

A Teacher's Guide to

The Distance Between Us

A Dream Called Home

By Reyna Grande

“I would write about the immigrant experience in a way that showed our humanity, that told the world we weren't numbers or statistics, but human beings, and that our stories deserved to be told.”

—Reyna Grande from *A Dream Called Home*

About the Books

Reyna Grande's 2012 National Book Critics Circle Award finalist, *The Distance Between Us*, tells the story of her harrowing early years growing up in Mexico without her parents, who left to pursue a better life in the United States; it then follows her experiences in the US after she and her siblings crossed the border with their father, settling in Los Angeles. In her follow-up memoir, *A Dream Called Home*, Grande continues her story as she recalls the many obstacles she had to overcome to become the first person in her family to earn a college degree and fulfill her dream of becoming a writer. As in *The Distance Between Us*, Grande unflinchingly explores the themes of abandonment and separation, identity, the search for belonging, and how holding fast to one's dreams is not only the author's story, but the story of millions of immigrants who strive to create a better life for themselves and their families.

The questions and activities below particularly address the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (RL.11-12 .1, 2, 4) (SL. 11-12.1) (W.11-12.7)

Before Reading

Present the following question to the class: What does the concept of *home* mean to you? Give students fifteen minutes to respond in writing. Next, place students in small groups to share their ideas. Finally, lead a broader conversation with the entire class. As students share and listen, encourage them to consider how others' perspectives are both the same and different from their own. After reading *The Distance Between Us* and *A Dream Called Home*, students can refer back to this prereading activity to discuss how the content impacts their understanding of home.

Present both memoirs to the class, and inform them that Reyna Grande is a Mexican-American author who came to the United States as a small child. Write the word *immigration* on the board or screen. Ask students to discreetly write one word on a piece of paper that they associate with

immigration and/or immigrants. Have students fold their papers and place them in a basket. Choose a student to write down each word as you read them aloud. Ask students to categorize each word into one of three columns: positive, negative, or neutral. Provide students time to offer comments or questions before they begin reading. After reading the memoirs, students can choose to add more words based on what they've read, or refer to the list as they begin to answer the discussion questions.

Discussion Questions for *A Dream Called Home*

1. On Reyna Grande's first day at UC Santa Cruz, a fellow student asks, "Where are you from?" Grande writes, "It was an innocent question, but it was a question that made me think about my foreignness, a question that made me raise my guard." Discuss how the concept of "the other" permeates the life of immigrants.
2. Discuss Grande's experience in her freshman literature class. As the teacher calls roll, he pronounces Grande name as Renée Grand. Why would it have been easier for Grande to "become" Renée Grand, to "blend in"? What does Grande's decision to correct her teacher tell you about her character? Discuss the meaning of assimilation and how the pressures of becoming "American" affect immigrants. Consider the following: "As a woman of color and immigrant, I knew what it was like to be marginalized, to have to prove constantly how American I was, always to have to fight for my right to remain." What does it mean to be marginalized? How do you think marginalization places pressure on immigrants to assimilate into American society?
3. Throughout the text, Grande turns to writing to help her navigate her world as a daughter, a student, a mother, and a writer. She refers to writing as "an act of survival." For Grande, how is writing a survival mechanism? What does Marta mean when she says of Grande's writing, "It isn't melodrama. It's your truth."
4. Despite Grande's fraught relationship with her father, Natalio, she longs for his approval and a deep and authentic connection with him. As Natalio is building a pergola for her patio, Grande begins to ask about his childhood and formative years in Mexico. What does Grande discover about her father, and how does her discovery lead to this realization: "And as I sat on the patio with my child and the man that I loved, the casita rising about us, I realized that for the second time in my life, my father had built me a house, but I was the one building myself a home"?

