



Esperanza Rising

Esperanza Ortega's happy life on her family's large ranch in Mexico ends abruptly with the murder of her father. Forced to flee their land and her greedy uncles, thirteen-year-old Esperanza and her mother escape with their former servants to a migrant camp in California. Life in the agricultural camps is a hard adjustment, and when Mama falls ill, it is up to Esperanza to earn money by working in the packing sheds as well as helping with the chores of their new extended family in the farm camp. As Esperanza struggles to understand her new life, she transforms from a pampered rich girl to a hardworking and compassionate young woman. Readers will gain a deep understanding of the historical forces of the Depression, labor strikes, and the immigrant experience in 1930s Southern California through Esperanza's story.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

CHARACTERS

Why does Esperanza's father have a special feeling for his land? Discuss the characters of Tío Luis and Tío Marco. How are they different from Esperanza's father?

What does Esperanza mean when she says to Miguel that there is a "deep river" (p. 18) that runs between them? How does this change when they move to California? Discuss how Esperanza grows as the story progresses.

Why do Alfonso and Hortensia offer to take Esperanza and her mother to the United States with them even though doing so puts their own lives at risk?

On the train ride to California, Esperanza refuses to allow a peasant girl to touch her treasured doll; yet later she offers to give the doll to Isabel, Miguel's cousin. What has brought about this change in her feelings?

Why does Esperanza dislike Marta when they first meet? What makes her change her mind about Marta?

SETTING

Compare the setting in Aguascalientes to the company camp in California. How does Esperanza react to the changes in her life? How does her illness affect Esperanza? Compare the two train rides—the one Esperanza and Miguel took as young children and the one they take to California. What is significant about the description of the earlier train ride in the story?

Compare the strikers' camp to the company camp. How does seeing the strikers' camp affect Esperanza? Why do Josefina and Hortensia tell Esperanza and Miguel to shop only at the Japanese store? What does Alfonso mean when he tells Miguel that Mr. Yakota is "getting rich on other people's bad manners" (p. 188)?

THEMES

When Esperanza lives at El Rancho de las Rosas, she and her friends look forward to their Quinceañeras, after which they will be old enough to marry, "rising to the positions of their mothers before them" (p. 8). Compare this idea of "rising" to the rest of the story and to the title. How does the meaning change?

Discuss the Mexican proverbs at the beginning of the book and how they relate to the story:

"He who falls today may rise tomorrow."

"The rich person is richer when he becomes poor, than the poor person when he becomes rich."

Why does the author name each chapter for a fruit or vegetable? What is the significance of each type of fruit or vegetable to that part of the story? What is the significance of the rose cuttings that Alfonso and Miguel carry with them from Mexico?

How does Abuelita's experience of leaving Spain for Mexico compare to Esperanza's of leaving Mexico for the United States? How does Abuelita's crocheting reflect their experiences? What does she mean when she speaks of the "mountains and valleys" (p. 51) in the stitching?

Research the legend of the phoenix in Mexican folklore. What does Abuelita mean when she says, "We are like the phoenix"?