Tell Me How It Ends

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF VALERIA LUISELLI

Valeria Luiselli was born in Mexico City in 1983, though her family moved to the United States two years later. Shortly after her father earned a Ph.D. in Wisconsin, the family moved to Costa Rica, followed by South Korea and South Africa. Luiselli lived there until she moved back to Mexico City at the age of sixteen, though she soon left to complete high school in India before returning once again to attend the National Autonomous University of Mexico. After majoring in philosophy, she moved to New York City to work as an intern at the United Nations. During this time, she also studied Comparative Literature at Columbia University, where she earned her doctorate degree. She published her first book in 2012, a collection of essays written in Spanish called *Papeles Falsos*. In 2013, she published the novel *La historia de mis dientes*, which appeared in English two years later as *The Story of My Teeth*. She has worked extensively with undocumented child migrants in the United States, an experience that informed her book-length essay *Tell Me How It Ends*, which was published in 2017, as well as her novel *Lost Children Archive*, published in 2019. She lives in New York City, has a daughter and a stepson, and is married to the novelist Álvaro Enrigue.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Throughout the 1980s, El Salvador underwent a bloody civil war, in which the militarized government fought a number of left-wing guerilla groups, all of whom banded together as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front. The war began in the final months of 1979, when there was a coup to remove the president from office. Because the United States didn't want El Salvador to become a Communist nation, it backed the military-led government, supplying it with funding and weapons to control left-wing opposition groups. As a result, the violent government drove out approximately one-fifth of the entire population. Many of those who fled El Salvador migrated to the United States, settling in cities like Los Angeles, where they encountered gangs such as the Bloods, the Crips, the Nazi Lowriders, and the Aryan Brotherhood. Threatened by the presence of these gangs, Salvadoran refugees formed MS-13, hoping to protect themselves amidst the violent ganglands of urban America in the 1980s. Because many of the members of MS-13 had been guerilla fighters in El Salvador, the gang quickly became violent. By the 1990s, when the United States carried out sweeping deportations of Central American immigrants, MS-13 was a notoriously merciless organization, which spread to countries like El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras with the steady rise of deportations. Luiselli points to this history as a way of illustrating the role the United States played in both creating MS-13 and helping it spread throughout the Americas.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Because *Tell Me How It Ends* is about migration and the immigrant experience in the United States, it shares certain similarities with *Enrique's Journey*, a nonfiction book by Sonia Nazario about a seventeen-year-old boy's journey from Honduras to the United States to reunite with his mother. In the same regard, *Tell Me How It Ends* explores similar thematic material as Óscar Martinez's *A History of Violence: Living and Dying in Central America*, as both titles examine the brutal history of violence in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions
- **When Written:** 2015
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** April 4, 2017
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Nonfiction
- **Setting:** New York City, Arizona
- **Climax:** Recognizing how easy it will be to defend him against deportation, a team of lawyers agrees to represent Manu López in immigration court.
- **Antagonist:** The United States immigration system, as well as the country's refusal to admit its partial responsibility for the immigration crisis
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Political Messaging. Valeria Luiselli wrote *Tell Me How It Ends* while also working on her novel about undocumented minors, *Lost Children Archive*. She has said that firmly setting forth her political stances in *Tell Me How It Ends* enabled her to write *Lost Children Archive* in a more open-ended manner, since the former gave her a chance to voice her beliefs so strongly.

Juicy. Luiselli wrote her second novel, *The Story of My Teeth*, in a serialized format, composing one chapter at a time and sending each new installment to a Mexican juice factory, where the workers read them aloud and voiced their thoughts, which she would then take into account as she composed the next section.

PLOT SUMMARY

In 2015, Valeria Luiselli starts volunteering at a Manhattan nonprofit organization called The Door. She interviews unaccompanied child migrants, asking 40 questions listed on an "intake questionnaire." Translating what they say into English, she fills out the official forms, which will be used to match children with pro bono lawyers willing to defend them in court. The first question she has to ask is, "Why did you come to the United States?" The answers, she notes, are never "simple." Instead, the children speak apprehensively, not knowing whether they can trust Luiselli. Moreover, their stories are shot through with "fear," and the children deliver complicated tales that have "no beginning, no middle, and no end." When they finish, Luiselli takes her notes to lawyers, who look for elements in the stories that could be built into "a viable defense against a child's deportation."

Luiselli jumps back in time one year, narrating a road trip she took from New York to southern Arizona with her husband, daughter, and stepson. She and her family are waiting to find out whether they'll be granted green cards, meaning that they're—in the "slightly offensive parlance of U.S. immigration law"—considered "nonresident aliens." As they drive, they listen to the radio, hearing about the sudden influx of child migrants into the United States from Central America. It's 2014, and people have just started talking about the "immigration crisis," though Luiselli points out that many prefer the term "refugee crisis."

