



***The Distance Between Us*, by Reyna Grande**
Discussion Questions for GVSU's 2013 Community Reading Project
By Maureen Wolverton, Liberal Studies Department

Spoiler Alert! This book provides the reader with many surprising moments. Engage these questions by section only after reading the chapters to ensure that these moments remain intact.

Book One – Mi Mamá Me Ama
Prologue

- 1) Before reading this book, consider your views on immigration. What stereotypes exist within this topic? What is your understanding of current US policies on immigration? *Recommended:* TEDx talk by Jose Vargas called, "[Actions are Illegal: Never People](#)".
- 2) Additionally, reflect on associations that you have with Mexico. Examine stereotypes and reflect on how your views of Mexico and Mexicans were shaped growing up. *Recommended:* View "The Danger of a Single Story" by Chimamanda Adichie on TED.com.
- 3) Why do you think that Reyna Grande is writing this book? What does she hope that you will learn by reading it?

Chapters 1-5

- 1) Why does Reyna's father leave for El Otro Lado and why does he send for his mother two years later? What dreams does he have for their family?
- 2) Describe Reyna's siblings, grandmother, and grandfather who the children will live with after their mother leaves. Describe the house and the room that Reyna must now call home.
- 3) Why does Reyna become so angry with the baker's wife? How does Élica's presence impact Reyna? How does Mago try to curb Reyna's anger?
- 4) How is Reyna's name important? What is the story of how you were named? How is the story of Reyna's birth critical to her identity? Do you know the story of your own birth?
- 5) How does hair come to represent the vast differences between Élica's treatment and that of Reyna and Mago?
- 6) Reyna's father left school in the third grade to harvest crops. How does Reyna forge a relationship with the "Man Behind the Glass" as a child? How does she try to keep the memory of her mother alive?
- 7) How does Mami's pregnancy announcement impact Mago? How do the children respond to their harsh punishments?
- 8) Discuss the significance of the birthday cake and pictures sent to El Otro Lado along with the coming of age ceremony for señoritas, the quinceañera. What coming of age ceremonies are practiced in your family?
- 9) Chapter Five closes with fantasies of how Papi and Mami would return. Everyone dreams of a better life in the future. What dreams did you have for your family at a similar age? What became of these dreams? What do you think will happen with Reyna's family?

Chapters 6-12

- 1) As Reyna enters first grade, she feels pride for her city and shame because of characteristics and circumstances that are out of her control. What early memories of pride and/or shame do you hold? How does Reyna confront traditional notions of good/evil in this part of the book?
- 2) "As the oldest, it was clearer to Mago, more than to Carlos and me, that the distance between us and our parents was destroying our relationship more than any of us could have imagined. And the consequences would be great" (57). How does Mago, little mother, help the children through the crisis of the too small clothes?
- 3) Their father's dream of building a home starts to become a reality, but then it is abruptly halted. How do the children interpret this?
- 4) Why does Reyna Grande add the pictures in this book? How do they impact you as a reader? Which one is your favorite so far? Why?
- 5) Tía Emperatriz keeps an eye on Reyna during the scorpion sting incident. Reyna asks her aunt if her parents will come back for her. How does Tía Emperatriz answer this question? Why does Reyna describe Mexico as a place of "broken beauty" (65)?
- 6) The return of Reyna's mother is bittersweet. Why is Mami not the same woman who left? How has Mami changed? How has Reyna changed?
- 7) What historical factors intensify the struggles that Reyna's torn family faces?
- 8) How did the relationship end between Reyna's parents?
- 9) Were you surprised that Mami left for Acapulco? Why or why not? Why do you think she went?

