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Solito

A Memoir

By Javier Zamora

Guide written by Rachael Zafer

Hogarth

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ABOUT THE BOOK

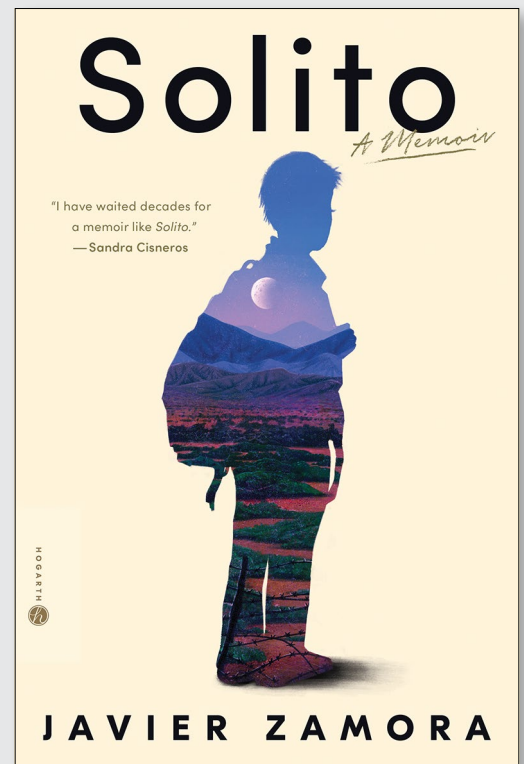
Trip. My parents started using that word about a year ago—“one day, you’ll take a trip to be with us. Like an adventure.”

Javier Zamora’s *adventure* is a 3,000-mile journey from his small town in El Salvador, through Guatemala and Mexico, and across the U.S. border. He will leave behind his beloved aunt and grandparents to reunite with a mother who left four years ago and a father he barely remembers. Traveling alone amid a group of strangers and a “coyote” hired to lead them to safety, Javier expects his trip to last two short weeks.

At nine years old, all Javier can imagine is rushing into his parents’ arms, snuggling in bed between them, and living under the same roof again. He cannot foresee the perilous boat trips, relentless desert treks, pointed guns, arrests and deceptions that await him; nor can he know that those two weeks will expand into two life-altering months alongside fellow migrants who will come to encircle him like an unexpected family.

A memoir as gripping as it is moving, *Solito* provides an immediate and intimate account not only of a treacherous and near-impossible journey, but also of the miraculous kindness and love delivered at the most unexpected moments. *Solito* is Javier Zamora’s story, but it’s also the story of millions of others who had no choice but to leave home.

First-Year and Common Reading Guide



“Perhaps only a poet could invoke the fear and beauty of a migrant’s voyage. A witness who lived the story is essential to gain credibility. A child is necessary to summon compassion. This is the mythic journey of our era, told by a hero not old enough to tie his shoes, an oracle for our troubled times. I have waited decades for a memoir like *Solito*.”—Sandra Cisneros, author of *The House on Mango Street*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JAVIER ZAMORA was born in El Salvador in 1990. His father fled the country when he was one, and his mother when he was about to turn five. Both parents' migrations were caused by the U.S.-funded Salvadoran Civil War. When he was nine Javier migrated through Guatemala, Mexico, and the Sonoran Desert. His debut poetry collection, *Unaccompanied*, explores the impact of the war and immigration on his family. Zamora has been a Stegner Fellow at Stanford and a Radcliffe Fellow at Harvard and holds fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What challenges did Javier Zamora experience living apart from his parents for much of his childhood? What did he imagine his life in the United States would be like? What emotions did he experience as he prepared to leave his home in El Salvador?
2. How did Javier's grandfather help him prepare for his journey? What was his relationship with his grandfather like? Did you have any close relationships with grandparents or other elders when you were a child? If you were to take a similar journey as a child, what trusted adults would likely have supported you?
3. Why do you think Javier chose to use Spanish words and phrases throughout *Solito*? How did his incorporation of Spanish language impact how you engaged with the text? Have you ever experienced being around people who speak a language that you did not understand? How did it make you feel?
4. How did Chino, Patricia, and Carla help Javier throughout his journey? How did creating a family unit protect them along the way? How was Javier vulnerable as he traveled without his parents?
5. What rules did the coyotes give to groups? How did Javier react to changing rules? Why was he instructed not to talk to strangers while in cities and towns? How did this make him feel?
6. How did Javier and the groups he traveled with cope with the difficulties they faced during the long trips by boat, bus, and foot? How did these trips impact Javier physically, mentally, and emotionally? How did he create a sense of comfort with the plants and animals that surrounded him? Have you ever taken a long journey? What are some of the differences between your trip and Javier's journey?
7. What was Javier's relationship with Marcelo like? Why do you think Marcelo split off from the larger group? How did you feel when you read that he was missing? How did Marcelo's decision to leave impact the larger group?
8. Why did Javier try to stay out of the way of other people during his journey? Did he receive the support and care that he needed? Why or why not?
9. Why are Javier and members of his group forced to leave the bus in Mexico? Why did Javier focus his attention on a lizard that he named Paula? How did Javier's group avoid being deported? What feelings do you think they experienced during this interrogation?
10. Who is La Migra and what is their role? Were groups adequately prepared for encounters with La Migra? Why or why not? How was Javier treated by people in positions of power and authority? Why do you think his experience was so different with Mister Gonzalez?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(CONTINUED)