As a volunteer at The Door, Luiselli hears many different answers to the question, "Why did you come to the United States?" Despite this variation, though, the children frequently cite the same reason: "reunification with a parent or another close relative who migrated to the U.S. years earlier." They also talk about similar "push factors," or motivations to leave their home countries, such as "extreme violence [and] persecution and coercion by gangs." This, Luiselli says, makes it clear that the majority of these migrants aren't searching for the "American Dream," but simply trying to stay alive. Continuing her description of the intake questionnaire, Luiselli notes the various responses she receives to the second question, which is, "When did you enter the United States?" She then describes what it's like during her family's road trip when they listen to the radio and wonder if the strong negative reaction to the arrival of child migrants at the border would be quite as vitriolic if the children were white. Thinking this way, Luiselli and her husband search for ways to talk to their children about the manner in which Americans are reacting to the immigration crisis.

Continuing her examination of the 40 questions, Luiselli explains that the sixth question is, "How did you travel here?" This question often reveals how dangerous the journey is from Central America to the United States, as children ride on "La Bestia," or "The Beast"—a freight train that runs through Mexico and upon which many migrants die, since they often roll off or are "sucked" onto the rails. Understanding the dangers, though, "people continue to take the risk." Once young migrants reach the Mexico-U.S. border, they turn themselves into border control, knowing that it's even more dangerous to wander through the desert after such a long journey. At this point, they're put into a detention center known as the "icebox," so-called because it's run by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and because the authorities keep the facilities incredibly cold, treating the children like "foreign meat" that might "go bad." Even though the law says that no one can be detained there for more than three days, child migrants are often held for much longer, occasionally with "nowhere to lie down to sleep."

The seventh question on the intake questionnaire is, "Did anything happen on your trip to the U.S. that scared you or hurt you?" Luiselli hates hearing the answers to this question. As a Mexican woman herself, she's mortified by the terrible violence these children encounter on their way through Mexico. To demonstrate what migrants are up against, she notes that "eighty percent of the women and girls who cross Mexico to get to the U.S. border are raped on the way." Furthermore, many migrants are kidnapped or disappear, as drug cartels often abduct them and force them to work without wages. This consideration dovetails into the questionnaire's eighth question, "Has anyone hurt, threatened, or frightened you since you came to the U.S.?" Luiselli tells stories about officers who shoot and kill unsuspecting migrants and then claim to have done so out of "self-defense," despite any evidence to support this. To add to this, there are also "civilian vigilantes and owners of private ranches" who "hunt undocumented migrants."

After her road trip, Luiselli starts volunteering at The Door in late 2014 with her nineteen-year-old niece. It is around this time that the media coverage of the "children's crisis" becomes nearly "constant." Luiselli notices that the majority of the child migrants come from Guatemala, El Salvador, or Honduras. What's more, almost all of them have come to the United States to escape gang violence. In response to the crisis, Luiselli narrates, President Barrack Obama issued a "priority juvenile docket" in 2014, declaring that all child migrants must appear in immigration court within 21 days of arriving in the United States. "Being moved to the top of a list, in this context, was the least desirable thing," Luiselli explains, "at least from the point of view of the children involved. Basically, the priority juvenile docket implied that deportation proceedings against them were accelerated by 94 percent, and that both they and the organizations that normally provided legal representation now had much less time to build a defense."

Luiselli's first interview with a migrant is with Manu López, who is sixteen and has come to the United States from Honduras. He is terse with her, but he explains that he left his home

country because gang members were pursuing him. He even shows her a copy of a **police report** he filed, outlining the fact that these gang members used to wait for him outside school every day and follow him home, threatening to kill him all the while. The copy of the report claims that the police department will take action, but this never happened.

Luiselli points out that, despite the frequent coverage of the immigration crisis, "few narratives have made the effort to turn things around and understand the crisis from the point of view of the children involved." Going on, she explains the origins of gangs like MS-13. During the Salvadoran Civil War in the 1980s and early '90s, she says, the United States funded the militaristic Salvadoran government, thereby helping them massacre various opposition groups. As a result, large numbers of Salvadorans left the country, coming to the United States as "political refugees." Because many of these refugees had become involved in guerilla warfare to resist the dangerous government, they were accustomed to violence, which they encountered once again when they found themselves facing gangs in cities like Los Angeles. To protect themselves, then, they formed MS-13, which quickly became the notoriously violent group it is now. When the United States government cracked down on immigration in the 1990s, it deported large numbers of people, including many members of MS-13. As such, the gang spread to Central America, which is why it's now driving people back to the United States. "The whole story is an absurd, circular nightmare," Luiselli writes.

