Fiction Selections –
Immigration Themed Books


This wordless graphic novel is suitable for fifth through adult.

Synopsis: A man leaves his homeland in search to make a better life for his wife and daughter. It appears that the homeland has something ominous hovering over it (as indicated by the dark serpent-like tales woven throughout the pictures). The man takes a ship to an unknown new land where he encounters new written language, new creatures, industrialism, and unique architecture. You watch the main character find a place to stay, find a job that he understands, meet new friends, and finally reunite with his family. The characters, written language, and creatures aren’t indicative of any certain area in the world. It appears the author does this so the reader feels just as unfamiliar as the character of the book.

Indicators of Authenticity: The following awards have been bestowed to this book:
Best Books For Young Adults 2008
Best Books Of The Year 2007
Best Illustrated Books of the Year 2007
Booklist Books For Older Readers - 2007
Bulletin Blue Ribbons 2007 - Fiction
Kirkus Reviews - Editor's Choice Children's Books - 2007
Notable Books of the Year 2007 : Children
Notable Children's Books 2008 - Older Readers
Picture Books - 2008


Lexile 790. Kindle- YES
Synopsis: Fourteen year-old Nadira and her family immigrated to the United States from Bangladesh. Due to an unethical lawyer, the family’s visas have been expired, and they have not become U.S. citizens yet. Since the September 11th attacks, immigration authorities, due to concerns of terrorism, have sought Muslim families out. The family travels to Canada to seek asylum, but they are turned away because Canada was inundated with those seeking asylum that they couldn’t process all the requests. Soon, Abba (the father) is detained at the border going back into the United States. He is also investigated for funding a religious group suspected of illegal activities. The mother, Ma as she is called, stays at a shelter to work things out for Abba while the two girls travel back to Queens, New York.

Her older sister, Aisha, constantly outshines Nadira who is an average achieving student that is a bit overweight. Aisha is an A+ student that ends up earning the right to be valedictorian of her class. Initially, Aisha tries to meet with government officials to debate her father’s case, but she is unsuccessful. The book comes to a climax when Nadira shows up at her father’s hearing with evidence that he was innocent of the accusations (basically a mistaken identity situation). Abba is released to his home and granted another hearing for citizenship. At the end, he is granted permission to file a new application for residency by a judge.

Indicators of Authenticity: The following are a partial listing of honors and/or favorable reviews granted to this book:
Booklist Starred 12/15/05
Notable/Best Book: American Library Association 01-01-07
Horn Book starred 03-01-06


Synopsis: Fourteen year-old adopted son named Otter has great pride in what his father and uncle do: miners of gold. The father’s and uncle’s profits keep Otter and his mother financially secure in China. They were trying to make money to overthrow the current government.
Otter went up to a place known as Dragon’s Gate to check on his mom’s landholdings, and he gets into deep trouble. A Manchu soldier was intoxicated and egged Otter (a political rebel along with his family) to sing their national anthem. The soldier took out a knife to threaten Otter, but in his drunkenness he fell on it…accidently killing himself.

Otter’s mother sent him to America to avoid Chinese prison as Otter was considered to be a murderer. Once in America, Otter met up with his father and uncle. It turns out that the two worked as railroad constructors. In America, it was the era after the civil war, so most people were considered free men. The Chinese, however, had to brave starvation, harsh cold, long hours, and dangerous working conditions while blasting through the mountains to construct the railroad. They were considered the lowest echelon of society, and Otter was used to being well in China.

Otter befriends an Irish boy named Sean. The two of them are disheartened and aware of the prejudice people have towards the Chinese in America…including Sean’s people.

The story comes to a climax when an avalanche kills an entire camp full of Chinese railroad workers. More avalanches were expected, but Otter and his uncle dynamite through avalanches to prevent more death of the Chinese in their camps.

**Indicators of Authenticity:** This is a Newberry Honor Book – 1994. In the Afterword, the author cites seventeen works he consulted to do the research for this book.

**Munoz-Ryan, Pam. Esperanza Rising. New York: Scholastic, 2000**

**Lexile: 750. Kindle – NO**

**Synopsis:** (courtesy Lexile.com) For the first 12 years of her life, Esperanza Ortega is pampered by servants and sheltered by her doting parents on their ranch in Aguascalientes, Mexico. But a sudden tragedy shatters that world of wealth and privilege. Homeless and destitute, she and her mother immigrate to California to work in the fields and start a new life.

