

The Heart- Stopping Journey of Sonia Nazario



by Sylvia Mendoza

Sonia Nazario sat on top of the rolling freight train – *El Tren de la Muerte* (the train of death) – to get a feel for what thousands of children go through daily. Their mission: to leave their Central American homes to find their mothers in the United States.

The journey is a brutal one. Riding the train and traveling more than 12,000 miles was a way that Nazario, a special projects reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, could understand what a child will go through to reach a mother and also show the incredible desperation that drives mothers out of their countries to seek work to save children from starvation and utter poverty. Nazario wanted to see the story through their eyes.

“More than 48,000 children make the journey alone each year,” says Nazario. “It’s a modern-day exodus. More than 600 people can be on the train at one time. It looks like a beehive with human beings.

Immigrants of all ages withstand excruciating heat, bandits, gangs, corrupt authorities, beatings, rape, hunger, and prejudice. They lose limbs when they fall off of the train and are sucked under the churning wheels. They are

caught and deported. Some have made the journey over and over again, aching to be with loved ones. The journey is a nightmare, tests their strength and stamina beyond belief, and crushes the human spirit.

“I rode with a 12-year-old boy wearing a Tweety Bird T-shirt,” says Nazario. “I’d heard that kids as young as 7 were crossing four countries to get to their mothers, when in this country a 7-year-old can’t walk to school alone. I wouldn’t have believed it unless I saw it myself. They just didn’t understand the danger. The 12-year-old never made it. After many, many attempts, he gave up and is back in Honduras.”

One boy who didn’t give up is Enrique. Nazario met him in Nuevo Laredo on the Texas border and decided to re-create his journey to find his mother, Lourdes. He was 5 years old when she left Honduras. After an 11-year separation, he made the trip eight times before he finally reached her in North Carolina.

Nazario saw firsthand what he went through. His survival was miraculous. “They really are hunted down like animals, even though most had nothing except the clothes they wore,” says Nazario. “Kids tried to hide scraps of paper with

their mothers’ phone numbers on them in their shoes or in the waistbands of their pants. That was the most valued thing they had.”

Nazario’s firsthand reporting adds richness and depth to *Enrique’s Journey*, which started out as a series for the *Los Angeles Times* and ended up a bestseller finding its way into the hands of thousands.

“I wanted to humanize immigrants instead of demonize them. Who wouldn’t consider leaving their children to alleviate their hunger by heading north – if that was a last resort?”

The story is so compelling and received such incredible reader reaction that Nazario won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing for *Enrique’s Journey*. Photojournalist Don Bartletti, who accompanied Nazario, also won a Pulitzer for his photos of the people in transit.

Telling an Underdog’s Story

“I’ve been driven all my life to tell stories,” says Nazario, daughter of a Polish Jewish mother and a Syrian Christian father. The family spoke Spanish, Yiddish, Arabic, and English in their Kansas home. She was 14 when her father, a college professor, died from a heart attack and her

mother took her and her three siblings to Argentina. They worked hard to make ends meet. During the military dictatorship, through 1983, Nazario saw bloodstained sidewalks. Her mother said journalists had been silenced for telling the truth. The seeds of social justice and truth-telling were planted in Nazario.

"I knew this is what I wanted to do," says Nazario. "It's been a learning curve for me ever since." At 21, she landed a job at the *Wall Street Journal*, working the Los Angeles, New York, Miami, and Atlanta bureaus. By 25, she was burned out, she says. She headed to the University of California-Berkeley, received a master's degree in Latin American studies, then returned to reporting, traveling throughout Latin America, living out of a suitcase, writing about injustices. Pretty soon that became a dangerous and draining way of life.

She decided there were plenty of urgent stories to be told in the United States, and moved to the *Los Angeles Times* in 1993. She has won numerous awards for her writing over the years.

"I try to think about the big social issues of our day. Then I try to find a new twist and a narrative thread to tell it through, mostly through the eyes of the most vulnerable women and children, those affected by hunger, poverty, and drugs."

Enrique's Journey was one such story. "I thought I knew this story, but I never knew it this way," says Nazario. "Americans don't know what determination is."

