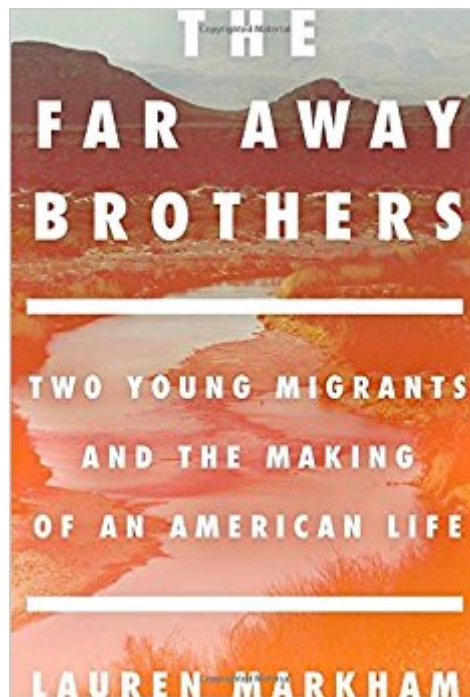




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The Far Away Brothers: Two Young Migrants And The Making Of An American Life



Synopsis

The deeply reported story of identical twin brothers who escape El Salvador's violence to build new lives in California—fighting to survive, to stay, and to belong. Growing up in rural El Salvador in the wake of the civil war, Ernesto Flores had always had a fascination with the United States, the distant land of skyscrapers and Nikes, while his identical twin, Raul, never felt that northbound tug. But when Ernesto ends up on the wrong side of the region's brutal gangs he is forced to flee the country, and Raul, because he looks just like his brother, follows close behind—away from one danger and toward the great American unknown. In this urgent chronicle of contemporary immigration, journalist Lauren Markham follows the seventeen-year-old Flores twins as they make their harrowing journey across the Rio Grande and the Texas desert, into the hands of immigration authorities, and from there to their estranged older brother's custody in Oakland, CA. Soon these unaccompanied minors are navigating a new school in a new language, working to pay down their mounting coyote debt, and facing their day in immigration court, while also encountering the triumphs and pitfalls of life as American teenagers—girls, grades, Facebook—with only each other for support. With intimate access and breathtaking range, Markham offers a coming of age tale that is also a nuanced portrait of Central America's child exodus, an investigation of U.S. immigration policy, and an unforgettable testament to the migrant experience.

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Customer Reviews

A Fall 2017 Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Selection—“Timely and

thought-provoking—Markham provides a sensitive and eye-opening take on what's at stake for young immigrants with nowhere else to go. Publishers Weekly—“Powerful—Focusing primarily on one family's struggle to survive in violence-riddled El Salvador by sending some of its members illegally to the U.S.,...[this] compellingly intimate narrative—keenly examines the plights of juveniles sent to America without adult supervision—. One of the most searing books on illegal immigration since Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey*.—Kirkus [starred review]—“A stark examination of youth migration and the extreme risks taken to access a better life....Markham questions the accessibility of the American dream while compassionately narrating Rafael and Ernesto's experiences.—Booklist”This brilliantly reported book goes so deeply into the lives of its protagonists and is so beautifully, movingly written it has some of the pleasures of a novel—but all the force of bitter truth, the truth about the lives of unaccompanied minors in the USA, about poverty, the ricocheting wars here and there, and the caprices and brutalities of immigration policy. Anyone who wants to understand more deeply how we got here and why we need to keep going until we get someplace better should dive into this book.”—Rebecca Solnit, author of *The Mother of All Questions*“Beautifully written,—The Far Away Brothers—examines the claustrophobic space between grinding poverty and brutal gang violence that drives so many children from El Salvador to make the dangerous journey North. Lauren Markham applies the eye of an artist to the dogged reporting of an investigative journalist. What a fine and timely book!”—Ted Koppel, author of *Lights Out*—“In the midst of a contentious debate in which reality is too often bent or ruptured entirely,—The Far Away Brothers—is a necessary book. But it is so much more than just that. Told with elegant detail, profound compassion, and painful truth, you will come out of this story with so much knowledge and, more importantly, understanding—of immigrants and also of youth. Lauren Markham has written this book in a hard and noble way, depicting the Flores brothers not only as representatives of a vital issue, but as human beings: complicated, special, humorous, and flawed. You need to meet these young men.—Jeff Hobbs, author of *The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace*“A twenty-first century odyssey,—The Far Away Brothers—will take readers to unimaginable places, mapped and unmapped, in heart and mind as well as on the earth's surface. This is one of the finest accounts ever written of the plight of unaccompanied migrant children, full of insight and empathy, and as gripping a tale as one might hope to find in a masterful suspense novel. By making the Flores twins come alive, Lauren Markham puts flesh and bone on one of the most shadowy yet most pressing crises of our day and

