

# LEARNING GUIDE for

"An achingly beautiful story... masterfully told... Jenny Torres Sanchez is a true leader within young adult fiction."  
—Christina Diaz Gonzalez, award-winning author of *The Red Umbrella*

## WE ARE NOT FROM HERE

JENNY TORRES SANCHEZ



# ABOUT *WE ARE NOT FROM HERE*

A poignant novel of desperation, survival, and escape across the US-Mexico border, inspired by current events. Pulga has his dreams. Chico has his grief. Pequeña has her pride. And these three teens have one another. But none of them have illusions about the town they've grown up in and the dangers that surround them. Even with the love of family, threats lurk around every corner. And when those threats become all too real, the trio knows they have no choice but to run: from their country, from their families, from their beloved home.

Crossing from Guatemala through Mexico, they follow the route of La Bestia, the perilous train system that might deliver them to a better life—if they are lucky enough to survive the journey. With nothing but the bags on their backs and desperation drumming through their hearts, Pulga, Chico, and Pequeña know there is no turning back, despite the unknown that awaits them. —and the darkness that seems to follow wherever they go.

In this striking portrait of lives torn apart, the plight of migrants at the US southern border is brought to light through poignant, vivid storytelling. An epic journey of danger, resilience, heartache, and hope.

## A NOTE TO EDUCATORS:

*We Are Not From Here* details the perilous emotional and physical journey three children take from Central America to the United States. It is also, as the book's author states in the introduction, a story that does not shy away from the stark picture of the desperation in Central America, and the fact that "the ones who suffer most are the same: the powerless, the righteous, the poor, the innocent." Those of us living in the United States have a responsibility to face the role we have played in destabilizing Central American countries and contributing to conditions that have led and continue to lead to the deaths of far too many people, far too many children. With that said, the story is also one that perpetually returns to the theme of survival and the power of faith and hope, in dreams yet unrealized and in the kindness of strangers during the darkest times. As you read this book with the young people in your life, remember the humanity within us all and that we each make the choice for action or inaction every day. We have a choice to face injustice and dehumanization head-on, every day. To have a choice is the double-edged sword of privilege and responsibility.

Y para los estudiantes inmigrantes quiénes lean este libro: Que sepan que los vemos. Para nosotros, ustedes no son de los desaparecidos. Hay comunidades y grupos de gente aquí para aceptarles y apoyarles. Ustedes son nuestro futuro. Creemos en ustedes. Queremos para ustedes solo un futuro lleno de la realización de sus sueños y descanso de preocupaciones, miedo, guerra y la inseguridad emocional y física. Los esperamos aquí con brazos abiertos. Estaremos aquí para recibirles con todo cariño.



## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES AND QUESTIONS:

Create a dialectical journal. This should be three columns, one for what the text says literally, one for what you think about it, and then one for questions you have and/or events that compare or contrast with your own life. A dialectical journal is for you to enter into dialectic with, or talk back to, a text. Think of it as a place for you to record your emotional reactions to what is happening in the plot rather than the more intellectual work of analyzing the text for its literary features.

IT SAYS . . .	I THINK . . .	AND SO . . .
Ex. "But I can't breathe. And it's difficult to swallow. I reach up and feel my neck. It's wet and warm." (60)	Pequeña is experiencing a nightmare and reliving the trauma that surrounds her in her daily life.	I haven't experienced nightmares quite like this, but I would imagine having violence around or near you would find its way into your dreams and lead to a perpetual sense of uneasiness or unrest.

Using [CultureGrams](#), or any other database your school subscribes to, locate Guatemala, El Salvador, and Mexico. Familiarize yourself with the geography, different regions, and statistics about each economy as well as the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural makeup of the land. Make a presentation for your peers using [ThingLink](#) or another site that is available to you to present your findings. Consider dividing into expert groups that focus on economics, culture, or geography, then share what you have learned.

COUNTRY	ECONOMICS	CULTURAL AND ETHNIC INFORMATION	GEOGRAPHY
GUATEMALA			
EL SALVADOR			
MEXICO			

Conclusions: In El Salvador, I see a connection between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. The information I've found shows that \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. A connection I see between these two pieces of evidence is that . . . Therefore, it seems the economy is most affected by . . .

**ESSAY:** A big part of the journey is on board La Bestia, also known as "The Beast" and "El Tren de la Muerte." To read this book and understand the children who take the journey, it is important to know the relationships among the countries La Bestia travels through and to understand what the train itself is, as well as why people would undertake such a perilous journey. Using one or more of the following resources, write a response to the question "If one has to choose between life and death, is there a choice?"

