A CONVERSATION WITH SONIA NAZARIO

Random House Reader's Circle: What inspired you to major in history and eventually led you to a career in journalism?

Sonia Nazario: I led a fairly sheltered life until I was thirteen years old, when my father died of a heart attack. My mother decided to take the family back to Argentina, where she and my father had grown up. It was just as Argentina's so-called dirty war was cranking up, during which the country's military would ultimately "disappear" nearly 30,000 people.

The move made me want to study history for two reasons. First, it was clear many Argentines hated Americans. When I spoke English with my American accent, people would sometimes spit on my shoes in disgust. What role, I wondered, had the United States played in the world to make people behave this way?

Second, I increasingly understood how repressive regimes thrived by stifling the free flow of information. I decided to become a journalist at fourteen after seeing the blood of two journalists killed by the military on a sidewalk near my home in Buenos Aires.

These formative experiences made me determined to write about social justice issues in Latin America. When I graduated from college, I went to work at the *Wall* St*reet Journal*. By the age of twenty-five, I was their backup Latin American correspondent. But after living out of a suitcase for far too long, I decided there were plenty of social issues I could write about here in the United States I have focused on writing about people whose voices aren't often heard, those who don't get a lot of ink: women, children, the poor, and immigrants.

RHRC: How would you describe the way you report? What's your process of finding a story and sources?

SN: I typically decide on a topic—usually a social issue—I want to write about. I talk to experts in that area until I find something new happening within the issue. Then I find a narrative thread to tell that new story through. With a newspaper series called "Orphans of Addiction," I was writing about the one in five children in America who grow up with a parent addicted to alcohol or drugs. I told that story through three children, showing in intimate detail what their lives were like.

To achieve this, I do a lot of "fly on the wall" reporting, where I follow someone for months on end and watch their lives unfold. My goal is to have them forget I'm there, and to behave as they normally would. There is immediacy and power in describing something to readers as it is happening, putting

them in the middle of the action. When you report this way, you bring a level of narrative detail and nuance to your subject that's difficult to get in any other way.

RHRC: Why did you choose to write about Enrique after finding him in Nuevo Laredo?

SN: I picked Enrique because his experiences were typical of what children go through trying to reach the United States to reunite with a mother. Enrique had experienced hunger, had been robbed and beaten, and had spent months just trying to survive, all for the chance to be with his mother again.

What's more, Enrique was willing to have his story told. He was open and honest. He never told me something just because he thought it's what I wanted to hear.

When I met Enrique, I worried about two things. When he began his journey, he was slightly older (sixteen versus fifteen) than the average child migrant apprehended entering the United States alone. I also felt I needed a more angelic boy to center this story around. When I went to Nuevo Laredo, and spent time with him, I learned that Enrique was a glue-sniffer. Would readers find him unappealing, turn away, stop reading? I kept searching for a younger, more appealing subject.

But Enrique got into trouble with drugs because his mother wasn't around. He didn't feel loved. My editor at the *Los Angeles Times* said that readers cannot identify with angels. They identify with someone who is like them, who isn't perfect, who has flaws. Indeed, he said, the best characters in literature are always flawed.

After that discussion, I decided to tell the story through Enrique.

RHRC: How did you get the level of detail needed to write *Enrique's Journey* if you didn't actually make the journey with him?

SN: Once I had found Enrique, I spent two weeks with him on the Rio Grande in Nuevo Laredo. I followed him around night and day and I interviewed him. Then, I followed him to North Carolina. Over several days of further interviews, I got the blow-by-blow details of Enrique's entire journey. I interviewed his mother, Lourdes, his sister Diana, and others. Then I traveled to Honduras and met Enrique's family there. I traveled through Central America and Mexico exactly as Enrique had. I took buses through Guatemala. I began riding atop freight trains in Chiapas, Mexico. I rode seven trains up the length of Mexico. For the last portion of his trip through Mexico, Enrique hitchhiked on an 18-wheeler to the border. I hitchhiked on an 18-wheeler from the same truck stop.

In reconstructing his journey, I tried to carefully follow in Enrique's footsteps, to see and experience things as he had seen and experienced them. Along the way, I interviewed many of the people Enrique had encountered during his journey, as well as other immigrants.

One critical scene in the book is when Enrique is beaten on top of the train. Will he survive? I interviewed many children who had similarly been beaten on top of the train and I rode through those parts of Mexico on top of the train.

Enrique only had a vague notion of where he had flung himself off the train after his beating. Using a photo of Enrique and walking along the tracks, I finally found the town where Enrique had landed. I found the field hand who had first seen Enrique stumbling, bloodied, along the tracks. That field hand described what Enrique looked like and what he said. He took

me to the mayor of the nearby town, who had laid Enrique down on a bench outside the local church. I asked the mayor to bring me to the same bench in the same spot and to lie on it and show me what Enrique had said and done. Bringing people back to a place often helps them remember more details.

