

Evangelina Takes Flight

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“Challenges are chances in disguise” in this gorgeously woven novel with a message of hope.

Honest in its exploration of xenophobia, and timely in its empathetic portrayal of a refugee family, *Evangelina Takes Flight* is a vibrant and appealing historical novel.

In 1911, under threat of a raid by Pancho Villa and his men, Evangelina de León, her family, and their neighbors in Mariposa, Mexico, leave their homes behind. The book is divided between the first signs of danger on Rancho Encantado and Evangelina’s last week there; the journey by rail to Seneca, Texas; and the daily challenges the De Leóns face as they attempt to remake their lives. Laced with memories of Evangelina’s grandfather and his stories, the colorful plot emphasizes faith in God no matter the circumstances.

Chapters in Mariposa are especially skillful at drawing the close-knit clan. Events that would seem commonplace in less turbulent times gain additional poignancy in light of Evangelina’s tense state of mind. From sumptuous cookery to farm chores, an encounter with a scorpion, and a quinceañera celebration, natural details paint a world that is clearly ingrained and loved, yet seldom romanticized.

Once Evangelina crosses the border to America, the plot loosens, allowing serendipitous discoveries to play a strong role. Several scenes stand out for their ability to capture Evangelina’s altered status. Her arrival in Seneca—with its progression from storybook homes to the other side of the tracks—aptly signals the divisions in town. Her first day of school is rife with palpable anxiety and language barriers, and melds humiliation with compassion in the form of a fellow child’s aid. A reunion with family that had been left behind in Mexico leads to news on the fate suffered by friends, which reminds the De Leóns how much there is to remain thankful for.

Despite the dark period, the book softens certain topics for a younger audience. The violence of Mexico’s revolution remains peripheral, and Seneca’s racism manifests in turned-away faces and one man’s rhetoric, which is rapidly quelled. As much as this vital work takes on social issues, it’s Evangelina’s coming of age that resounds. Her abuelito’s maxim, “Challenges are chances in disguise,” grows into a gorgeously woven message of hope.

KAREN RIGBY (May/June 2017)

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