

A Reading Group Guide to

The Crossroads

By Alexandra Diaz

About the Book

After a dangerous and difficult journey, twelve-year-old Jaime Rivera and his cousin Ángela have finally made it to the United States, where they are living with Jaime's older brother, Tomás, on a ranch in New Mexico. Being in the United States means attending school there, but while Ángela seems to fit right in, Jaime struggles to navigate a world of teachers and students who are not always welcoming to a new student—especially one who does not speak English yet. When the dangerous gang, the Alphas, attacks their grandmother in Guatemala, Jaime accepts he can't go back, even though he wants nothing more than to return home to his family. Except it's not safe. While there are immigration officers to fear, living in the U.S. is still safer than home. Thankfully, new friends and allies give Jaime and Ángela hope that love, friendship, family, and art will help them bridge the gap between the home they left and the home they are building.

Discussion Questions

1. Consider the book's title. What is the literal meaning of *crossroads*? Why is this term often used symbolically, for instance, when we say someone is at a crossroad in life? What crossroads do the characters in this book encounter? Have you ever experienced crossroads in your own life?
2. Why do you think the Alphas attack Jaime and Ángela's grandmother? What message are they trying to send? What do you think would happen to Jaime and Ángela if they returned to Guatemala?
3. In *The Only Road*, Jaime used art to express his thoughts, feelings, and memories. In this book, his journal takes on new significance as a tool he can use to communicate and connect with other people. Explain how Jaime's art allows him to communicate even though his English is poor.
4. What challenges does Jaime face at his new school? Why do you think Ángela seems to have an easier time transitioning to school in the U.S.? What can you do to make it easier for a student who is new to your school?
5. Why do you think Diego bullies Jaime? Do you think his apology is sincere? Explain your answer.
6. Jaime and Ángela rarely talk about the dangerous journey they made when they left Guatemala. Why do you think they avoid talking about it, even with each other? Why doesn't

Jaime want to share his story with his classmates? How do you think his classmates would have reacted if he had told them more details about his dangerous and difficult journey?

7. Describe the character of Don Vicente. Why is he such an important figure in Jaime's life?

8. Why is Don Vicente placed in a detention center? What is deportation? How do the immigration officials decide whom to deport?

9. What happened to Jaime and Angela's friend Joaquin? How does Jaime find out about her?

10. In the U.S., Jaime makes a new friend, Sean, who is deaf. How do they communicate? Why is the desire to communicate so important to daily life? What might happen if you aren't able to communicate with another person?

11. For most of the book Jaime is convinced that Ángela does not care what happened to Xavi. What does Ángela tell him to change his mind? Do you think Xavi is still alive? Explain why or why not.

12. Even though they can't attend her funeral, explain how Jaime, Tomás, and Ángela find ways to say good-bye to their grandmother and celebrate her life.

13. Were you surprised to read that Jaime wants to go back to Guatemala after he made it to the U.S.? Although Jaime escaped the torment of the Alphas, do you think he is safe from other dangers in the U.S.? Explain your answer.

14. If you had to leave your home country, what things would you miss the most? What does Jaime miss the most about his home in Guatemala?

15. During a unit on immigration, Jaime's teacher explains the difference between immigrants and refugees. Why does Jaime identify with the term *refugee*?

16. What does Mr. George do to try to help Don Vicente, Doña Cici, Tomás, Jaime, and Ángela stay in the United States? Why does he want to help them?

17. Jaime does not like the idea of being referred to as "an illegal." Why would this term be objectionable? What does it suggest or imply? Why would the term *undocumented* be preferable?

18. Why does Jaime begin to doubt his parents' love for him? What changes his mind?

19. Explain Jaime's plan to help Don Vicente. Why do you think he succeeds?

20. Tomás tells Jaime that things have changed in the way the U.S. views immigrants. For example, there is talk of building a wall along the border between the U.S. and Mexico, and people who immigrated as children are now uncertain about whether or not they will be allowed to stay in the U.S. How would these changes affect the characters in this novel? For instance,

what may have happened to Jaime and Ángela if there was a wall blocking their entrance into the United States?

Extension Activities

1. In her author's note, Alexandra Diaz describes her own experience about starting school in the U.S. as a child. She writes, "One of the best ways for people to show their support for immigration is to read and be aware of what's happening." Just as Jaime spoke out on behalf of Don Vicente, you are not too young to speak out about immigration and help other kids like Jaime and Ángela. Read about the Special Immigrant Juvenile Visa at <https://www.uscis.gov/green-card/sij> and the DACA program (also known as the Dreamers Act) at <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/dream-act-daca-and-other-policies-designed-protect-dreamers>. If you want to speak out about the importance of these programs, you can write to your representatives to express your opinion. Find out who your representatives are and contact them through the government's website: <https://www.usa.gov/elected-officials>.
2. Tomás explains that in the U.S., all children have a right to receive an education and that schools and churches are often considered sanctuary spaces. What does the word *sanctuary* mean to you? Today, there are several cities asserting their rights to become sanctuary cities. Research what it means to be a sanctuary city and whether your city is considered one. Why would sanctuary cities be important to people like Tomás, Jaime, Ángela, and Don Vicente?
3. Tomás explains why the immigration officials stopped his truck by telling Jaime and Ángela about "DWB: Driving While Brown." What is racial profiling? Can you think of any stories you've seen or read in the news about someone being targeted because of the color of their skin? Have you ever had anyone assume something about you or your friends based on the way you look?
4. In her author's note, Diaz encourages readers to be kind to immigrants in their community. She writes, "If there are immigrants in your community, make them feel welcome and get to know them as people, not just immigrants." How can you make your school, church, or community more welcoming to immigrants? Brainstorm a list on the board with your classmates.
5. One of the issues Jaime faces is not being able to communicate or understand what others are saying. His friend, Sean, also has trouble being understood. What other languages do people speak in your school or community? Are there any deaf students like Sean in your school? Try learning some basic phrases to help you communicate in another language. There is a glossary in the back of *The Crossroads* with some of the Spanish phrases Jaime uses to help you get started.
6. Diaz writes, "We are a nation of immigrants." Has someone in your family immigrated to the United States in the past? Why did they choose to immigrate? Join your classmates in sticking a pin over that country or countries on a world map. Then see how many countries your class has labeled, and discuss. What are some things your countries have in common? What are some differences?

7. After reading this book, what questions do you have about immigration? Diaz has included a list of references to help you learn more about the issues that children like Jaime face. Once you've researched your topic, share what you have learned with others and find ways to be a friend, ally, and advocate.

Guide prepared by Amy Jurskis, English Department Chair at Oxbridge Academy in Florida.

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