age." — Carlos Eire, author of *Waiting for Snow in Havana* and *Learning to Die in Miami*

"Lauren Markham has written a modern day epic with *The Far Away Brothers*. It is a wonderfully unfolding, intimate portrait of family and the dangers people are still willing to risk for a simple chance at a better life. Markham's writing reads like the best of fiction out there, and yet... remember, this happened to real people. This is the sort of book you'll be thinking about at night." — Domingo Martinez, author of *The Boy Kings of Texas*

"The most moving revelation of this book comes not from the geo-political lessons we learn, the path of the brothers through the desert, or the obstacles they face in U.S. courts — rather, it's the insight into how that journey affects them, plaguing them with anxiety and guilt but also inspiring hope, ambition, and responsibility. From a lesser writer this would be a simple migration story, but thanks to Markham's relentless reporting and care, it becomes a deeply relatable tale of human transformation — messy, stumbling, and bursting with optimism." — Laura Tillman, author of *The Long Shadow of Small Ghosts*

"Once you've read this remarkable reporting, 'immigration' will never be an abstract or airless debate for you again. It's hard to imagine a more timely or more valuable volume." — Bill McKibben, author of *Radio Free Vermont*

Lauren Markham is a writer based in Berkeley, California. Her work has appeared in *VQR*, *VICE*, *Orion*, *Pacific Standard*, *Guernica*, *The New Yorker.com*, on *This American Life*, and elsewhere. Lauren earned her MFA in Fiction Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and has been awarded Fellowships from the Middlebury Fellowship in Environmental Journalism, the 11th Hour Food and Farming Journalism Fellowship, the Mesa Refuge, and the Rotary Foundation. For the past decade, she has worked in the fields of refugee resettlement and immigrant education.

A story of two "unaccompanied minor" twin brothers who fled to the U.S. from their home of El Salvador due to having been targeted for violence by gangs and their Uncle. Raul and Ernesto "Flores" are identical twins so when one is being targeted amidst El Salvador's national epidemic of gang violence and homicides, the other has to also flee. Fleeing has its costs though, financially, physically, and psychologically. The story is compelling and the Flores twins will cause readers who are so inclined to feel empathy. The language is easy to read, and the information that is provided flows within the story. In fact, this true story (but with names changed) reads like a novel. So much has happened in the young lives of the Flores twins, that's it hard to believe that when they enroll in school in California they are just 17 (a fact that maybe should have been emphasized more in the book). The story is told with sympathy for the choices that El Salvadorans have to make, but the

telling itself retains some objectivity, as Lauren Markham notes both the Flores' twins strengths and challenges but also their moments of weakness. These characters aren't always "heroes" and their older teenager ages are reflected in mistakes with money and in their romantic and familial relationships. The author discusses politics, but it appeared to me that the author did try to remain more subjective in its telling than she actually is. (I think this is a wise approach, as this book leaves some possibility of swaying opinions for those who have not yet made up their mind). Markham gives criticism both for Obama and for Trump (although it is early in the latter's presidency).