[As Mexico Cracks Down on Migrants, More Risk the Dangerous Train Known as La Bestia](#)  
[Central American Migrants Face Grueling Journey North](#)  
[La Bestia and the Struggle of Central American Migrants](#)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, PART ONE:

### PULGA

(14) Pequeña's cries make Pulga remember "the women who die and leave tiny pieces of themselves behind." What is he referring to? At this point in the story, what pain has Pequeña had to deal with that the boys have not? What effect does this have on her?

(25) Who are Nestor and Rey? What relationship do they have to Pulga and how does he see them?

(27) What secret does Pulga conceal from his mother? Why? How does this experience make him grow up faster than he should have to?

(33) "All I know is we have to run—hard and fast and without looking back. Away as quickly as possible. Away so you're not a witness. So you're not a part of any of it. So no one can ask you questions. So no one knows you were there." What have you ever had to run away from? How does that compare to this situation?

(40) How does the experience of seeing extreme violence early in life change you? If you don't know because you have never had this experience, research the term "**ACE**" (Adverse Childhood Experience) and how it may psychologically and physically change the body. How can we prevent such experiences? In the case of Chico, Pulga, and Pequeña, can they be prevented?

(47) In what way does Pulga serve as a protector for Chico? How does this role force him to mature or grow up sooner than a child should have to?

(49) What are the dreams Pulga has about his life in the US? Take note of these dreams and his language about them in your dialectical journal, to return to later in the novel. Consider how his perspective about his dreams changes over time.

(68) When Pulga convinces Chico, "We saw nothing," what does he mean? What didn't they see? What *did* they see and why is it so important for them to change their story?

(91) What does Pulga mean when he says, "I guess sometimes lying to those we love is the only way to keep them from falling apart"?

(110) When Pulga's heart tells him, "You can outrun danger... But you can't outrun the pain," what do you think this means?

### PEQUEÑA

(34) "Maybe in other places, terrible news is unexpected. But here, it is not. Here we wait for it always. And it always comes." What is the terrible news? Have you ever had an experience with terrible news that you were not ready for? How did it impact your life in that moment, and afterward?

(42) Why does Pequeña feel the way she does about her baby? What is her emotional relationship to the baby's father? What clues do you have about the power dynamic between them?

(60) Pequeña's character has many instances where she connects with her spirituality. Sometimes these moments involve a supernatural element. Keep track of these instances in your dialectical journal. What does the author describe? What is the underlying message?

(63) When Pequeña says, "Something bad has happened. Something bad is going to happen," what do you think she means? What do you think is the likelihood that something bad will happen to the children and what options do they have after this realization?

(88) What does Pequeña mean when she says, "I go to sleep thinking of ways to be deadly"?

(95) What will Pequeña have to sacrifice when she leaves? What will she have to leave when she runs away? What emotions does she reveal on this page that connect to themes of fear, running, and survival?

(102) What do the ring and the baby symbolize in this scene? Compare/contrast Pequeña's experience in this moment with others you have seen or heard about. Explain why she may feel she is at a crossroads between life and death.

### CHICO

None of the sections are specifically named for Chico. His name in Spanish not only means "boy," but also "small"; even so, he plays a large part in the decision Pulga and Pequeña make when they decide to run. What do you learn about Chico's personality through his relationships with Pulga and Pequeña during Part One?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, PART TWO:

### PEQUEÑA

**(115)** What one word would you use to define Rey and Pequeña's interactions? What role does power (or the lack of it) play during the times when they are together? Consider the internal and external forces, including the culture and people around Pequeña, that might influence the way she interacts with Rey.

**(153)** "We are to Mexico what Mexico is to the States." The main characters are Guatemalan and they have a complicated relationship with surrounding countries. What do you think Pulga means by this statement? What is your understanding of the relationship between Mexico and the US? Why don't some people want Mexicans to enter the US? Make a vocabulary square, then research, and educate yourself on the definitions and your personal meanings for the following terms: **immigrant, emigrate, migrant, xenophobia, expatriate, refugee**

VOCABULARY WORD	DICTIONARY DEFINITION
DEFINITION IN YOUR OWN WORDS	REAL-WORLD OR NOVEL APPLICATION

**(155)** How do the children push the physical limits of their bodies? What connection can you make to the psychological or emotional strain they must also be experiencing?

**(172)** On this page, La Bestia is personified. Explain how. What characteristics does it have? How does it both represent safety and immediate danger for the children? What is their psychological relationship to it?