11. What did Javier experience while he was detained in the United States? Why was he released before Chino? Once released, where did his group find refuge?
12. Why did Doña refuse to talk to the group while they were staying in Mexico near the border? Why did this frustrate Patricia?
13. What happened to Coco Liso? Why did the group continue their journey without him? How did Javier and other members of his group cope with injuries, sickness, hunger, and thirst along their journey? How did reading about their hardships make you feel?
14. What are some of the foods that Javier found comfort in while on his journey? Why was he not always able to eat or drink when he was hungry or thirsty?
15. How did Javier create a sense of safety for himself along his journey? What did he pray for when he prayed with Patricia and Carla? Why did he ask for protection from the cadejo?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**1. Deepen Your Understanding**

Identify a list of unfamiliar words in *Solito*. Your list might include phrases, cultural references, food, beverages, and nicknames. Break into small groups and research each word. How does a deeper understanding of these words impact how you engage with and understand Javier's story?

2. Map Javier's Journey

Create a map of Javier's journey, from La Herradura, El Salvador to Tecún-Umán, Guatemala to places throughout Mexico and arrival in the United States. How long did Javier and his fellow travelers spend at each place? How long did his entire journey take?

3. Soundtrack for *Solito*

Choose one of the songs that Javier heard during his journey from the list below. Listen to the song and read a translation of the lyrics. What do you experience when you listen to the song you selected? Where was Javier when he heard this song? What memories did he have while listening to this music?

- "Payaso" by Javier Solís
- "Payaso" by Vicente Fernández
- "Como Te Recuerdo" by Los Temerarios
- "Quiéreme" by Los Bukis
- "Auto Rojo" by Vilma Palma e Vampiros
- "Bye Bye" by Vilma Palma e Vampiros
- "Comprendes, Mendes?" by Control Machete
- "Pero Te Vas A Arrepentir" by Los Yonic's featuring Marco Antonio Solís
- "Que No Quede Huella" by Bronco
- "El Venao" by Los Cantantes
- "Te Aprovechas" by Grupo Límite

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

(CONTINUED)

Most of the music Javier remembered hearing or discussing during his journey was created by men. What does this say about the kind of art that was valued during this time period? For several days, pay attention to the music played in public spaces. Is most of the music created by men? Does music created by men focus on the same subjects as music created by women and non-binary people? What differences and similarities do you observe?

4. No Place for a Child

Read “No Place for A Child” by The Marshall Project and *Politico*: [tinyurl.com/NoPlaceForAChild](https://www.politico.com/story/2018/07/26/no-place-for-a-child-468181). After reading, break into small groups and select a photograph from the piece. What do you notice about the people, objects, or environment in this photograph? What emotions does this image make you feel? What similarities do you recognize between the image and Javier’s experiences in *Solito*?

5. Language and the Immigration Debate

Complete the “Key Terms in Immigration Debate” worksheet from Teaching Tolerance: [tinyurl.com/ImmigrationTerms](https://www.teachingtolerance.org/immigration-terms/). As a class, discuss some of the prevalent terms used to discuss immigration in your community. Why do you think these terms are used? How do these terms shape the way people think about immigration in your community and in the United States? What are some ways you can speak up when you notice use of dehumanizing language?

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES**1. Salvadoran Civil War**

Learn more about the history of El Salvador. How did the Salvadoran Civil War impact Javier and his family? What are some of the factors that might have contributed to their decision to migrate to the United States? Where did other Salvadorans migrate to during and after this war? How did they travel and what hardships did they likely experience?

2. Borders in Your Region

Learn more about the borders in your region. How were these borders created? How are people living on both sides of these borders impacted by this geographic separation? What other forms of separation—in language, culture, resources, employment—exist?

