Introduction

Across a Hundred Mountains (2006) is Reyna Grande’s first novel. Largely autobiographical, the book opens with a poverty-stricken family living in a cardboard shack on the outskirts of a small Mexican village. Juana is a young girl whose father, Miguel, has left his family to find work en el otro lado—“on the other side.” He finds a “coyote” to take him to America, promising to send money to his family. After two years, the family has heard nothing from Miguel. Juana loses her baby sister in a flood, and the family is deeply in debt to the village’s loan shark. Juana, convinced that her father is across the mountains, leaves her mother to find him.

Juana’s story is intercut with a narrative from the point of view of Adelina Vasquez, a Mexican girl who is a social worker in Los Angeles. Adelina is traveling to Mexico in order to discover the truth about her own father’s disappearance nineteen years earlier, and to get away from her pimp/boyfriend. Traveling in opposite directions on similar quests, the two women meet in a Tijuana jail, where Adelina agrees to help Juana find the “coyote” who brought her father across the border and into the United States.

While on the surface, Across a Hundred Mountains chronicles the personal journeys of two women, it also considers the larger issue of immigration and examines the poverty and destitution experienced by scores of Mexican families who risk their lives trying to escape their situations by crossing the U.S. border.

Literary and Historical Context

Across a Hundred Mountains takes as its subject matter the contemporary phenomenon of Mexican immigration into the United States. Although the book is a fictional account of immigration, Grande drew heavily upon her own experiences. Born in Mexico in 1975 and left behind to be raised by her grandmother while her parents immigrated to the United States to work, she came to the United States as an undocumented immigrant at the age of nine. Unable to find books that she could relate to, Grande has said, “I wrote this story because all of the books that I read, especially those by Latino authors, never quite captured my own experience,” adding, “A lot of books deal with the children of immigrants—what they go through and their identity as U.S.-born Latinos. I always felt a little left out because I wasn’t born here, and these stories weren’t reflecting my personal experience” (Rappaport).

Rather than discuss the political implications of the immigration issue, Grande personalizes and humanizes the poverty and desperation faced by the thousands of Mexican immigrants coming over the border each year. Speaking about her own experience, Grande has commented, “The poverty—that’s very real to my experience…. My sister in Mexico had a habit of picking up things off the ground… and eating them, just because we didn’t have any food” (Rappaport).

The border’s tendency to break families is illustrated in the novel as well as in Grande’s experience. Her father left for the United States, followed by her mother. When Grande crossed the border after them, several years later, her parents were divorced. According to the Los Angeles Daily News, “She has no memory of her parents ever living together. And when she arrived in the United States, she lived with her father, and although her mother was just 20 minutes away, she only saw her once or twice a month,” adding, “Grande said those childhood experiences reverberate in her writing” (Coca). In the book, Juana’s family is broken when her father leaves—an event that is a catalyst for further fractures and disconnects within the family, ultimately leading to Juana’s own journey and self-discovery.
Cultural identity assumes a fluid nature in Across a Hundred Mountains. Upon crossing the border, people’s identities shift and change. When characters enter a country that does not want them, they become anonymous and alone. Families on the Mexican side of the border, stuck in a cycle of poverty and violence, are torn apart as a result of members leaving. Despite his intention to effect a change by earning more money for the family, when Juana’s father leaves, the family’s misfortunes intensify. Grande assigns an almost mythical quality to the journey from Mexico to the United States by referring to the destination as “the other side.” She equates the journey from Mexico to the United States with a kind of rebirth, where new identities are acquired, but the novel shows that ultimately cultural identity is inescapable.

The theme of cultural identity is extended by Grande’s treatment of duality in the novel. Juana and Adelina represent two sides of the same coin, each on a journey to discover themselves. Early in the novel, Juana meets a man who, speaking of the moon, tells her, “It has two faces. She only shows one face to the world. Even though it changes shape constantly, it’s always the same face we see. But her second face, her second face remains hidden in darkness. That’s the face no one can see. People call it the dark side of the moon. Two identities. Two sides of a coin.” (Grande 25). Rather than maintaining one identity, the novel illustrates the modernist notion of a fractured, multiplicity of identities.