**Indicators of Authenticity:** Please refer to Lexile.com: http://lexile.com/book/details/9780439120418/

Lexile 850. Kindle- YES

Synopsis: Thirteen year-old Yara describes her life in a diary that she received as a gift from her father for her birthday. Set in the years 1967-68, Yara and her relatives experience hardship in Cuba under the Fidel Castro regime. They work long hours on agricultural plantations without compensation. Their brother, Pepito, serves in the Cuban army. The family decides they must leave Cuba because of their opposing views with the Castro government. Once in America, the family begins to break apart. They initially live with extended family in Miami, but soon they earn enough money to get their own apartment. The mother becomes more independent in America – both getting her own job as a seamstress and obtaining a driver’s license. This causes tension between her and the father, who holds on to Cuban tradition. The father joins an anti-Castro militant organization in the United States, and he is often under the watch of the FBI. The father intended for their stay in Miami to be temporary, and he planned to return to Cuba upon the fall of Castro (which never happens).

Yari and her sister Ileana slowly adjust to the new language and customs of America. They both earn friends and encounter teenaged experiences like sleep-overs and boyfriends. At the end of the book, Yari gets to travel and vacation with her American friend’s family, which isn’t customary in Cuba. Upon arrival home, her father basically tells her that experience won’t happen again because they’ll be back in Cuba by the following year.

After the novel, there is the account of the author’s personal exile called “My Personal Exodus.”

Indicators of Authenticity: The author immigrated to Miami from Cuba at the age of six.

Here is a partial list of honors received for this book:
Voice of Youth Advocates 02-01-03
American Library Association 01-01-04
This is a historical fiction graphic novel suitable for third through sixth graders. The lexile level is 730. Kindle - NO

**Synopsis:** With some of the characters and events based off of the author’s great-grandmother and great-uncle’s immigration to the United States, this book details the events of a 10-year old girl’s flee to safety of the United States. Hannah is the only girl of seven children in her family. The extended family ends up with two tickets purchased for America that was supposed to be used by Hannah’s cousin, Rivka, to immigrate to American and wed a betrothed man, and Rivka’s sister, Esther, is to accompany Rivka on the long journey. Plans changed when Rivka died due to the flu. The family decides Esther will use Rivka’s ticket and passport, and Hannah will accompany her. Soon, we learn that all needed to flee Lithuania (then part of Russia) because her family is Jewish, and the Jews were being killed in pogroms. The book details Esther’s and Hannah’s journey to America, including the train ride to Germany and the ship ride to Ellis Island. We learn of the tests that were taken, the physical examinations required, and that each child immigrant needed a sponsor to vouch for them. Our travelers are detained for a while because their sponsor, Zalman (Rivka’s fiancé), isn’t located by the Ellis Island officials due to a misunderstanding about his address. Finally, they move to New York, get jobs to earn money for other family members to immigrate, take advantage of education, and even the use public library. The book ends with Hannah writing a letter home to her family describing how wonderful she views American life to be. There is a brief glossary to help the reader understand some Jewish words and an author’s note at the end of the book.

**Note:** While on the ship, the author describes how vile the living conditions were, and she uses and illustrates the word “piss” to describe how the passengers had to urinate off the sides of the ship.

**Indicators of Authenticity:** In the author’s note, you will find that characters and events based off of the author’s great-grandmother and great-uncle’s immigration to the United States. The author has been honored with over 35 awards since 1990, including an American Library Association Notable Book and an International Reading Association Teachers’ Choice award.
This is a fictional story based on real people and events. This is suitable for approximate ages of 10-13 year old children.