Discussion Questions across Both Books

1. In *The Distance Between Us* [Distance], Grande describes a fifth grade experience involving a writing competition. Grande decides to write a personal narrative, written in Spanish, about her birth story. The book is callously rejected by her teacher. Hugely disappointed, the rejection leaves Grande feeling “just not good enough.” In *A Dream Called Home* [Dream], Grande recalls this experience, telling a fellow student, ““To me, my teacher hadn’t just rejected my story, she had also rejected me, and I felt ashamed to be an immigrant, a Spanish speaker, and a person of color.”” How does this experience fuel Grande’s determination to be a successful writer? Cite other examples from the text when Grande uses experiences in both Mexico and the United States to fuel her drive to succeed. What strategies does she use, both internal and external, to overcome obstacles and accomplish goals?

2. Reread chapter 20 in *Distance*, in which Grande describes her family’s border crossing experiences. Next, reread and analyze the excerpt by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Dream*: “The U.S.-Mexico border es una herida abierta where the third world grates against the first and bleeds, before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture.” Discuss how Grande uses the border between the United States and Mexico as a metaphor for family separation, loss, fear, abandonment, and the immigrant experience.

3. Discuss the meaning of the word *paradox*. In “Dream,” Grande reflects on a paradox of the immigrant experience: “Despite the trauma I suffered from my father’s decision to immigrate, that same decision would allow me to be the parent he could never be.” Cite and discuss additional examples of paradox in Grande’s life that came about as a result of her father’s decision to bring her to the United States.

4. In the prologue of *Distance*, the reader learns that *El Otro Lado*, the “Other Side,” is a euphemism for the United States. Throughout the text, Grande, her family, and community members reveal their beliefs in the mythic image and promise of the United States, and how that belief leads so many people to cross the border to escape hunger and poverty while searching for a better life. Discuss Grande’s experiences in both memoirs that contrast with the dreams and expectations that people in Grande’s hometown have about life in the United States. On a visit to Iguala, a young cousin asks Grande if she lives in Disneyland. Grande reflects on the question, realizing that she *does* live in a “magical place.” Discuss how living in the United States can be viewed as a privilege, and how, for many people born in the US, those privileges are taken for granted.

5. Throughout both memoirs, Grande has big dreams. Discuss the importance of dreams, and how Grande’s steadfast hope, optimism, determination, and resilience propels her to both personal and professional success. In *Dream*, Grande declines a book contract because the editor

wants to fundamentally change the story. Discuss how this decision supports her dream of becoming the author that *she* wants to be, publishing the stories as she “envisioned” them.

6. Education figures heavily in both memoirs. How does Natalio’s insistence that his children receive an education affect Grande and her siblings? Why is Grande so disappointed when Natalio discontinues his English class? Discuss the influence of Diana, Marta, and the other female mentors in Grande’s life. How do the Latina writers that Grande was exposed to also serve as her mentors? Reread chapter 24 of *Dream*. How did Grande’s school experiences as a newly arrived immigrant help her to become an effective and empathetic teacher? Of her students, Grande describes, “Their stories were so similar to my own. Broken homes, broken families—that was the price we all had paid for a shot at the American Dream.” Dig deeper into this statement based on what you know about the immigrant experience in the United States. How might talking about these stories help people make connections? What is your personal concept of the American Dream? Why do you feel that way?

Thematic Connections

Identity: In both memoirs, Reyna Grande examines the concept of identity, looking at life as a Mexican-American, a daughter, a single mother, a woman of color, and a writer. In *A Dream Called Home*, Grande writes, “Because I was a child immigrant, my identity was split; I often felt like an outcast for not being completely Mexican but not fully American either. The border was still inside me.” Reread this entire passage and discuss the concept of “split identity,” or the reality of being caught between two worlds. Marta tells Grande, “If they treat you differently in Mexico it is because you *are* different . . . you are now bilingual, bicultural, and binational. You are not less. You are more.” How do Marta’s words help Grande to feel less “cut in half,” and more “transformed into twice the girl I used to be”? Discuss how Folklorico helped Grande find a place to belong in America without sacrificing her cultural heritage. Reread chapter 31 and discuss what Grande reveals about the “duality of being an immigrant.” Grande works tirelessly to find her writer’s voice. Reread the first paragraph of chapter 27. How is finding one’s voice an integral part of identity formation?