Nazario tells of a young man who tried coming north 27 times. At one point, a machete was held to his throat while he and others helplessly watched a gang rape a woman. When they were all released, some went home, but he said he'd try a 28th time to escape that kind of terror.

Nazario first learned of the enormity of the dilemma of child immigrants from her housekeeper, Carmen, who had left her four children in Guatemala and was heartbroken about it.

"I remember being judgmental," says Nazario. "How could a mom walk away from her kids?"

After 12 years, Carmen was able to bring her kids here legally. Two hate her for leaving them. Nazario said Carmen told her, "If had I known the ending, I would never do it."

Nazario realized that thousands of others take that leap of faith and leave, not knowing if

they'll ever see their children again, hoping their sacrifice will be enough to save them all.

The Longest Miles

The journey was eye-opening for Nazario.

ENRIQUE'S JOURNEY

The STORY of a BOY'S DANGEROUS ODYSSEY to REUNITE with his MOTHER

Sonia Nazario
Winner of the Pulitzer Prize



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She saw human suffering at its worst. Yet the kindness of strangers sometimes made all the difference. There was the priest who gave up his stipend and his own shoes and urged parishioners to help people on their journeys.

The most heart-wrenching image for Nazario was the shelter run by a most generous Olga Sánchez in Chiapas. There were people who had

lost limbs to the train or from machete attacks by bandits. "You see this human carnage that is haunting, but I try to remember more than the negative."

She remembers the 100-year-old woman whose hands were knotted with age. When she heard the train coming, the woman filled bags with burritos and tortillas and gave them to her 70-year-old daughter, who ran alongside the train and handed up their offering. She said if she had one tortilla, she would give half away because God would provide.

"You see the poorest of the poor who manage to scrape up food and drink to help," says Nazario. "It showed the human spirit rising, willing to help a total stranger. They helped because it is the Christian thing to do. I had never seen people live their faith in this way."

Sonia's Journey

With more than 110 notebooks and dozens of cassettes with hundreds of interviews, it took Nazario five years of research, transcribing notes and preparing outlines, and a sabbatical from the *Los Angeles Times*. It took 12 drafts to get to her final newspaper piece. Reporter's notes followed every installment of the six-part series.

"There was no doubt she had her bases covered and her sources accounted for," says Rick Meyer, her *Los Angeles Times* editor.

Prior to her first trip, she had checked routes, made contacts, and set up safety nets, including a personal letter from a high-ranking government official that actually kept her out of jail three times. She had bodyguards and safe places to sleep.

"For the series, it took three months along the migrant routes and on the train," says Nazario. "Then it took another three-month trip for the book."

Despite the pre-preparation, once she started the journey from Honduras to Nuevo Laredo, she had close calls that she admits can't compare to an immigrant's horror stories. She was almost swept off the train by a huge branch when she didn't duck in time. A 15-year-old girl was raped at a rail where she had been just the night before. A crazed gangster lunged at Nazario, and she jumped three cars to escape him. When photographer Bartletti felt he needed to wade into the Río Grande for photos, she felt vulnerable, standing alone on the shoreline.

Nazario says of her husband, an emergency planner, “He has an enormous faith in me. He knows I’m street smart from my days in Argentina and in the nitty-gritty parts of the United States I covered.” She had called him daily, but of course he worried.

On her return home, she sought therapy for nightmares in which she was chased atop a moving train by bandits trying to rob and rape her.

Still she believes there was no way for her to get to the heart of the story without taking the journey herself. “You have to put yourself in the middle of the action to help people understand a situation better,” she says. “I learned how far I was willing to go to get to the truth of a story.”

Meyer told her not to worry about the word count, which freed her to write her story. “Sonia is one hell of a reporter and one savvy woman,” he says. “She wanted to understand that angle, walk in those shoes. It takes a lot of courage to take on something of this magnitude.”

The series had an overwhelmingly positive response, says Meyer. “There were some folks who were nasty about Enrique coming into the country illegally, but it was also the first time we printed an article in both English and Spanish on the Web site, so the story reached thousands.”

