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# Illegal



## Synopsis

A promise. Quinceañera. A promise that we would be together on my fifteenth birthday . . . Instead, Nora is on a desperate journey far away from home. When her father leaves their beloved Mexico in search of work, Nora stays behind. She fights to make sense of her loss while living in poverty—waiting for her father's return and a better day. When the letters and money stop coming, Nora decides that she and her mother must look for him in Texas. After a frightening experience crossing the border, the two are all alone in a strange place. Now, Nora must find the strength to survive while aching for small comforts: friends, a new school, and her precious quinceañera. Bettina Restrepo's gripping, deeply hopeful debut novel captures the challenges of one girl's unique yet universal immigrant experience.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 272 pages

Publisher: Katherine Tegen Books; 1 edition (March 8, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0061953423

ISBN-13: 978-0061953422

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.9 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 28 customer reviews

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## Customer Reviews

With searing realism, debut author Restrepo describes Nora's anger, desperation and loss of faith... This memorable coming-of-age story will awaken readers to the overlooked struggles of immigrants. --Kirkus - 2-15-2011 Thoroughly engaging and thought-provoking... an excellent choice for a book discussion group or a class conversation starter about immigration, prejudice, or gangs --VOYA - 4 in quality and popularity

I used to be an auditor at a chain of ethnic grocery stores, Fiesta Mart, Inc., headquartered in Houston, Texas. I drove around the city visiting the stores on a daily basis. I came to know

the clientele and their financial life cycle very well. The immigrant customers would arrive with their weekly paychecks. After paying their utilities bills (overdue), a bag of bus tokens, and sending a few hundred dollars abroad (via Western Union), I would watch them walk into the grocery store and carefully pick out their groceries. When they went through the checkouts, they only had enough money left in their pockets to exchange for quarters (for the laundry mat). It was a vicious cycle of survival. I found Nora at Fiesta Mart on Quitman Avenue. A girl standing on the side of the road staring at the grocery store. Her face haunted me. I wanted to know her story. How did she come to stand on that corner? Where was her family? Was she hungry? Those questions became a story which turned into a novel. I modeled the neighborhood in my book after the neighborhood surrounding Moody Park on Quitman Avenue. The market Nora visits is a Fiesta store. The town, Cedula, is fictional, but based on a town I visited in Mexico as a child. Cedula is just a piece of slang referring to the older Mexico voter registration card (a prime piece of ID in Mexico). Chapter 11, Highway 59, was written after a terrible crime was committed in South Texas. A truck driver left 77 immigrants in a truck in the middle of a field. 18 people cooked to death. The Houston Chronicle did extraordinary coverage of this horrific incident. The images haunted me--especially the one of a foot hanging lifelessly out of the back of the truck. Chapter 11 is one of the original chapters of the book that hasn't changed. Mr. Mann was created from a photo I saw advertising the North Texas Food Bank. I imagine him to have paranoid schizophrenia with periodic moments of lucidity. Many people who choose to live in the street are mentally ill ~ that doesn't make them less human. I named the main character Nora because she is a Viking forging into the new world. The Greek origin of the name means "bright one". Aurora, her mother, means sun. The sun feeds and burns. Grandma Isabel was named after my own Colombian grandmother who passed away. Manuela, Jorge's wife, is named after my own mother.

Nora's family isn't doing too well. Because they need money to support their farm in Mexico, her father leaves for the U.S. in search of work. Money and letters stop coming from him. Nora decides it's best to go to Texas to find her father so that he can fulfill his promise: they'll be together for her fifteenth birthday. Nora and her mother embark on a grueling trip to Texas. Once there, they struggle to find housing, food, jobs and false papers. They're surrounded by the cruel and the kind. Nora's bravery shines through as mean girls, lecherous men, and gang members mistake her for a victim. And still, she doesn't give up looking for her father so that they can be reunited before her

quinceañera, an event girls in her culture eagerly await. This is a wonderful novel about the immigrant experience. It filled me with both questions and sympathy towards people who cross the border illegally. It's also heart-breaking, so don't be surprised if you need tissue at hand.

The story of Nora, a Mexican who comes to Houston illegally, is rich and powerfully told. She's looking for her father, who left the family to make a way in America and who has seemingly disappeared. Restrepo's writing puts the reader right there next to Nora and her mother in the dust of Cedula, and hidden in the back of the fruit truck as they make their way across the border, and on the streets of Houston, as they settle in a foreign and dangerous land. As a resident of Houston, I immediately saw the power of this story. It presents a different perspective of what it means to be "illegal" and shows the reader why people risk their lives in order to find a new life in America. The story does not gloss over the hardships faced by immigrants, including gangs and prostitution, but there are also wonderful characters, an intriguing plot and ultimately, a great deal of hope. A must-read!

Wonderful writing about arriving and thriving in the great USA. There are many touching and emotional moments in this novel. Nora's voice rings true, although she must also be mature. Illegal details problems of the coyote trip to America. Fascinating, enlightening and horrifying. Would we be able to give up everything like those begging to be allowed in America? This book is timely and necessary!

Intended for a tween and teen audience, this beautiful, if sometimes gritty and heartwrenching, story follows Nora -- almost 15 -- as she tracks her Dad from Cedula, Mexico to Texas trying to bring him back home -- or to stay in the US with him. Tackling a subject not-often-enough spoken about in sympathetic terms, Restrepo creates an engaging yet accessible story, worthy of a shelf in every library and classroom.

Illegal is beautifully told, heartfelt story about a girl (Nora) who risks everything to find her father in America. Nora's father leaves Mexico to support his family, but the checks and letters stop coming all of a sudden. Nora and her mother face Coyotes (people smugglers), poverty, and prejudice to find him. (No spoilers!) Highly recommended!

Staying behind in the grapefruit orchards of Cedula, Mexico when her father left for America was

painfully difficult for Nora. But times are tough and the money papa sends has helped the family hang on to the only thing they have left. But when her father's letters and money stop coming, Nora won't stay idle waiting for the family to lose their orchard. In spite of her youth, she pulls her mother into a plan to go to Texas in search of him. Braving through hiring a "coyote", a harrowing trip by truck and forced to lead her mother like a horse all the way Nora won't give up until they find her papa. But the American dream isn't instantly granted to those who come seeking it. Houston is a big city filled with gangs, homelessness and finding her papa may take longer than Nora and her mother can afford. When you don't speak the language and your very presence breaks the law, how do you build a new life? My personal feelings regarding illegal immigration aside I struggled with this story. I think Restrepo bit off more than she could chew as far as this very controversial topic is concerned. Everything came far too easily to Nora and her mother, even the "harrowing" border crossing was toned down to a very G-rated experience. Because this is a Young Adult novel intended for younger readers I do understand the need for not going into certain areas but at the same time I feel the author has done a disservice to the readers. Coming to America illegally is not this simple and the horror stories I have heard make this seem like a very sugar-coated fairy-tale version. I was disappointed that this wasn't more true to life. All of that aside this was so well written! If the author had been writing another story I might have been able to give it a much higher rating. Restrepo has a great grasp of scene setting and characterization. The things Nora wants are so suited to a girl of her age it was easy to care for her and pray she would find her papa and that her family would have the happily-ever-after ending. Though I felt the social issues (ie. gangs) were badly watered down I do feel like the author did it for the right reasons, for the younger audience this book is intended for, I can't fault that. Overall this is well written and not unenjoyable but if you're expecting the story to be frightening or sway political feelings it's simply not that solid. I think it would be very suitable for the younger end of the YA age group but won't appeal to adults who enjoy YA. \*\*\*Notes: Received unsolicited ARC via publisher.

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