Chapters 13-20

- 1) Mago rages again as the pain of her mother's departure is too much for her to comprehend. Carlos becomes gravely ill. Abuelita Chinta is a traditional healer. How is this worldview different from a medical view of illness?
- 2) Carlos looks to Tío Crece as a father figure for a time. What other male influences surround Carlos? How is he learning what it means to be a man? Examine the notions of masculinity in the book. Reflect on American cultural messages and your personal influences about what it means to be a man in your own culture.
- 3) The Flood raises the question of hope. Does Reyna still hold onto the hope that her father will return? How does Catalina's death impact Reyna's hope for the future?
- 4) Why does Mago leave school? Reyna's fear of abandonment, this time with Mago, is triggered at the train station. And, again, with her mother's car accident. How important are early childhood attachments with regard to our psychological development? What if these attachments are broken? What other consequences do you expect to see?
- 5) Mami returns from Acapulco and the distance between her and her children is fully evident. Abuelita Chinta performs a ceremony for Mami. How would the medical system in the United States treat her?
Recommended - An example of a limpia ceremony,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SoJUzUU0BF4>.
- 6) Mami rekindled hope when the government gives land away, but Carlos falls ill and is unable to hold their ground. Once again, she runs away from her problems by moving in with Tía Guera. How does this impact Reyna?
- 7) There are many references in this book by women stating that they are waiting to be saved by men. How is this view reinforced by culture? How does it damage women? How does it damage men?
- 8) The issue of class is very present in this book. It is clear who is upper class and lower class based on outer appearances in this book. How is class visible or invisible in our society? In the classroom?

- 9) How is education the great equalizer for Reyna with regard to class? Is this still the case in the United States? Is education the pathway to a better life? What complexities exist between education and class today?
- 10) Compare the celebrations in this part of the book to your own traditions. Reyna outlines the conflict within her mother between wanting to be loved by a man and wanting to do right by her children. Christmas demonstrated the status of this conflict. Can you see both sides of this? How much the children feel when Mami brings home Rey? What was Mami thinking?
- 11) What was Reyna's initial response when seeing her father on the couch? Mila? How are the initial interactions? How does Reyna convince him to take her to El Otro Lado? Why is Betty left behind?
- 12) Describe the crossing from Reyna's perspective. Is she able to comprehend the risk? What promise does she make after she safely makes it to El Otro Lado?

Book Two – The Man Behind the Glass Prologue & Chapters 1-6

- 1) Does Reyna ever get her wish to be truly seen by her father? Why or why not? How important is it to be recognized by our primary care givers? What role does it serve as we develop into mature adults? What can someone do when they do not receive this support from their parents?
- 2) How is life different on El Otro Lado for Reyna? What brings her joy? What new struggles must she face? Specifically, how is school for Reyna?
- 3) What does Reyna miss about Mexico? How does living in the United States impact her identity? Where does she belong?
- 4) Compare Halloween to the traditional Mexican celebration of the Day of the Dead. How is the intent behind these social customs different? Where are there places of congruence?
- 5) How does the Man Behind the Glass compare with the real version of her father? How is Reyna to align these two realities? How does Mila fit into the picture?

Chapters 7-14

- 1) Discuss the significance of the story where Reyna is sent home from school with lice. Why do you think that Reyna chose to include this story in the book?
- 2) Mago is growing up and gains interest in boys, but is ashamed of her looks and difficulty with English. She says, "My English isn't good enough. It'll never be good enough" (208). How does this book shed light on the struggles of ESL students?
- 3) Most of us don't feel "good enough" at times. Discuss the reasons for this.
Recommended: Brene Brown's talk named, "The Power of Vulnerability" on TED.com. After viewing this talk, consider the ways that Mago might fill the void she feels. Also, extend the analysis to other members of the family.
- 4) Discuss the process of assimilation for the Grande children. What is gained? What is lost?
- 5) Reyna nurses ambition through her love of books and writing stories. Her hope is to, "write a book that won't be rejected, one that will make my father proud" (218). In the prologue of this book, Reyna longs to be seen by her father—truly seen. What is in the way of this?
- 6) Addiction is also at the center of this book. There are many ways to understand addiction. Dr. Gabor Mate suggests that we shift the question from, "Why the addiction?" to "Why the suffering?" and examine the answers. What happens when we do this within the context of this book? *Recommended:* View Gabor Mate's Rio TEDx talk on "The Power of Addiction and The Addiction to Power"
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66cYcSak6nE>)

- 7) What is Reyna's reaction to finding out that her mother is nearby? How is she living compared to Reyna's father? Compare their values. How does Reyna's view of her mother permanently shift in Chapter 10?
- 8) How does the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 provide hope for Papi? What avenues exist today for immigrants to this country to become citizens?
- 9) How does Papi deal with the gang activity in his neighborhood? What crushes his forward momentum in Chapter 12? Why is this so devastating?
- 10) How does band provide hope for Reyna? What books shaped her writing? How did Papi respond when she won first place for her writing?