Lexile 760. Kindle- NO

**Synopsis:** The Torres family, already poor, suffers the loss of their father in a fishing boat accident. The father was the main provider for the family of seven. Although the mother worked as a cleaning maid at a local hotel, her wages alone would not support the family. The family was in debt before the father died, and neither job offered life insurance benefits for his death. Thirteen-year-old Lupita and her older brother, Salvador, illegally enter into America to find work. Lupita poses as a boy to find work. The two siblings smuggle themselves to California on a train, constantly trying to avoid guards. They run into a man that hooks them up with his brother to work at a motel and a restaurant in a town called Colton, California. The two meet others that know tricks to get money down to their family without being picked up by la migra, or the U.S. immigration police. When the la migra arrests their friends, the escaping siblings decide to move onto Indio, California, where their aunt lives although it is another seventy-five miles of mountain and desert to travel. Lupita and Salvador finally reach their aunt’s house. It is evident to the siblings that her aunt was not rich as they had always imagined that she was. In fact, the aunt’s family receives welfare payment from the government, and the aunt ends up borrowing a couple of dollars from the kids to arrange for breakfast. The uncle earns no money as he is a drinker, gambler, and has health issues with his back and lungs. The kids end up staying with their relatives, but they pay $150 rent per month. The siblings work in agricultural fields for less money than their jobs paid in Colton. Soon, Salvador takes a job at a café that causes him to leave the house. When he returns to the aunt’s house, he gives Lupita less and less money to send home. She figures out that he has a girlfriend. Lupita had no friend as had missed her family. She even spent Christmas without her brother. The book comes to a climax when Salvador, forced by his aunt, takes Lupita along to a Valentine’s Day dance. La migra bust the dance, and Salvador is apprehended because he could not answer their questions in English. This
inspires Lupita to want to learn English, but la migra often targeted night schools. Irela, the youngest cousin, teaches her English at the end of the book, giving them both some for a better tomorrow.

**Indicators of Authenticity:** It is documented that the author used firsthand research for this story by interviewing Mexican immigrants instead of using her normal research method – the library. Beatty won the 1974 Southern California Council on Literature for Children and Young People’s lifetime contribution award. This book is a Jane Adams Children Book Award honor book.

**ISBN-13:** 978-0140363913

![Picture of Rifka](image)

**Lexile 660; Kindle: Yes**

**Synopsis:** Written in letter format, this book depicts the journey that Rifka Nebrot takes as a persecuted Jewish Russian to the United States. She and her family must leave hastily and cleverly to avoid the Russian army that intends to kill her two brothers. Rifka and her family encounter many adversities on the way to America (including typhus, ringworm, being swindled, and difficulty with new languages). Rifka is separated from her family when they get to travel to America, but she is forced to stay in Europe to treat her ringworm.

Finally, she arrives in America, only to be detained for not having any hair. With the help of a Russian peasant boy, Rifka proves to the officials at Ellis Island that she is worthy enough to become an American.

**Indicators of Authenticity:** The following honors (and many more) have been awarded to this book:

- National Jewish Book Award
- IRA Children’s Book Award
- Christopher Award
- ALA Best Book for Young Adults
- Horn Book Outstanding Book of the Year
- School Library Journal Best Book of the Year

**ISBN-13:** 978-0440961321
This book would be suitable for fifth through ninth graders. The lexile is 970. Kindle - NO

NOTE: There are derogatory names used for the slaves that were customary of the time setting of this novel.

Synopsis: Thirteen-year-old Jessie Bollier gets kidnapped by sailors in a section of New Orleans while running an errand for his mother. The sailors kidnap him because they witnessed him playing a fife earlier in the day, and they want him to play his fife aboard their slave-ship, The Moonlight. The ship heads to Africa to obtain a shipment of slaves. The ship's commander is Captain Cawthorne, and there are eleven other crewmen aboard the ship.

On the way to Africa, Jessie finds out that the crewmembers divide the profits for the sale of the slaves. He also witnesses the crew’s mood deteriorate and fighting (about an egg) begins. Finally, they reach Africa.

After Anchoring, Jessie witnesses a barracoon (slave confinement) ablaze. The British burned it as slave trade is illegal. Still, the crew manages to pick up nearly 100 slaves. Many slaves die and are tossed overboard. Some slaves rest in a recumbent position to kill themselves. To help the slaves stay strong, Jessie is forced to play his fife so they dance and work to the music. Soon, Jessie refuses to the play the fife, but he is beaten into compliance.

Jessie befriends a young African boy, Ras, who retrieved his fife for him after Jessie and a crewmember get into a fight. After arriving in Cuba, the slaves are ordered to thrown overboard by the captain because Americans board the ship and there is a raging storm happening. Jessie and the African boy escape and survive by floating to the shores of Mississippi on a wooden boom from the ship. Finally, Ras is arranged to head north to freedom, and Jessie makes his way back to New Orleans.

When Jessie grows up, he fights for the Union during the Civil War. He also can no longer listen to music because it brings back memories aboard The Moonlight.

Indicators of Authenticity: This book is a Newbery Winner. The author has received the Hans Christian Andersen award.

This site was accessed to provide thumbnail pictures of book covers and ISBN numbers for the above book list.