Family Relationships: In *The Distance Between Us*, readers learn that Grande’s only relationship with her father is through a photograph; the young Grande refers to her absent father as “The Man Behind the Glass.” Discuss the arc of Grande’s relationship with Natalio. How does his initial decision to leave the family behind in Mexico set the course for their fraught relationship? In her commencement speech, Grande publicly reveals Natalio’s alcoholism and abusive behavior. Why do you think she decided to include this truth, knowing that it could further distance her from her father? How does the distance Grande feels from her parents and siblings factor into her becoming pregnant? Discuss Grande’s intellectual and emotional reaction

to the news of her pregnancy, and how her own upbringing factors into her decision to keep the baby. Discuss Grande's decision to go back to school, and Mago's reaction. What does Grande mean by saying, "I'm doing this for both of us." Discuss the cycles of poverty, separation, and abuse that are described in both memoirs, and the steps Grande takes to break those cycles.

Separation/Abandonment/Distance: Grande is haunted by the memories of being abandoned by her father as a small child, and repeatedly by her mother. Discuss her description of the ongoing pain she experiences: "I was constantly picking at the wounds of my memories and bleeding again, and again." Cite examples from the text that support her description. In *Dream*, Grande is on a bus heading back to her hometown; she writes, "As my bus traveled south, I thought about my mother. Every time I talked to her, I couldn't control the anger that raged inside me. Even after all these years, I still felt the devastating blow of her abandonment." Discuss Grande's relationship with her mother over the course of *Dream* and *Distance*, and how her feelings of abandonment translate into the loneliness that haunts her into her adulthood. In *Dream*, she writes: "For years we had criticized our father and mother for prioritizing their own needs above their children's. I was finally beginning to understand that it takes as much courage to leave as it does to stay." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain your reasoning. Reread the passage about Clemente, the fruit vendor. Discuss the aspects of sacrifice that immigrants like Clemente make in an effort to provide better lives for their families.

Determination and Resilience: In both memoirs, the themes of determination and resilience are presented over and over again. In *A Dream Called Home*, Grande describes how she ultimately won a lottery to buy a house in South Central Los Angeles, and uses the words *persisted*, *tenacity*, and *endurance*. Discuss the meaning of these words and how Grande personifies them in her life. How is the following passage from *Dream* a metaphor for Grande's life: "We looked at the cypress and pine trees which were leaning against the wind, beautiful in their struggle for survival, clinging to the soil with fierce determination"? In *Dream*, Cory tells Grande, "Because of your experiences you have the perseverance, drive, and unyielding desire to succeed." How does living through struggle and hardship foster these traits?

Home: Discuss Grande's efforts to provide Betty with a stable home. Why is it so important for Grande to prove to her mother that she can take care of Betty? Discuss Grande's notion of a "third country" when she says, "Not Mexico, not the U.S., but the hyphen between Mexican and American." How does this third country conflict with Grande's desire for a home, and what does she mean by her heart being "the open wound"? In *Dream*, when Grande decides not to move in with Gabe, she thinks, "I would build my home out of the only things I had—words and dreams." Discuss how Grande accomplished this goal. Why is being a homeowner so important to Grande? In *Dream*, Grande compares her first novel, *Across a Hundred Mountains*, to a house's structure: "And as I held my book in my hands, feeling its comforting weight, its thick cover as sturdy as concrete walls, the words on the page lined up like rows and rows of bricks,

my name in capital letters stretched across the cover, I realized what I had done. I had finally built a home that I could carry.” Discuss what she means by this last line.

