

# *Illegal* by Bettina Restrepo

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## **Chapter-by-chapter Teacher discussion in-class, or quick write ideas**

*These questions may need more support for the student than the student guide questions-as a supplement.*

*Some questions ask about why the figurative language is used or how the text is structured, which may be difficult for students to figure out on their own and may need a good deal of prompting from the teacher. Some might be used as warm ups at the beginning of class.*

**Chapter titles:** *The author indicated that she often devised the title of a chapter by reading it and then reflecting on the first and last sentences. They may serve to help orient your students as they read, which is why some of the questions in the student guide instruct the students to connect the meaning of the title to the chapter.*

### **SECTION 1**

#### Chapter 2

- Consider the heat and dirt. What does this setting reveal or reinforce about the characters?
- How is the smoke-shrouded family portrait symbolic?

#### Chapter 3

- “Dreams printed on glossy paper” is an image with a metaphor. What does it reveal?
- What foreshadowing is present in Grandma’s idea that “Sins never go unpunished? Always repent.”

#### Chapter 5

- Three adjectives are presented as fragments: “Angry. Uncomfortable. Nervous.” What’s the effect of presenting them as single word fragments, rather than sentences?

#### Chapter 6

- As Grandma claims *familia* comes first, can you think of a way that Arturo’s actions demonstrate his commitment to family? What is Nora’s or Grandma’s idea of commitment?

#### Chapter 9

- Examine the way the author presents Matamoras. How is it different from Cedula? Which is better? What words (diction) lead you to this conclusion?
- Why is *coyote* a fitting slang term for the job of a human trafficker/smuggler?

#### Chapter 10

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- Nora and her mother are walled up in a mango truck. Could this be a metaphoric burial?
- As Nora finds the prayer card, what could you speculate about the trip?

## SECTION 2

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- The title of the chapter has religious connotations—lion and the lamb are description of Christ. In what way is Nora both a lion and a lamb in dealing with the truck driver?
- Consider Christ's treatment of the moneychangers (the cleansing of the temple) and how anger could be justifiable.
- What are the men of the novel like so far? Consider Papa, Hector, the coyote, the truck driver.

Chapter 13

- Pg 69 alien world. Explain the pun on the word "alien".
- Considering the religious overtones of sanctuary—comment on the pair finding sanctuary in a *taqueria*. Explore with the students the other places Mama and Nora might have gone.
- The advice "can't feed every beggar" is repeated. How practical is this advice? Is Nora able to keep with it? What's the reality? Does Nora take charity?

Chapter 14

- Consider 'fair' as opposed to 'best or final'. How is Mama right?
- Nora's conclusion about Houston—is it fair? How has life changed? How has it not?

Chapter 15

- There is a pun on "both ideas dried up in his absence." Explain.

Chapter 16

- In "words like candy" (p 86) explain the purpose of the simile.
- Spanglish—find other examples (in life or the novel) of this mixing of the languages.
- In the scene with \$900; "I don't steal from poor people—I didn't know we were poor." Why did she not? What does Nora realize here?

Chapter 18

- From the student guide: "Nora mistakes a Colombian woman for a Mexican and comments on the different accent. Nora is unaware of the different countries and makes an innocent mistake. Have you ever done this? Why would it matter to the Colombian so much? Do you tend to assume people are all the same based on looks?" Ask the students for differences among the cultures. Begin a discussion about the somewhat artificial labels: Hispanic, Latino. Does Latino mean brown, black, or white? Can Latinos be blonde and blue-eyed, etc.? Try to challenge your students perceptions and stereotypes.

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## Chapter 19

- Explain what is happening as Flora is trying to climb out of the car.
- What does the tattoo of the red star with 713 mean, literally, and what could it symbolize?

## SECTION 3

## Chapter 21

- Examine Nora's religious beliefs. What is her understanding of church, lighting candles, God, etc.?

## Chapter 22

- Describe the lifeguard and her attitude. Is this typical of some white people?
- Submergence in water is often a symbol of rebirth (like baptism)—list a few ways Nora is different from this point to the end of the novel.

## Chapter 23

- At the end of the chapter why does the author close this chapter with Flora, then Mr. Mann? What's significant about these two characters at this point in the story?

## Chapter 24

- "...I could smell her love floating across the house." What is meant by this figurative language? Compare it to the end of the next paragraph.

## Chapter 25

- Is Flora's explanation of wanting to be a part of any family realistic? Is the need for family that strong? Consider Nora's motivation throughout the novel.

## Chapter 27

- Nora has begun thinking about her quinceañera again. Compare the purpose of and activities involved in a *quinceañera* and the gang initiation that Tessa went through.

## Chapter 29

- Notice how "I was not a victim" is its own paragraph and a very short sentence. What is the effect of isolating this idea?

## SECTION 5

## Chapter 42

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- Grandma's beautiful words "I choose you. I choose to be here and make a new life with you" display one of the ideas of the novel. Explain this idea and describe other instances of its appearance and development throughout the novel.

## **Epilogue**

- Nora calls grief a snake. How is this a fitting metaphor?
- Notice how sweet sixteen has replaced *quinceañera*. Why is this?