Markham also doesn't shy from the fact that while these people are fleeing violence, there also can be for many the pull of a better economic life. Markham clearly shows that she knows the players, the economics of immigration, and the appropriate terminology. The section that might feel most preachy is actually short, The Afterword, with much of the rest of the political talk more focused on statements of whether or not a policy was right or mistakes made by governments. I did feel that Markham was perhaps too critical of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement, without also noting how ORR was overwhelmed by the influx too and are actually folks that are trying to help refugees, asylees, and unaccompanied minors. One aspect I particularly found interesting was the Flores' twins' perspective on lesser racism, and how some Americans ignore Latinas/os even while they don't consider themselves to be racists. This book does present a lot of information in the headlines and provides a nice summary of issues. Readers will learn about issues that are faced by Latinos/as even if they are not experienced by the Flores family. For example, there are chapters that provide sidebars such as a chapter about a family of three from Honduras who is on their own way "North." These are nicely interwoven, and I felt that they added rather than distracted from the main story. There's also talk about abuse in detention centers, descriptions on adult detention centers, and other political events like states where Latinos/as in the U.S. are stopped by police and required to produce their papers, even when they are not witnessed in committing any crime. There's also talk about the challenges that women and girls face when traveling "North," such as the prevalence of rapes and noting how many women start on birth control before they embark because it is so common to get raped that this will at least help to prevent a pregnancy. I did not feel that the book was overly long (as I often do), and other reviewers have mentioned the cursing which I really did not notice. To me, the cursing felt not-unappropriate for teenagers and just-turned- adults (who do often curse) and, in particular, these two brothers who have seen so much violence and upheaval in so short a time. I'll just say if you can through their trauma and life and not curse, then you are stronger than me. In fact, it's hard to not think of parallels between the Flores' lives and your own while reading this book, and readers

may walk away feeling grateful that they've never had to deal with the same situation. While the book clearly shows that the U.S. is not a perfect promise ground offering everyone an easy "American dream" (and can even be violent in its own way for those who end up in a violent place like Oakland, California, there's an underlying message that Americans should show more sympathy for those who are faced with unrelenting gang violence and just want the chance to build a better, safer life. After all, no one wants to see their children killed. To the charge that this book is "nothing new," I will agree that that might be the case factually, but this telling is very well done, up to date with a lot of recent news coverage and facts, and covers a lot of issues without feeling dry. Thus, this book comes well recommended for those interested in El Salvadorans, human rights, or just compelling (and maybe thought-provoking) human experiences.

This very timely story focuses on the travails of twin 17-year old brothers escaping from the gangs and violence of El Salvador to "go north". Their older brother (their "far away" brother) had crossed over about 7 years earlier and had managed to pay off the ~\$6K that he owed to the coyote who accompanied him on the journey. The price has gone up, and the twins each have to pay \$6-7K. Their large poor family can't raise that kind of money, so put up one of their plots of land as collateral. The payment doesn't make their journey any less harrowing; the coyote actually disappeared and left them on their own for part of the difficult trip. When they arrive at the border, they are kept in the border camps for a while until they can sort out the paperwork and arrange with their older brother to taken them in. They move in with him in his San Jose apartment, but the transition is far from smooth. The boys move with their brother into a cramped, crowded apartment in Oakland (more affordable than San Jose), and enroll in Oakland International High School, where the author is on staff. They have little English, and little knowledge of how anything works in California. They both take part-time jobs, and after a split with their brother move into a room in a house together and are responsible for all of their expenses. It is hard to send money home to pay off the debt, with grows at a usurious interest rate of 20%. They find a low-cost attorney to help them navigate the immigration courts. They get robbed and beat up, and miss too much school; but they still feel that they are lucky to be here in the U.S. away from the gangs, poverty and violence back home. The book is well researched and written. Focusing on the plight of just these 2 boys and their families, both in the U.S. and back in El Salvador, gives the story a very human and emotional core, while covering in a more general way the challenges faced by all immigrants. The situation in their home country is truly dire, and it is abundantly clear that just "building a wall" isn't going to solve the immigration problem. Immigrants are risking their lives now to get into the U.S., and the

wall will be just another of the many obstacles that they seek to overcome. This, and similar works, should be required reading for anyone in our government seeking to craft a truly humane and just immigration system.

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