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## A child's nightmare ride

### 'Enrique's Journey' tells of young Central Americans in search of their mothers who went to U.S. for work

Reviewed by Julie Foster  
Sunday, March 5, 2006

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#### Enrique's Journey

#### The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite With His Mother

By Sonia Nazario

RANDOM HOUSE; 292 Pages; \$26.95

#### IMAGES



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More than 10 years ago, novelist T.C. Boyle slit "The Tortilla Curtain," revealing an unsavory world folded into the canyons of Southern California. Luis Alberto

Urrea offered readers the opportunity to traverse "The Devil's Highway" in his riveting 2004 account of a death walk through the Arizona desert. Now, award-winning journalist Sonia Nazario invites readers aboard el Tren de la Muerte, The Train of Death.

"Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite With his Mother," is a meticulously documented account of an epic journey, one undertaken by thousands of children every year.

The impetus for "Enrique's Journey" was a 1997 conversation Nazario had with her Guatemalan housekeeper, Carmen. What she learned from the woman stunned her. Twelve years before, unable to support her children, Carmen traveled to America, leaving her children behind.

Why, Nazario wondered, "Among Latinos, where family is all-important, where for women motherhood is valued far above all else, why are droves of women leaving their children?"

This continuing Latina exodus has also given birth to a monstrous legacy. Frantic at being abandoned, Central American children, some as young as 7, traverse Mexico atop freight trains to be reunited with their mothers in the United States.

The author decided to make the train trip herself to see what the children endure.

Nazario, who lives in Los Angeles, has written about social issues for 22 years, winning the George Polk Award for International Reporting and the Grand Prize of the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Awards. She was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for the Los Angeles Times series upon which "Enrique's Journey" is based.

She began what became a five-year odyssey by first contacting her newspaper colleagues. They helped her obtain permission from the four companies whose trains travel through Mexico. She spoke with dozens of children who had made the journey.

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She heard about "the gangsters who rule the train tops, the bandits along the tracks, the Mexican police who patrol the train stations and rape and rob, about the dangers of losing a leg getting onto and off of moving trains."

She learned that, while riders fear time in Chiapas, where they are often beaten, robbed and raped and called the "stinking undocumented," Veracruz is known for the overwhelming generosity of its residents, who understand the young riders are making an attempt at a better life, as many of their own children have done.

"Sometimes twenty or thirty people stream out of their homes along the rails and toward the train. They wave. They smile, they shout, and then they throw food."

By May of 2000, Nazario made contact with a 17-year-old Honduran boy in Nuevo Laredo, who after eight attempts atop the trains, succeeded in getting to the border. He was waiting to cross over to find his mother in North Carolina.

"From Enrique, I gleaned every possible detail about his life and trip north. I noted every place he had gone, every experience, every person he recalled who had helped or hindered him along the way."

Nazario retraced his trip, starting in his hometown of Tegucigalpa, Honduras. She rode buses through Central America, as Enrique had done, then boarded a train in Chiapas, Mexico. Her six-month journey covered 1,600 miles, on seven trains, through 13 Mexican states. For additional research, she retook the journey in 2003.

"From Tegucigalpa through Mexico, I interviewed dozens of migrants and other experts -- medical workers, priests, nuns, police officers. All this added to the journey and helped corroborate Enrique's story."

There is nothing easy about this story. Nazario doesn't flinch from recounting the grisly conditions of extreme poverty that drive women to leave their countries, the brutal environment encountered by the children during their trips and the anguish and misunderstanding families struggle with once reunited. Some of the most horrendous portions of the book detail the hazards of getting on and off the trains: "But as he let go, the air pulled him in. The wheels flattened his right foot, then sliced through his left leg above the knee. ... He had lost nearly a third of his blood, but the hot rails had cauterized many of his arteries."

Nazario concludes with a clear, succinct discussion of immigration policy. She ties together data from think tank studies, opinions of immigration observers and statements from employers, counselors and social workers.

She covers both positive and negative effects of immigration, illuminating the problem's complexity. Nazario explains why in 1996 almost a third of California Latinos supported Proposition 187, which attempted to bar illegal immigrants from hospitals, schools and most services; and why some observers feel our policies are "purposefully schizophrenic" resulting in a "blowback" effect creating waves of illegal immigrants. In telling Enrique's story Nazario bears witness for us all, to this continuing nightmare.

*Julie Foster is a Sacramento writer.*

*This article appeared on page M - 1 of the San Francisco Chronicle*

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