Grande’s narrative in Across a Hundred Mountains shifts between her two main characters. The book opens with a section told from Juana’s point of view. Héctor Torres, associate professor at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, has commented, “Adelina” opens the narrations, situating the reader amid the search for the lost/absent father. The reader finds Adelina looking for the lost bones of her father. Nineteen years have passed, the narrator tells us, since the search began: ‘Too many years thinking he had abandoned them.’ Grande leaves her reader suspended over this abyss of narrative time and the corpse Adelina’s search has uncovered” (Torres). Across a Hundred Mountains has a narrative structure that
manipulates time by situating Juana in a linear, chronological trajectory, while Adelina, generally moving forward through her time, is simultaneously allowed to move backward, through Juana’s time. As Torres observes, “Grande plays with narrative time, making it move backwards and forwards with each name until they collide, unsettling the formula of self-identity, A=A” (Torres).

Grande uses deceptively simple language to tell her characters’ stories, with short, sometimes clipped sentences. This makes for a fast-paced story, and also gives the reader a sense of the complicated emotional states occupied by people living very simple lives and dealing with very basic human needs. One critic has suggested that, “Across a Hundred Mountains… maintains its power throughout because Reyna Grande keeps control over her language and does not feel a need to trumpet emotionally volatile scenes of alcohol and drug abuse, rape, poverty and infant mortality” (Olivas).

Critical Reception

Garnering critical acclaim, Grande’s novel won an American Book Award (2007) and an El Premio Aztlan Literary Award (2006). Called “a breathtaking debut from a young writer who has a remarkable literary future before her” (Olivas), Across a Hundred Mountains has been praised for its sparse language and honest portrayal of the realities of Mexico’s poor and of the immigration experience. One critic observed that the novel is written “In evocative language that never falls into the trap of bathos,” which contributes to “a striking and moving story” (Olivas). Another, calling the book “a powerful story that balances cultural trauma with reterritorialization and cultural renewal,” calls attention to the book’s “disarmingly simple prose” (Torres).

Many critics note that Grande drew on her own life experiences while writing the novel, one commenting that the fact that “the novel is filled with details drawn from Grande’s own life adds immeasurably to the poignancy of the story” (Rappaport), but Grande maintains that the work is not entirely autobiographical—merely informed by her experience with Mexican poverty and as an undocumented immigrant. Commenting on Grande’s use of autobiography, one critic noted, “While acknowledging that the process draws from her personal experience, [Grande] was also quite candid about her disposition to depart from it and make up a tale free to bend the codes of authority housed under the name of realism” (Torres).

While the vast majority of critics gave Across a Hundred Mountains rave reviews, some registered complaints about the writing, accusing the novel of having such shortcomings as “stereotyped characters and wildly melodramatic plotting” (Reese). Grande has been accused of writing with a melodramatic bent in the past. The Los Angeles Daily News reported that “Grande…said her melodramatic bent was understandable considering she’s

Crossed a Hundred Mountains

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Reyna Grande was born into poverty in rural Mexico and crossed the border to live with her father in Los Angeles when she was eight years old. At the urging of an English teacher at Pasadena City College, Grande attended the University of California at Santa Cruz, where she earned a bachelor’s degree in creative writing in 1999. Her senior project in UCSC’s Literature Department was the first eighty pages of Across a Hundred Mountains.

After graduating, Grande was named a 2003 PEN USA Emerging Voices Fellow, which enabled her to enroll in free writing classes at UCLA. Now an American citizen, she lives in Los Angeles, teaches English as a second language, frequently visits schools to talk about writing and her books, and continues to write fiction.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited


Additional Resources

Criticism and Reviews


Shank, Jenny. “Reyna Grande’s Across a Hundred Mountains.” New West Books and Writers, 16 Aug.

Gale Resources


Open Web Sources

Grande’s website featuring a biography, speaking engagements, sections dedicated to her books, and contact information is at http://www.reynagrande.com/index.htm

Grande’s publisher’s website includes a biography, interviews, reviews, and excerpts from her novels. http://authors.simonandschuster.com/Reyna-Grande/27097999

An interview with the author in which she discusses her books and her career is at http://thedarkphantom.wordpress.com/2009/03/31/on-the-spotlight-

For Further Reading


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