Extending Learning

The State of Immigration

Donald Trump said the following in his 2015 presidential bid speech: “When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.” Since Trump became the forty-fifth president of the United States, immigrants and immigration rights have been under steady attack. Begin a study of changes in immigration patterns and policies over the past decade, including the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA), the Trump policy of separating children from parents caught crossing the border illegally, ICE raids, and the “Muslim ban.” Bring students together to present their findings, and begin a debate about possible solutions to the nation’s most pressing immigration issues. The following links provide background information on the topic, including the August 11, 2018, *New York Times* opinion piece by Grande:

- <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/11/opinion/sunday/the-impossible-choice-my-father-had-to-make.html>
- <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/100000006031838/trump-doubles-down-on-government-shutdown-over-border-security.html>
- <https://immigration.procon.org/view.resource.php?resourceID=000842>

Writing Your Truth

Since her childhood, Grande has turned to writing as a lifeline and an “act of survival.” By believing that her stories mattered, Grande was able to write her truth. In *A Dream Called Home*, Grande writes, “This was the first time I’d considered that my experiences might be things to celebrate, rather than be ashamed of. Was it possible that everything I had gone through had shaped me into a unique individual with a unique voice?” Identify something in your own life that is worth celebrating, and write about it in any form, such as essay, poem, short story, or script.

Latina Artists Arise

Grande was fortunate to have excellent teachers during her educational journey who introduced her to a variety of Latina and Chicana writers such as Sandra Cisneros, Helena María Viramontes, Julia Alvarez, and others. Begin a multiple author study of these and other

twentieth- and twenty-first-century Latina writers. Schedule a series of literary salons to analyze and celebrate particular works.

The Immigrant Next Door

Because of language barriers, poverty, fear of deportation, and a variety of other reasons, too many immigrants live on the margins and in the shadows of American society. Immigrants are part of every community in the United States. How familiar are students with the immigrant population in your town, city, and state? Begin a class research project to discover the facts about “the immigrant next door.” Upon completion of research, have students present their work in a school-wide assembly. (Many community organizations exist to aid immigrants. Before beginning this project, it would be helpful to seek out such an organization, not only for current information, but for possible classroom speakers. For example, Neighbors Link services the immigrant population of Westchester County, NY. Here is a link to their website:

<https://www.neighborslink.org>).

DREAM On

Grande dedicated *The Distance Between Us* to her father, Natalio, “And to all the DREAMers,” referring to the population of immigrants protected by the 2012 Obama administration program to “allow people brought to the US illegally as children the temporary right to live, study and work in America (source: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/sep/04/donald-trump-what-is-daca-dreamers>).” Give students time to research the facts around DACA and the Trump administration’s efforts to end it. Stage a debate that presents not just the political sides of the issues, but the emotional, economic, and humanitarian aspects as well. The following article appeared in the August 9 edition of the *New York Times*, and provides a fairly current account of the fate of DACA in a variety of states: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/09/us/daca-texas-courts-immigration.html>.

Resources for Teachers and Students

Immigrant Learning Center:

<http://www.ilctr.org/promoting-immigrants/ilc-workshops/educators-2/>

Teaching Tolerance: <https://www.tolerance.org/moment/supporting-students-immigrant-families>

National Writing Project:

<https://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2898>

Words Have No Borders:

https://www.nwp.org/cs/public/download/nwp_file/12496/Words_Have_No_Borders.pdf?x-r=pcfile_d

Informed Immigrant:

<https://www.informedimmigrant.com/resources/>

John Jay College:

<http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/undocumentedstudents>

The Advocates for Human Rights:

<https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/teachingimmigration.html>

<https://cla.umn.edu/ihrc/immigrant-stories>

Immigrant Stories (<http://immigrants.mndigital.org/exhibits/show/immigrantstories-exhibit/stories-a-m>) helps recent immigrants and refugees create digital stories: brief videos with images, text, and audio about a personal experience. The IHRC shares and preserves these digital stories for future generations through the IHRC Archives (<https://cla.umn.edu/ihrc/ihrc-archives>), the Minnesota Digital Library (<https://mndigital.org/>), and the Digital Public Library of America (<https://dp.la/>).

This guide was created by Colleen Carroll, children's book author, curriculum writer, literacy specialist, and education consultant. Learn more about Colleen at www.colleencarroll.us.

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