Luiselli struggles with the linguistic and narrative difficulties of her job as an interpreter. She sometimes tells her daughter what she hears, and her daughter always asks how the stories end, though Luiselli is unable to answer this question. She also considers the fact that what a child says during the interview greatly affects whether or not they'll be deported. If they answer the questions "correctly," it's more likely that a lawyer will agree to take their case. A "correct" answer, Luiselli explains, is one that is candid about the hardships a child has endured, making it clear why they can't return to their home country.

Although Luiselli usually doesn't know the end of her subjects' stories, she's able to follow what happens to Manu in the aftermath of his interview. In that initial meeting, he tells her that he and his friend were chased by gang members in Honduras one day after school. The gang members killed his friend, but Manu was able to escape. This was when he called his aunt Alina, who had already immigrated to Hempstead, Long Island. Hearing what had happened, Alina made arrangements for Manu to join her in America, paying $4,000 for a "coyote" (a guide) to bring him across the border. Because the police report Manu possesses is "material evidence" that it's unsafe for him to return to Honduras, a group of high-powered lawyers have now taken on his case, and they ask Luiselli to continue acting as a translator and interpreter. In a fancy building, she convenes with Manu, Alina, and the lawyers. Manu tells them that things are going well but that he wants to drop out of Hempstead High School. When pressed, he explains that the school is full of MS-13 and Barrio 18 members. Recently, Barrio 18 beat him up, knocking out his front teeth. MS-13 intervened and protected him, meaning that he now owes them, though he has thus far managed to avoid joining the gang. Upon hearing that Manu wants to drop out, though, his lawyers inform him that his legal status in the United States requires him to be a student.

Having explained Manu's predicament, Luiselli argues that the children who cross the border should have "the right to asylum." She also upholds that all of the governments involved in the immigration crisis—the United States, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—should start thinking about it as a "transnational" and "hemispheric war," thereby giving them a reason to come together to create "combined policies."

Luiselli starts teaching a Spanish conversation class at Hofstra University in Hempstead. She decides to turn the class into a "migration think tank," in which she and her students discuss the crisis and the best way to approach it. As the semester continues, the students become enthusiastic about taking action, eventually forming a nonprofit organization called Teenage Immigrant Integration Association (TIIA), which aims to help at-risk migrant teenagers quickly "integrate" into American society and, thus, avoid gang life. The group organizes language classes, civil rights workshops, and pickup soccer games, which Manu occasionally attends. Manu, for his part, busies himself by going to a church where he has found a community. He also has relationships with mentors at another anti-gang nonprofit, and he's trying to improve his English by taking courses with TIIA.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Valeria Luiselli – The author and narrator of *Tell Me How It Ends*, Luiselli is a Mexican writer and professor living in the United States. While waiting to receive her green card in 2014, she goes on a road trip with her husband, daughter, and stepson, driving from their home in Harlem, New York City to southern Arizona. An immigrant herself, Luiselli is closely attuned to the sudden influx of child migrants coming to the United States from Central America. While driving close to the southern border, she and her family listen to radio programs covering the national reaction to the "immigration crisis." Upon returning to New York, she finds that her green card hasn't arrived like the rest of her family's, so she obtains a temporary work permit. Shortly thereafter, she starts volunteering with her niece at a nonprofit called The Door, where she interviews

child migrants by asking them 40 pre-determined questions. As she does this, she thinks about the complexities of the immigrant narrative, scrutinizing the ways in which children use language and how the immigration system is ill-equipped to understand the complexities of their situations. Her first interview is with a sixteen-year-old named Manu López, and though she usually doesn't know what happens to the children after she interviews them, she later serves as his translator and interpreter when a team of lawyers decides to take on his case. Because of this, she gets to know Manu better, and even invites him to events put on by a nonprofit organization she and her students at Hofstra University establish. By the end of the final chapter, Luiselli still doesn't have a green card, forcing her to stop working, though the epilogue makes clear that she does eventually receive it.