### PULGA

**(146)** "This danger feels more crushing, but maybe because it's so close to where hope lives." Explain the connection between the dreams of a better future and the reality the children face as they prepare for the journey. What is the connection between their expectations and the stark reality?

### CHICO

In a sense, Pulga's relationship with Chico is the same one we each have with our emotions. What can you identify about Pulga and Pequeña's feelings about the journey through the ways they interact with Chico? Think about the connection between words, actions, and possible emotions.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, PART THREE:

### PULGA

(182) What is Pulga's relationship with his father? How does music connect them, and how do his memories of his father connect to his desire to risk everything to travel to the US?

(197) How do the people riding La Bestia care for and support one another? What does Pulga notice about the things they have in common and what sets them apart? What do you notice about the relationship between compassion and competition for survival happening within Pulga's character?

(214) "Maybe we have to become zombies to survive any of this. Maybe part of us has to die to endure this." What does Pulga mean by dying in order to survive? How does this connect to your earlier learning about [ACEs](#) and what you may have heard about [PTSD](#) (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder)?

(222) How are the spiders Pequeña sees symbolic of both danger and protection? Consider your dialectical journal and any of the [magical realism](#) elements you may have recorded from Pequeña's visions. How do they serve to protect her by warning Pequena of the dangers that surround her and those yet to come?

(235) What is the symbolic significance of Chico being "forever caught in the in between"?

### CHICO

When Pulga refers to Chico as his brother, he is, in essence, claiming him as a part of himself. How does Pulga change in Part Three, and how is his relationship with Chico related to those changes?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS, PART FOUR:

### PEQUEÑA

(316) How is the journey different for Pequeña as a woman? Think specifically about the dangers to her safety that may not exist for males traveling the same route. How does she change herself in order to cope, both emotionally and physically?

(327) What is the significance of this visit from La Bruja? Why does she visit Pequeña at this time? Ancient Aztecs revered a mystical being known as Mictecacihuatl, "Lady of the Dead" or "Santa Muerte." Research her and compare her to La Bruja that visits Pequeña. What differences or similarities do you see? In your dialectical journal, reflect: What are your own cultural traditions or beliefs about the moment we all experience between life and death?

(333) "It is impossible—to travel so many miles, on the border of dreams and reality, of life and death, and come across the kindness, and love, and humanity of two sisters. It's impossible. And yet." The children experience extraordinary kindness during this part of their journey. Research and watch videos about [Las Patronas](#) on YouTube. What do you notice? Compare and contrast that with what you have observed about how immigrants are treated in your community.

### PULGA

(248) Look at your earlier notes from Part One, where you reflected on Pulga's dreams for his future. Compare/contrast his opinions and thoughts about what his dreams were then with what they are at this point in the novel. What is different? Why?

(263) "Because if you don't run toward something, Pulga, at least remember what you're running from." Why does Pequeña say this to Pulga? Why are these words so important at this moment in time?

(276) This page details the relationship between Chico and Pulga, but equally as important is the relationship Pulga has to his emotional self. What emotions does he express on this page? How does this moment connect to the earlier ideas on page 214 about having to become "zombies" in order to survive?

(297) "I walk, my backpack getting heavier with each step, weighted down with all the things we carry." Read and watch poetry from [15 Poems on Immigration](#) and consider the emotional and physical items people may carry when leaving an old life behind for a new one. Which poem speaks to you the most? Why?

(343) "From my chest comes a shriek louder than La Bestia, so long, so loud, it scares my tía and she pulls the car over and reaches for me and holds me and tells me it will be okay. I will be okay." Why does Pulga scream in this moment and what does the scream contain? What does it release?

### CHICO

Throughout their time on La Bestia, Chico's voice is both smaller and bigger than those of the other two characters. How can studying Chico as a character help our understanding of the most vulnerable passengers on La Bestia? In what ways is he symbolic of their journey?

## POST-READING ACTIVITIES:

On page 310, Pulga reflects and thinks, “And it doesn’t matter if you never say your dreams again, because they’re inside you. And they embedded themselves in your heart and grew. And you believed. Even if it was an impossible dream.” Chico, Pulga, and Pequeña all have dreams of a better life. In the US, the [Dream Act of 2017](#) (also known as DACA) protected undocumented citizens who came to the US as children (and have lived here for at least four years) from deportation by giving them an opportunity to earn legal status if they met certain requirements. Those who identify as “Dreamers” have had to continually defend their right to remain in the United States, both in public and private spaces. Research information about the Dream Act, read stories of Dreamers from *The Making of a Dream: How a Group of Young Undocumented Immigrants Helped Change What It Means to Be American* by Laura Wides-Muñoz, then [learn what you can do](#) to take action on behalf of undocumented Dreamers and DACA recipients that may be in your community. Remember that it is not currently safe to openly declare one’s citizenship status, and that immigrants (both documented and undocumented) still face much prejudice, brutality, and discrimination in this country, both due to unjust laws and exploitative economic practices.