Enrique was driven to a doctor. I had the same driver take me. During that drive, he remembered critical details that Enrique hadn't thought to mention. He took me to the doctor who treated Enrique. I could then describe what the medical clinic looked like. The doctor remembered what Enrique said, how he treated him, and dug out notes from the session and his prescriptions, all of which added greatly to this scene.

My goal is to use all five senses in my descriptions to make the reader feel like they are there as the action is unfolding.

RHRC: What was the hardest part of doing this story?

SN: A great difficulty was figuring out a way to report this story in a way that would involve the least danger to myself. Living with the near-constant fear of being beaten, robbed, or raped over a period of months was difficult. I rode on top of a fuel tanker one night when there was rain and lightning. Once, a branch hit me in the face and nearly sent me sprawling off the train top. A child was plucked off the train by the same branch and fell down to the wheels below. Another time, a train derailed right in front of ours. I interviewed a girl who had been gang raped along the tracks in Ixtepec, Oaxaca, and realized that I had been alone at that same spot just one day before.

Gangsters were aboard some of my trains. On the Rio Grande, I worried about so-called "river bandits" and I was approached by Mexican police with their guns drawn.

That said, I endured nothing even minimally close to what

immigrants go through on this trek. At the end of a long train ride, I could pull out my credit card, go to a hotel and sleep. I ate. I had so many advantages these immigrants didn't have.

The story was most difficult for me on an emotional level. It was wrenching to interview mothers in the United States who had been spent years separated from their children. It was hard to talk to women in Mexico, on their way to the United States, who had just walked away from children, sometimes babies. Or to interview a girl who had been gang raped the previous day along the rails. Or speak with a boy who had just lost a leg to the train. My mission was to chronicle what this journey was like for these children and to do it to the best of my abilities. To take readers inside this world, to explain. But watching these human dramas unfold before my eyes, often lrft me feeling inadequate and useless.

RHRC: What were some of the ethical dilemmas you faced as a journalist while reporting on Enrique's journey?

SN: Journalists are not supposed to help people they write about, financially or otherwise. There are good reasons for this. We are expected to convey reality to readers. If we change that reality and then write about it, we are being dishonest. Our credibility also depends on not taking sides. Sometimes, if you pay people for information, it can corrupt the information they give you. People will tell you what they think you want to hear. Finally, if people see you as anything other than a neutral observer, they may suspect you are really an agent of law enforcement—or worse. Obtaining information with those suspicions becomes impossible.

With Enrique and other migrants I met I was clear: if you

let me tell your story, I cannot help you in any way. You are sharing your story because you feel it is important to educate people in the United States about this issue. The exception to the no-involvement rule is if a migrant is in imminent danger. Then I would help if I was in a position to do so. There were several instances where I did intervene to help migrants. For example, I interviewed a girl who had been gang raped. I talked to her from a jail where she was being held. As we talked, the two gangsters who raped her yelled from their jail cell across the hallway that when they were all deported to Guatemala, their homies controlled that town and they would finish her off. I made sure she was not deported to that specific town. I felt her life was in danger. When I intervened, I didn't use anything about those migrants after I helped them because I had changed their stories.

Each day, dozens of migrants asked me for food or money. Largely, I explained why I had to say no. If someone was miserable, but not in imminent danger, I saw it as my job to witness their experiences and write the most powerful story possible. My hope was that the story might motivate people to change the conditions I wrote about for the better.

Watching misery unfold is very difficult. Despite everything else I went through reporting *Enrique's Journey,* the hardest part was telling migrants every day that I couldn't help them.

RHRC: What left an indelible mark—what is the one incident you'll never forget?

SN: Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state, was the heart of darkness. So many bad things happen to migrants there. Migrants emerge from Chiapas afraid that anyone who approaches them is out to do them harm.

But in central Mexico, in the state of Veracruz, the people there restored my faith in humanity. In small towns along the tracks, where the train slows for a curve, villagers come out and hand bags of food to hungry migrants as they roll by. Sometimes twenty or thirty people stream out of their houses. They wave, smile, and shout. Then they throw food. The people who live along the rails barely have enough to eat, but they give some of what they have to strangers from other countries. They see their suffering, and they know it is the Christian thing to do. When I was on top of a train, a bundle landed in the hands of a boy who hadn't eaten in some time. I watched him sob with gratitude. It is incredibly moving to see and experience how these people lived their faith.

RHRC: Enrique was searching for his mother. Other than reuniting with a parent, what are some factors that might cause children to migrate?

SN: The year Enrique headed north, an estimated 48,000 children entered the United States unaccompanied by either parent. Since then, that number has doubled.

