (**Listening/Speaking:** gain information, appreciation). As an alternative, assign the questions as take home written work (**Writing:** to express, to discover, to record, to develop and reflect on ideas, and/or to problem solve). Sample comprehension and discussion questions might include:

Session I: Assign Chapters 1-4 (pp. 5-46)

1. Kata decides to bring her cloth doll Anna on the trip. What would you bring if you could only select one thing and had no idea where you were going or how long you would be gone? Explain your choice.
2. What does Kata notice about the man's arm when her father hands over the money? Why do you think Kata instinctively steps away from this man?
3. What clues or language does the author use to indicate that the yellow stone is valuable. Be specific.
4. What goes wrong for the Campos family during their night time crossing of the Rio Grande River into Texas? How would you feel in their situation?
5. Describe what is meant by "You are in the land of good opportunity" (pg. 13).
6. Who is Doña Anita? How does Anita respond to the situation that is brought to her door? What kinds of things does she teach Kata?
7. What do you think happened to Kata's father? Why do you think the not knowing can be worse than finding out the truth?
8. How does Don Juan help Kata's mother? Why do you think he likes visiting Anita on a regular basis?
9. On pg. 44, Kata has a frightening dream. Do you think it is realistic? Why or why not. Anita believes that dreams are signs and that one must listen to their own dreams at all times. What do you believe?
10. What kind of danger do you think Kata and her family might be in?

Session II: Assign Chapters 5-7 (pp. 47-89)

1. Do you think it is strange that Kata's new home lacks a place to cook? What do Kata and her mother decide to do to make the new place cheerier and functional?
2. Kata makes several comparisons between the new place and Anita's place. List at least three of those comparisons.
3. Who does Kata see one day after walking around the block with Pablito? What do you think he wants?
4. When Kata felt scared, her body felt cold all over and chills went up her spine. How does your body feel when you are scared or in danger?
5. Aside from wanting her father to come back, what else does Kata want to do and see and be? What things do you want to do and see and be?
6. Where does Officer Gonzalez take Kata and Pablito? Who is Nell? Ramona?
7. Describe Anita's injuries and the injuries of Kata's mother. Why does Doctor Mendez encourage Kata to visit her mother in the hospital regularly?
8. What difficult decision must Kata make when she is talking with Anita and the Doctor? What does she decide? Why?
9. How does Anita affect Ramona, Nell, and Doctor Mendez differently? What conclusions does Kata have about Anita?

Session III: Assign Chapters 8-10 (pp. 91-136)

1. Why does Kata call Ramona "the silent one?" Do you have nick-names you use for people in your life? Do people have nick-names for you? If so, what are they? If not, write down some fun or nice nick-names you might use for someone you know.

2. What does Kata notice about Nell when they pull up to the Doctor's house? Why do you think Nell feels the way she does?
3. How does Nell describe the Doctor's marriage? What are some advantages and disadvantages of following traditional family or cultural customs?
4. Kata uses words like "vampire" and "poisonous rattler" to describe Pilar. What are some specific things Pilar does to trigger those descriptions? How would you describe Pilar?
5. Why does Olga like Kata? What advice does Olga give Kata regarding Pilar?
6. What conclusion does Kata have about Pilar and the Doctor? Why?
7. When was Doctor Mendez the happiest in his life? What does he feel he should have done instead of marrying Pilar? Why did he go ahead and marry Pilar anyway?
8. What did Anita see in Kata's dream? How does Anita cure Kata? What does Anita do for Kata's mother? What does the Doctor think about the techniques Anita uses?
9. How much is the gold nugget worth? What kinds of things can Kata's family buy with that quantity of money?
10. What happens to Kata's father at the end of the story? What dreams do you think he will have now for his family?

After Reading:

Writing Activities:

1. The author uses similes and metaphors throughout the story. Share some examples with students:
 - Pg. 6 "Papa trudges ahead like a soldier going to battle."
 - Pg. 32 "My heart aches like a pin cushion stuck a thousand times over..."
 - Pg. 68 "I hang my head in shame, like an ostrich ploughs his head into the dirt."Have students play detective and look for at least three other examples from the story's text. Ask students to write down the page and example, and then have students create a new simile or metaphor ending to what they found (**Writing:** using literary devices such as figurative language).
2. Ask students to recollect a recent dream. Have students write down their dream with attention to detail. Encourage students to incorporate the feelings they had in their dream, and to conclude their piece with how they felt immediately upon waking from the dream
3. (**Writing:** recording and reflecting on ideas).
4. Have students imagine that Kata's father kept a journal while sitting in jail. Ask students to write two entries from any point in time during his stay from his perspective
5. (**Writing:** journal writing, using voice and style appropriate to audience and purpose).

Reading Activities:

1. Kata has several dreams in the story (See pg. 44, 73, 106, 110). Have students select one of these situations and read the dream description out loud to a partner. Have the listening partner share the mental images that come to mind from the passage (**Reading:** comprehension, describing mental images that text descriptions evoke). Ask partners to switch roles with a different dream passage.
2. Explore what students know about the Mexican/American border. Ask students why they think so many Mexicans and/or Latin Americans try to enter the United States illegally. Have students research current news stories and uncover common characteristics or

situations shared by those who immigrate illegally to the United States. Encourage the use of the Internet (see border specific links in the “Connecting with Internet/Technology” section), Experts, and Print resources (**Reading:** research, inquiry, using multiple resources).