Chapters 15-18

- 1) Chapter 15 starts off with two big celebrations: Mago's graduation from High School and Green Cards! These are certainly huge achievement to enjoy. Despite Mago's big dreams for the future her body issues consume much of her time. How are women of color supposed to feel when the standard for beauty in this country is blond hair and blue eyes? *Recommended:* View the documentary film, "Miss Representation" and reflect on how the media shapes our views of women.
www.missrepresentation.org.
- 2) Mila justifies Reyna's father's abuse by saying that he was also abused as a boy and forced to work in the fields starting at age nine. Reyna asks the key question with regard to domestic violence, "If Papi knew what it felt like to be abused by his parents, then shouldn't he understand how we felt? Shouldn't he try to be a better father?" (256). Why does abuse unfold in these cycles? How can someone break this cycle?
- 3) How does Reyna get her quinceañera? When is she finally able to smile? Reyna refers to living in this "strange place of broken beauty" (262). She made the same reference when speaking of Mexico. Can all places be described in this way? If so, what is the lesson for us?
- 4) Reyna describes a picture that she took with both her father and mother on either side during the quinceañera. Where is this picture? Why isn't it in the book? Note: We have to ask her this when she comes to visit GVSU in March 2014. For more information: <http://www.gvsu.edu/read/>.
- 5) Once again, Reyna's dream of dancing the waltz with her father brushes up against reality. Reyna truly relied on Mago through her youth. Many people are forced by life to grow up too soon, to be the little mother. What are the upsides and downsides to this?
- 6) Discuss how Reyna's shyness is interpreted as arrogance. Introverts generally get a bad rap in many social situations. What are the good characteristics that introverts bring to the table? *Recommended:* If you are not sure, check out Susan Cain's TED talk, "The Power of Introverts."
- 7) How are Reyna's interactions with boys from school similar to her relationship with her father? How do the relationships with our primary caregivers frame all of our relationships into the future?
- 8) Mago fills the void of Reyna's parents' absence, but what does Mago fill her void with in turn? How does this form of addiction impact Mago's life in a negative way?
- 9) Why is Papi so against his marriage to Griselda? Is he right? Why or why not? Why won't Mami and Rey take advantage of the opportunities available to them in the United States?

Chapters 19-24

- 1) Reyna's return to Mexico at age seventeen forever changes her. How does Mexico look to her now? How do her friends and family view her differently? How does Reyna view her father's decision to leave for El Otro Lado now?
- 2) How is Mago's experience of Mexico different from Reyna's? Why?
- 3) Mago's abrupt departure coincides with Reyna's acceptance into UC Irvine. Why won't Papi sign for Mago? Why does his drinking worsen? How does Reyna manage to avoid the pitfalls that snag her brother and sister? How does she survive and thrive as her father self-destructs?
- 4) How does Reyna find a mentor? What is the significance of having mentors in our lives? Reflect on your experiences being mentored and/or mentoring others. What does the discovery of Chicano/Latino literature mean to Reyna? Have you ever had a similar discovery? How did it change your life?
- 5) Why does Reyna return to her father's side? What abruptly shifts his apparent turn around? How does Reyna make sense of this?
- 6) Discuss the final scene of the book. Why does she end the book this way?

Epilogue

- 1) Devise a list of Reyna's impressive accomplishments outlined in the epilogue. What are her hopes and dreams for the future?
- 2) According to Reyna, poverty is the reason for the cycle of leaving children behind. What can be done to keep children together with their parents?
- 3) Reyna provides us with a list of updates on her family. Were there any surprises? What other questions would you ask her after reading the book?
- 4) What is the role of forgiveness? How is this different from acceptance? As an adult, how do we understand the ambivalence we may feel towards our parents if they made mistakes? Is it better to forgive or accept? How important is it to process these feelings before our parents pass on? Has Reyna fully processed her feelings? If so, how can you tell? If not, how can you tell? *Recommended:* Joan Halifax on "Compassion and the true meaning of empathy"
http://www.ted.com/talks/joan_halifax.html.
- 5) How do you feel after reading this book? Has it changed your understanding of immigration? Of Mexico? Of the relationship with your own parents? Siblings? Self?
- 6) Who should read this book and why?