Most of the Central American children are going to reunite with a parent—usually a mother. After five or ten years apart, they want to be with her again. They want to know if she still loves them. But some children go north simply to find work. Others flee abusive families.

Additionally, gangs, long present in parts of Central America, have grown and increasingly allied themselves with Mexico's brutal Zetas narco-trafficking cartel. Both the gangs and the cartel forcibly recruit children. They accost nine-year-old boys leaving school and tell them: Join us, or we will rape your

sister, kill your parents. Many children are fleeing gang recruitment in places like Honduras and El Salvador that now have the highest homicide rates in the world.

RHRC: What do you think is the biggest risk faced by the migrants in their journey?

SN: The child migrants I saw faced so much adversity, often for months on end. They were hungry, cold, hot, and exhausted after months of trying to reach the United States, all the while sleeping outdoors in trees or on the ground and sipping water from puddles by the tracks. Many were robbed or beaten repeatedly by gangsters, bandits, or by corrupt Mexican authorities. Girls were raped.

When Enrique made his journey, the greatest risk came from the train itself. To evade Mexican authorities, migrants must get on and off the trains while they are moving. Many lose limbs when they stumble. Sometimes when they fall, the wheels tear them apart. Each year, the number injured or killed increases.

Today, however, migrants say the greatest risk is from the Zetas narco-trafficking cartel. The Zetas abduct migrants off the trains. Children are their primary target. They use the scrap of paper children carry with their mom's phone number to call and demand ransom. Abducted children are beaten and often killed.

RHRC: Even with the high risks and tightening of security at the borders, the flow of immigrants entering the United States illegally from Central America and Mexico continues. Why is this?

SN: The border "crackdown" hasn't worked because of the poverty and desperation many face in Central America and in Mexico. As rates of family disintegration and divorce grow in Latin America, increasing numbers of single mothers simply cannot feed their children. Women describe not having anything to give their children for dinner but a glass of water with a teaspoon of sugar to quiet their bellies.

Some of the families live with a tarp over their heads and a dirt floor underneath them. The level of poverty is staggering.

Their countries offer high levels of unemployment, rampant violence, and no hope. They know that if they reach the United States, they will make in one day what it takes a week or more to earn in Honduras. Because of this, determined women are willing to pay increasingly large sums to smugglers who can find innovative ways to slip into the United States.

Many women and children describe being deported to Guatemala by Mexico dozens of times, only to try again. They refuse to go home defeated and poorer than when they started out. They have a level of determination difficult for me to fathom. Until women in countries such as Honduras feel they have some chance of offering their children the essentials, they will seek out the United States, even if there is the possibility of dying while trying to get there.

RHRC: It seems many of the mothers are not prepared for how their departure will affect their children.

SN: A lot of these mothers believe in their hearts that they are doing the best thing by leaving their children. Because a mother sends money back home her child will not grow up in such grinding poverty. But the reality is that in most cases the sepa-

ration lasts much longer than the women believe it will, and the children ultimately resent their mothers for leaving them. In the end, for many families, it's a sad story.

RHRC: How has writing this book changed your opinions about illegal immigration?

SN: Most migrants would rather stay at home with everything they know and love—their families, culture, and language, yet 300,000 unlawful immigrants enter the United States each year. I now recognize that such a powerful stream will change only if it is addressed at its source, if the economies and safety of these countries that are sending large numbers of people to the United States improves. I talked to one teen in southern Mexico who had made twenty-seven attempts to reach his mother in the United States, and he was getting ready to make attempt number twenty-eight. You come to believe that no number of border control guards is going to stop someone like that.

We must address the "push" factors that cause people to migrate in the first place. Migration must be dealt with as an international development issue, something presidential commissions have advocated as the only long-term solution since the 1970s.

For the United States, that requires developing a foreign policy aimed at generating opportunities for women in the four countries –Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador—that send three-quarters of the migrants who come to the United States illegally. We must bring everything to this task: micro-loans to help women start businesses, trade policies that give preference to goods from these countries, promotions emphasizing education for girls.

We must encourage more democratic governments that redistribute wealth, the opposite of what the United States has historically done in the region. Instead of billions spent on useless walls (a University of California San Diego study shows 97 percent of migrants who want to cross the border eventually get through) we must put money into targeted economic development.

RHRC: How can readers help, either by giving money or getting involved?

SN: Readers have responded in very moving ways to Enrique's story. They have built schools, water systems, and homes for single mothers in Mexico and in Central America. Students at a high school in California raised $9,000 selling sweets and provided that money as a micro-loan to coffee-growing women in Olopa, Guatemala, so they could expand their business, thereby allowing more mothers to stay at home with their children. Some readers prefer to help migrants in the U.S., others want to help migrants in Mexico, and some want to help improve conditions in migrants' home countries. There are suggestions at: http://enriquesjourney.com/howtohelp.html.