3. Your Family’s Migration

Trace your family’s experience of migration. When did your relatives arrive in the country where you were born? Where did they come from and how did they arrive? What difficulties might they have faced during their journey? Learn more about the community they arrived in and how it might have been welcoming or hostile to them.

4. Title 42

Learn more about Title 42, a public health order used by border authorities to expel unauthorized border crossers. How has this order left many people vulnerable to danger? What current pathways exist for people to request asylum in the United States?

SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

These projects are designed to connect students' learning experiences with the larger community.

1. Support Migrant and Refugee Communities

Learn more about the migrant or refugee communities in your area. What community organizations or mutual aid groups exist to support them? Consider what resources and skills you have access to and how you can support these groups. Volunteer your time at a local food bank or shelter, fundraise for a local nonprofit, or help promote the work of local organizations on social media.

2. Organize a Community Drive

Contact a local service agency and identify some of the everyday items most needed by migrants or refugees in your community. Your list might include pantry staples, kitchen items, household goods, furniture, and toys for children. Organize a community drive gathering these items. Use this opportunity to share the importance of welcoming and supporting vulnerable people with your neighbors.

3. English-Language Learners

What are some of the language challenges that migrant or refugee communities in your area experience? Are there resources at the local library, English classes, or language study groups? Volunteer to be a tutor or develop a list of local resources for English-Language Learners.

4. Local Immigration Policy

Identify an immigration policy in your state or region. What local organizations are working to protect the human rights of people impacted by this policy? After learning more about how this policy could impact your community, volunteer to canvass, phone bank, or table at local events.

5. Human Rights at Your School

Read Amnesty International's guide "Becoming a Human Rights Friendly School": tinyurl.com/HumanRightsEdu. Form a small group and have each person take the Human Rights Temperature Questionnaire on page 86 of the guide. Next, complete the Action Plan on page 101 of the guide. How will you work individually and as a group to make your school friendlier to human rights?

**OTHER RESOURCES
FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS,
AND PROGRAMS**

- Read poetry by Javier Zamora: www.javierzamora.net/poetry
- Read prose by Javier Zamora: www.javierzamora.net/prose
- Read "Revisiting the Border During a Pandemic" by Javier Zamora in *The Bare Life Review*: www.barelifereview.org/revisitingtheborder
- Learn more about Salvavision, a Tucson, Arizona–based organization providing aid and support to asylum seekers and migrants who are passing through or being dropped off by cartel or deported by Border Patrol in the remote town of Sasabe, Sonora: www.salvavision.org
- Explore resources about El Salvador from Teaching Central America, a project from Teaching for Change: www.teachingcentralamerica.org/teach-el-salvador

**OTHER RESOURCES
FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS,
AND PROGRAMS
(CONTINUED)**

- Test your knowledge of Central America with Teaching for Change’s short quiz: tinyurl.com/QuizCentralAmerica
- Read the Education Justice Project’s “A New Path: A Guide to the Challenges and Opportunities After Deportation”: tinyurl.com/EduJusticeProject
- Explore the work of the Borderland Collective, a long-term participatory and education project based in Texas: borderlandcollective.org
- Explore The Marshall Project’s film series “We Are Witnesses: Becoming an American”: www.themarshallproject.org/we-are-witnesses/immigration
- Explore resources from Re-Imagining Migration, a non-profit organization working to advance the education and well-being of immigrant-origin youth, decrease bias and hatred against young people of diverse origins, and help rising generations develop the critical understanding necessary to build and sustain welcoming and inclusive communities: reimaginingmigration.org
- Watch the episode “Mainstream, USA” from the PBS documentary series *America by the Numbers with Maria Hinojosa*: tinyurl.com/MainstreamUSA. Before watching, review Learning for Justice’s guided-viewing questions: tinyurl.com/MainstreamUSAQuestions.
- Read “Ten Myths About Immigration” by Learning for Justice: tinyurl.com/10ImmigrationMyths
- Read “What Part of ‘Illegal’ Don’t You Understand?” by Lawrence Downes in *The New York Times*: tinyurl.com/NYTDowens

ABOUT THIS GUIDE’S WRITER

Rachael Zafer is a writer, educator, and social change consultant. Rachael provides creative and technical consulting to nonprofits and institutions across the country and has led hundreds of classes and workshops in prisons and jails in Michigan, Illinois, New York, and Colorado. Rachael is the author of discussion guides for two dozen books, including *The Sum of Us* by Heather McGhee, *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson, and *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi. You can view her discussion guides at www.rachaelzafer.com.



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