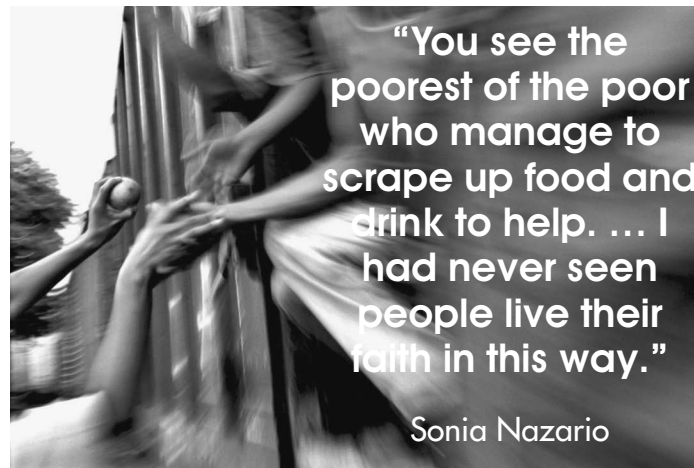
No Fairy Tale Ending

When Enrique found his mother, it wasn’t a fairy tale ending. Families and communities suffer repercussions. Lourdes worked several jobs in the United States, barely scraping by. Although she was able to provide food, clothes, and schooling for Enrique and his sister, Belky, Nazario showed that sometimes money sent home wasn’t enough.

“Whenever you pull families apart, there are going to be problems,” Nazario says. “Kids feel aban-

doned, and mothers lose what’s most important – the love of a child.”

Once these children reach America, it is extremely difficult to reconnect with their mothers, says Nazario. They have lost respect for them. They resent and hate them for the abandonment. They search for acceptance and assimilation by



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joining gangs. There are discipline problems. Enrique went through this transition.

Nazario worked with the Spanish variety show *Don Francisco Presenta* to reunite Lourdes and Belky, separated for 18 years. In the emotional reunion, Belky told Lourdes she had a hole in her heart she thought a baby might fill but realized only a mother’s love would do. Eight days later, she hugged Lourdes goodbye and headed back to her 40-day-old baby boy, making her choice clear. Even though she could have extended her visa, she would not subject her child to life without a mother.

The Ripple Effect

The *Enrique’s Journey* series and book have affected entire communities. And receiving the Pulitzer Prize was an honor unlike any Nazario had known.

“As a Latina writing about Latinos in an in-depth way, getting the acknowledgment that my

work was one of the best works by a journalist was a milestone. That’s humbling and pushes me to do my job better. It opened a lot of doors and exposed people to the story that might not have read it otherwise.”

Nazario also won the George Polk Award for International

Reporting, Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award, and National Association of Hispanic Journalists Guillermo Martínez-Márquez Award for Overall Excellence.

Simultaneously published in English and Spanish by Random House, *Enrique’s Journey* is resonating in so many countries because half of the 200 million migrants these days are women, Nazario says. In addition, there is a universal connection to a mother’s love for her children.

Reaction from readers has been most meaningful to Nazario. “People say I took them inside this world they never knew. It makes them look at immigrants a little differently.”

A steady stream of money has poured in to Olga Sánchez from readers, to help her maimed patients. María Shriver and other dignitaries have visited.

Nazario is traveling the globe to speak to students and at special events. “Teachers tell me that they

couldn’t get their students interested in reading until this book.” Others, she says, want to be enlightened about immigration.

Enrique’s Journey was selected for the One Book One San Diego project headed by KPBS, the city of San Diego Public Library and the Campaign for Love and Forgiveness, which explores how to effect positive change in global communities. “*Enrique’s Journey* seemed ideal because it’s about a mother’s unconditional love,” says Valerie Breen, a KPBS spokesperson. “It can educate and enlighten readers to important issues. We hope it will spark many interactions throughout our community.”

There will be online book discussions, giveaways, lectures, and partnerships with local coffee shops, bookstores, the Latino Film Festival, and various universities. The Museum of Photographic Art will exhibit Bartletti’s photos. The countywide multievent is the first of this magnitude, says Breen.

Nazario is honored that her work has stimulated this kind of reaction and awareness.

“I love being a journalist,” she says. “People want to be told good stories. They want something engaging, motivational, and meaningful. And if they’re moved and educated along the way, they’ll go along with you for the ride. Then you’ve done your job.”