Deportation and detention centers are places of unbelievable brutality and dehumanization. In the book, the children experience both the kindness and cruelty of strangers along their journey. [RAICES](#) (Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services) is an organization that works to fight for immigrant rights by providing free and low-cost legal services for those facing injustice or legal issues around immigration status. Visit the RAICES website after researching and talking with community members about the status of immigrants in your local community and choose one of the following actions to complete alone or with others:

- |                          |                                |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Create a petition        | Create a call campaign         |
| Create an event          | Create an email                |
| Create a fundraiser      | Create a text message campaign |
| Create a letter campaign | Create a report                |

Create a visual collage or other artistic project for one character from *We Are Not From Here*. Include quotes, images, and any other pertinent information from your dialectical journal. You may choose to make a map of their physical journey, a plot diagram, facial portrait, or body biography (draw an outline of the character’s body and include quotes or images that identify what they think, feel, do, and where they go as well as conflicts they face and what their personality is like). Include significant moments from their journey and clues about their dreams for the future.

**ESSAY REVISION:** Return to the essay prompt: “If one has to choose between life and death, is there a choice?” Now that you have read the novel, examine what you wrote with fresh eyes. What are your thoughts and opinions about the journey the children undertook? Compare and contrast them to what you thought before you read the novel. Consider the following important themes: **family, courage, survival, violence, danger, friendship, corruption, wealth, power, death, opportunity, hope.**

Standards\*: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1-10

Additional Resources and Further Reading:

[“Abolish ICE,” Explained, on Vox](#)

[Guides for Undocumented Immigrants, by Informed Immigrant](#)

[Activist Jose Antonio Vargas Speaks to Facing History, by Facing History and Ourselves](#)

[Enrique’s Journey, Book Share Program and Immigration Resources by Facing History and Ourselves](#)

[We Are Not From Here Spotify playlist, by Jenny Torres Sanchez](#)

[Riding The Beast: Alt.Latino Interviews Salvadoran Journalist Oscar Martinez, on NPR](#)

[Citizen Illegal by José Olivarez](#)

[Lima:: Limón by Natalie Scenters-Zapico](#)

## ABOUT JENNY TORRES SANCHEZ

Jenny Torres Sanchez ([www.jennytorressanchez.com](http://www.jennytorressanchez.com)) is a full-time writer and former English teacher. She was born in Brooklyn, New York, but has lived on the border of two worlds her whole life. She is the author of *We Are Not From Here*; *The Fall of Innocence*; *Because of the Sun*; *Death, Dickinson, and the Demented Life of Frenchie Garcia*; and *The Downside of Being Charlie*. She lives in Orlando, Florida, with her husband and children. Follow her on Twitter @jetchez and on Instagram @jennytorsanchez.

## PRAISE FOR *WE ARE NOT FROM HERE*

★ “A brutally honest, not-to-be-missed narrative... gripping, heart-wrenching, and thrilling.” —*KIRKUS REVIEWS*, starred review

★ “A candid, realistic story that will leave readers thinking about the characters—and about our own world—long after the last page.”  
—*SLJ*, starred review

★ “Gripping, poignant... This soul-shaking narrative [recalls] the works of Gabriel García Márquez.” —*BOOKLIST*, starred review

★ “A devastating read that is difficult to put down, this unforgettable book unflinchingly illuminates the experiences of those leaving their homes to seek safety in the United States.”  
—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY*, starred review

This guide was written by Julia E. Torres. Julia is a veteran language arts teacher and librarian in Denver, Colorado. Julia serves teachers around the country by facilitating teacher development workshops rooted in the areas of social justice, anti-racist education, equity and access in librarianship, and education as a practice of liberation. Julia also works with students locally and around the country, with the goal of empowering them to use literacy to fuel resistance and positive social transformation. Julia serves on several local and national boards and committees promoting educational equity and progressivism. She is the current NCTE Secondary Representative-at-Large, and she is also a Heinemann Publishing Heinemann Fellow and Book Ambassador for The Educator Collaborative. Connect with Julia on Twitter @juliaerin80.

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