

## A Reading Group Guide to

### *Santiago's Road Home*

By Alexandra Diaz

#### **About the Book**

Fleeing a physically abusive home, twelve-year-old Santiago finds an unexpected family in María Dolores and her young daughter, Alegría. Together, they decide to make the dangerous journey across the border to *el otro lado*, the United States. The path is full of danger, but nothing prepares Santiago for what awaits him on the other side. *Santiago's Road Home* takes readers inside an ICE detention facility, shedding light on the challenges children like Santiago face, while affirming their resilience, strength, and determination to work hard for better lives.

#### **Discussion Questions**

1. A book's prologue is often used to establish setting and provide details that will connect to the main story. What questions about Santiago's story do you have after reading the prologue? As you read, try to find the answers to these questions. Which questions would you like more information about?
2. What do Santiago's memories of his mother reveal about her? Why do you think the memory of dancing in the rain made such an impression on him? What is your favorite memory of a loved one? How does reflecting on it make you feel?
3. Why does María Dolores decide to go to the United States? Why does Santiago ask to go with her? Why do you think María Dolores decides to let Santiago accompany them on the journey?
4. Describe María Dolores's plan for crossing the border into the United States. What is dangerous about this plan? Why do you think she does not try to immigrate legally? Why does Santiago remark later that "the possibility of [immigrating] the 'correct way' hadn't even occurred to him"?
5. María Dolores tells Santiago, "Even though I don't have much, I like to support hardworking people trying to make a living." What does this statement reveal about her values and priorities? Explain your answer. What do you most value in your life? How do you act upon or share your values?
6. How does Santiago's willingness to work hard and help others allow him to gain the trust of those he meets on his journey, such as Don José, Domínguez, Consuelo, and Señor Dante? How do these adults help him in return?
7. According to the glossary, *coyote* is a term for a person who smuggles immigrants into the United States. How does Santiago find a trustworthy coyote? What does Dominguez say about

the difference between good coyotes and bad coyotes? Why do you think he considers what he does “an honest living,” even though what he is doing is illegal?

8. Which part of Santiago’s journey across the desert do you think was the most dangerous? Where do you see him having to be strong for others? When do you see others looking out for him? Explain your answers.

9. Describe Santiago’s favorite childhood story: *La princesa y el viento*. What do you think is the moral of this story? Why do you think this particular story means so much to Santiago? What was your favorite fairy tale or folktale when you were younger? What did you like most about it?

10. When Santiago first sees the detention center, he notices that it “resembles a prison instead of a sanctuary.” Later, his friend Guanaco notes that children in detention ““have fewer rights than murderers.”” Describe the conditions in the detention center. How is it similar to and different from a prison? What kind of atmosphere does this create for the children inside?

11. How does learning to read and write impact Santiago’s life? Señor Dante says that the government has decided to stop funding educational programs in detention centers because it is a “luxury they can no longer afford.” Do you think that education is a luxury or a necessity? Do you think all children should have access to an education? Explain your answers.

12. Santiago, María Dolores, and Alegría claim that they are siblings even though they are not related by blood. What does Santiago mean when he says that admitting he has two sisters is “the internal truth”? Do you have people in your life who you consider to be family even though you are not related? What is your definition of family?

13. What does it mean for someone immigrating to be granted asylum? Why does Señora Bárbara say that Santiago has a great case for being granted asylum in the United States?

14. Señor Dante tells the boys in his class that even though they cannot control the future, they can control how they respond to what comes their way. How does Santiago demonstrate this ability to control how he responds to adversity? How could you apply this advice to your own life?

15. What makes Santiago think that María Dolores forgot about him? What does he find out to understand what really happened?

16. It is often possible to analyze a story as a hero’s journey—a type of narrative with specific steps. One of these steps involves the hero being tested. How many different tests does Santiago face on his journey? Consider events that tested him physically and emotionally, as well as times when he had to use intelligence and creativity to solve a problem. What characteristics helped him overcome these challenges?

17. When we talk about words, we say that they have both denotative (literal) and connotative (associative) meanings. What are different meanings for the word *home*? What do you think the title *Santiago’s Road Home* means?

18. Read the author's note and resources sections at the end of the novel. *Santiago's Road Home* is a work of fiction, yet it is based on true accounts of people immigrating to the United States. Does knowing that information change the way you think about the story? Explain your answer. Why do you think the author, Alexandra Diaz, wrote this novel? What do you think she hopes readers will understand after reading it?

19. We discuss books about other cultural experiences as being either *mirrors* or *windows*. A mirror is a book that reflects your own experience in some way, allowing you to see a part of yourself in the story. A window is a book that allows you to look into the experience of someone whose life is very different from your own, and, as a result, helps you to understand things that others experience. Was this book a mirror or a window for you? Why do you think it is important to read both types of books?

### **Extension Activities**

1. Consider the following comment from *Santiago's Road Home*: "Not playing by the rules didn't make someone bad. Especially if the rules were unjust to begin with." Do you believe that there are times when it is okay to break a rule or disobey a law? Write a persuasive essay or speech about whether or not you agree with this statement.

2. Reflect on your experience reading a book that uses vocabulary from two different languages. How often were you able to understand what unfamiliar words meant based on their contexts? How often did you need to refer to the glossary? Try writing a short story or short autobiography that incorporates words from another language. Try to provide enough context for a reader to comprehend the meaning of these words. At the end of the story, include a glossary. Exchange your story with a partner, and then discuss your experiences reading each other's work.

3. In chapter fourteen, the author reveals that both María Dolores and Santiago left Mexico to escape domestic violence. After spending time in the harsh detention center, Santiago thinks, "As horrible as staying here would be, it [doesn't] compare with returning back there." Research the reasons that people attempt to immigrate to the United States, especially women and children. What are the most common reasons? Are they similar to María Dolores's and Santiago's situations? Work in a small group to draft a proposal for measures that could help address one of the main reasons people like Santiago feel they have to leave their home countries.

4. María Dolores, Alegría, and Santiago almost die as a result of dehydration and heat stroke. Research the dangers of dehydration and heat-related illnesses, and create an informative poster or video for your school about the importance of hydration. Think about the audience you'd like to reach, especially athletes and others who spend significant time outside.

5. In the detention center, Guanaco explains the separation policy to Santiago, saying, "They say it's to keep people safe. Personally, I think it's to hold power. Only bullies separate you from your family." Research the government's separation policy for people immigrating to the United States. What reasons are given for separating adults from children and boys from girls? What reasons are given by advocates who oppose family separation policies? What do you think the

government's policy *should* be? Explain your position using facts that you have researched from reliable sources.

6. Research the process for immigrating legally into the United States. Why is it difficult for someone in Santiago's position to follow this process? What role do nonprofits like Ley Unido play in helping people like Santiago enter the United States? As a class, come up with questions you have about the process or the history of immigration. Then decide who might be best to answer these questions, such as a local immigration lawyer or advocacy group, and see if you can discuss with them via email or video conference.

7. One of the lawyers for Ley Unido tells Santiago, "There are over thirteen thousand youths in facilities all over the country, and this is one of the better ones." Alexandra Diaz also references the fact that the United States government spends more than seven hundred dollars per person per day to hold children in immigration centers. If you were to design a facility that could house two hundred children awaiting immigration hearings at a cost of seven hundred dollars a day per person, what would be your monthly operating budget? How would you spend this budget? What programs and assistance would you provide for the children?

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