Manu López – Manu is a sixteen-year-old boy from Honduras who has recently migrated to the United States in the aftermath of his grandmother's death. The main reason he left Honduras, though, was because members of the Barrio 18 gang were threatening to kill him, waiting for him outside his school and following him home every day. One day, the gang chased him and his friend, and though Manu escaped, his friend was shot and killed. That night, Manu called his aunt Alina and she told him not to leave the house, quickly making arrangements for a "coyote" to take him to the United States. Manu first meets Luiselli after arriving in New York. With his immigration hearing coming up, he answers the questions Luiselli asks him, all intended to help match him with a pro bono lawyer. Because he has a copy of a **complaint** he filed with the police in Honduras, he's able to prove that he sought protection but was ultimately ignored. Because this is such a strong piece of evidence, a high-powered law firm agrees to represent him, asking Luiselli to act as his translator and interpreter. In this role, she gets to know Manu better, learning that he wants to drop out of school in Hempstead, Long Island, since it's packed with members of MS-13 and Barrio 18. However, his lawyers tell him he can't drop out because his chance to gain permanent residency in the United States is contingent upon his enrollment as a student. He admits that Barrio 18 recently beat him up and that MS-13 saved him, which means they now expect him to join them. In spite of this, he has refused to do so, saying he won't join a gang because he has to look out for his cousins. By the conclusion of *Tell Me How It Ends*, Manu has joined a church, forged relationships with anti-gang mentors, and started attending events put on by the nonprofit organization founded by Luiselli's students at Hofstra University.

Alina López – Alina is a woman from Honduras living and working in the United States. She is also Manu's aunt. Having originally come to the United States on her own to send money back to Manu and her two daughters, Alina eventually sees that it's too dangerous for her loved ones to stay in Honduras. She realizes this when Manu narrowly escapes murder at the hands of a gang. When this happens, Alina makes arrangements for him to come to live with her in Hempstead, Long Island, paying a "coyote" (a guide) $4,000 to escort him across the Mexico-U.S. border. Shortly after he arrives, she learns that gang members have also started harassing her two young daughters, and although she doesn't have the money, she puts herself in debt to bring them to live with her and Manu in Hempstead.

Luiselli's Husband – Like Luiselli herself, Luiselli's husband is a writer and an immigrant. When their family takes a road trip to Arizona and listens to radio programs covering the sudden influx of child migrants, Luiselli's husband engages in conversations with her about how, exactly, to talk about the "immigration crisis" with their own children.

Luiselli's Niece – Luiselli's niece is a nineteen-year-old woman who volunteers with Luiselli as a translator and interpreter at a nonprofit organization in Manhattan called The Door. She is waiting to hear back from colleges, and as she becomes more and more involved at The Door, she decides she's going to major in law so that she'll be able to advocate for child migrants.

Luiselli's Lawyer – Luiselli's lawyer is a Spanish-speaking woman who helps Luiselli navigate the process of getting a green card. However, she eventually gives Luiselli's case to one of her colleagues, changing jobs in order to work as an attorney advocating for undocumented child migrants. When she tells Luiselli why she's leaving, Luiselli asks her if she knows any organizations that might be able to use her as a translator, since she too wants to help undocumented minors. Consequently, her lawyer refers her to someone at the American Immigration Lawyers Association, which then puts her in touch with The Door.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Luiselli's Daughter – A little girl who frequently asks Luiselli—her mother—about the child migrants she (Luiselli) meets as a translator and interpreter. When she hears what these children have been through, Luiselli's daughter often asks how the stories end, but Luiselli is never able to answer this question.

Luiselli's Stepson – Luiselli's stepson is a little boy whose biological father is Luiselli's husband. When she narrates the road trip their family takes at the beginning of *Tell Me How It Ends*, Luiselli says that her stepson is visiting from Mexico.

Alina's Daughters – Alina's daughters are two young girls originally from Honduras. Like their cousin Manu, they endure harassment from gangs, so their mother pays for them to travel to the United States.

THEMES

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MIGRATION AND PERSONAL SACRIFICE

Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How It Ends* shines a light on the underlying factors contributing to the mass exodus of immigrants fleeing Central America since 2014. As a volunteer working to help undocumented children access legal representation, it's Luiselli's job to ask why they've come to the United States. Because of this perspective, she has a strong understanding of what has drawn them to the country and, more importantly, what drove them from their homes in the first place. Focusing on the gang violence plaguing countries like El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, she underlines the fact that these children are escaping very dangerous circumstances and shows readers that many immigrants come to the US out of necessity, giving up everything they've ever known to find safety. At the same time, Luiselli's examination of US immigration policy shows how eager the country is to swiftly deport new arrivals, meaning that even the decision to come to the United States doesn't guarantee safety. By highlighting the many disincentives surrounding immigration, then, Luiselli challenges the notion that undocumented immigrants come to the United States simply to enjoy the "American Dream." Ultimately, she builds an argument that their motivations are more directly linked to humanitarian crises.