3. Give students a budget of \$600 dollars. Have students bring in catalogs, newspaper inserts and/or classified advertisements, magazines, information brochures, and other promotional sales material. Ask them to browse the materials, decide what they want, and determine what they can buy with the stipulation that they come as close to \$600 as possible without going over. Have students compile a two column list of their purchases and quoted prices, and accumulative total (**Reading:** variety of sources, taking action, making informed recommendations and/or decisions).

Connecting with the Internet/Technology:

www.americanpatrol.org This site is the “Glen Spencer’s American Patrol Report” and includes border-specific feature articles, border patrol updates, and links to numerous other border-related links.

www.bic.state.tx.us The Borderlands Information Center (BIC) is a central clearing house and referral center for information about the Texas/Mexico border region.

www.cis.org The Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) explores Immigration in a time of recession. This site provides access to “Common Topics in Immigration” as well as an examination of trends since 2000.

www.nmsu.edu This site from New Mexico State University out of Las Cruces, New Mexico has excellent resources. In particular, click on “News and Media” then scroll down and click on “Frontera Norte Sur.” FNS provides on-line news coverage of the US-Mexico border.

www.riogrande.org This is the site for The Rio Grande Institute which provides information about how to appreciate and protect the cultural, economic and natural resources of the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo basin.

www.rivercommunities.org This is the site for America’s River Communities with a link to BIC (see above) or click on Rio Grande for information on the Rio Grande river and its border region, access to a documentary film, opportunities for Internet education, and related book and music reports.

www.utep.edu/border This site from the University of Texas at El Paso, Texas has direct access to the Borderlands Encyclopedia, a digital educational resource on Contemporary United States-México Border Issues. Click on “Information Topics” for other great links.

Other Follow-up/Extension Activities:

Revisit the same questions that were discussed in the “Before Reading” section. Encourage students to respond using their increased information from the research they conducted in the “After Reading: Activity #2” as well as referring to specific situations from the story (**Listening/Speaking:** connecting one’s own experiences, information, insights and ideas with

the experiences of others). Ask students to note any changes in their thinking or responses as a result of having read the story.

Have students select one of the questions from the Before Reading section and write a response from Kata's point of view (**Writing:** to express, to reflect on ideas, to select and use voice appropriate to audience).

Additional Reading/Other Books:

Beatty, Patricia. *Lupita Mañana*, (1992 pg.). To help her poverty-stricken family, 13-year-old Lupita enters California as an illegal alien and starts to work while constantly on the watch for "la migra."

Castilla, Julia Mercedes. *Emilio*, (105 pg.). Big brother Jaime and little sister Victoria seem to be fitting in well to their new homeland, but coming from a Central American village to the United States has been hard on Emilio.

Garver, Susan. *Coming to North America: from Mexico, Cuba and Puerto Rico*, (161 pg.). This non-fiction book explores the immigrant experiences of Mexicans, Cubans and Puerto Ricans in the United States.

Lachtman, Ofelia Dumas. *The Girl From Playa Blanca*, (259 pg.). When Elena and her little brother leave their Mexican seaside village to search for their immigrant father in Los Angeles, they encounter intrigue, crime, mystery, friendship, and love.

Morales, Dionicio. *Dionicio Morales: A Life in Two Cultures*, (199 pg.). From bitter poverty to sweet success, this compelling autobiography recounts one family's engrossing tale of immigration to the United States.

Temple, Frances. *Grab Hands and Run*, (165 pg.). In this novel, 12-year-old Felipe's father disappears and his family must flee from the authorities. A vivid portrayal of the brutal realities for one Salvadoran family as it journeys to safety in Canada.

Glossary of Spanish Terms (Attached)

Acknowledgments

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GLOSSARY OF SPANISH TERMS (*denotes English)
VOCABULARY/VOCABULARIO
 (boh-kah-boo-**'lah**-ree-oh)

Abuelo (ah- 'bweh -loh)	Grandfather
Anglo ('ahn -gloh)	Caucasian
¡Alto! ('ahl -toh)	Stop!
Bueno ('bweh -noh)	Good, fine
Chiquita (chee- 'kee -tah)	Little one
¡Cola de gato! ('koh -lah deh 'gah -toh)	Tail of a cat (Cat got your tail? Unable to speak)
Compadre	Mate, chum, pal
Fantástico (fahn- 'tahs -tee-koh)	Fantastic
Gracias, Doña Anita ('grah -see-ahs Doh- n'yah Ah- 'nee -tah)	Thank you, “respected” Anita
Gracias, niña ('grah -see-ahs nee- n'yah)	Thank you, child (or girl)
M'ija (m- 'ee -hah)	My daughter
Por favor (pohr fah- 'bohr)	Please
¿Qué? (keh)	What?
Ranchito (rahn- 'chee -toh)	Little ranch or farm
Señor (seh- n'yohr)	Sir, Mr.
Señora (seh- n'yohr -ah)	Madame, Mrs.
Señorita Nell (seh- n'yohr -ee-tah)	Miss Nell
Sí (see)	Yes
Sí, Señora (see seh- n'yohr -ah)	Yes, madame