As she interviews child migrants, Luiselli quickly learns that the majority of them come to the US for safety reasons. "[Their] answers point to push factors—the unthinkable circumstances the children are fleeing," she notes, listing "extreme violence, persecution and coercion by gangs, mental and physical abuse, forced labor, neglect, [and] abandonment" as the primary reasons why Central Americans have left their home countries. She goes out of her way to establish the fact that they are running *from* harrowing conditions, not just searching *for* new economic opportunities. "It is not even the American Dream that they pursue, but rather the more modest aspiration to wake up from the nightmare into which they were born," she writes. While the parents or relatives of these children may have originally come to the US for economic reasons, now they're forced to pay for their children to join them. Otherwise, the children and teens who have stayed behind in countries like El Salvador risk losing their lives to gangs like MS-13 or Barrio 18. For example, sixteen-year-old Manu López narrowly escapes murder at the hands of Barrio 18 before his aunt, Alina, finally puts herself into debt to bring him to live with her in New York. By relating this story, Luiselli shows readers that people like Manu and Alina see coming to the United States as a last resort, not a luxury. In such situations, Luiselli argues, the decision to migrate is a choice between life and death.

It's worth taking note of the sacrifices people like Alina are forced to make to ensure their families' safety. Although she originally came to the United States to financially sustain her family back in Honduras, Alina eventually has no choice but to spend all her money to bring Manu and her two daughters to New York. Manu outlines this decision for Luiselli during their first conversation. "When he left [Honduras], he explains, the same gang that had killed his best friend started harassing his two cousins. That's when his aunt decided that she'd rather pay the $3,000 for each of her daughters and put them through the dangers of the journey than let them stay," Luiselli writes. By drawing attention to the financial and psychological toll this process has taken on Alina and her family members, Luiselli invites readers to consider the fact that nobody would want to migrate under these circumstances if given a choice. In turn, the author tacitly implies that it is illogical to think that immigrants like Manu and his cousins are trying to take advantage of the United States' resources—an accusation many Americans do indeed level at undocumented immigrants. On the contrary, Manu and his family members are just trying to stay alive.

Despite the sacrifices migrants make to reach the United States, crossing the border doesn't ensure their safety. Luiselli shows that this is often because of the United States' immigration policy, which threatens to deport child migrants before they even find proper legal representation. Luiselli explains that President Barrack Obama's decision in 2014 to hear all child deportation cases within 21 days of their arrival has made it difficult for children (and the nonprofit organizations that provide them with legal representation) to prepare for their legal battles. "Being moved to the top of a list, in this context, was the least desirable thing," Luiselli writes. With only three weeks, nonprofit organizations have to scramble to match children with lawyers who will take their cases free of charge. And without proper legal representation, there's a good chance that people like Manu will be sent right back to their countries of origin, putting them once more into the dangerous situations they worked so hard to escape. Luiselli shows that, given these circumstances, migrating to the United States doesn't always promise safety and might not even bring about any change at all, despite the huge personal sacrifice required.

Knowing that many Americans fail to grasp why, exactly, their country has been flooded by new arrivals, Luiselli notes that the "debate around the matter has persistently and cynically overlooked the causes of the exodus." In response, she has decided to call attention to these "causes." Over the course of the book, she dispels the notion that immigrants have come to

the US to deplete its resources and ultimately invites readers to see the process of migration for what it is: a logical, survivalist response to danger.

LANGUAGE AND STORYTELLING

In *Tell Me How It Ends*, Valeria Luiselli scrutinizes the complexity and nuances of the immigrant narrative. Tasked with interviewing child migrants about their arrivals in the United States, she tries to make sense of their fractured stories, which often have "no beginning, no middle, and no end." The careful consideration she places on the children's words soon becomes a broader examination of language, as Luiselli interrogates the terms and phrases people use to refer to immigrants and to the United States' "immigration crisis." Believing that the way people use words and tell stories ultimately affects reality, she stresses the importance not only of employing precise language, but also of paying attention to the ways in which certain narratives work their way through the United States, coloring the way people view migration and asylum. At its core, *Tell Me How It Ends* encourages readers to reevaluate the broader discourse surrounding immigration, an act that Luiselli believes will help Americans better understand one of the country's most complicated issues.

It is through her work volunteering for a nonprofit organization that matches child migrants with lawyers that Luiselli begins her exploration of language's consequences. Her job there is to ask children questions about their personal histories. "Why did you come to the United States?" she asks. The answers to this question, she says, are never "simple." "I hear words, spoken in the mouths of children, threaded in complex narratives," she writes, highlighting the non-sequential, fractured way that young people string together stories. Of course, it's not just because these children are so young that their stories are "complex." It's also because they have experienced hardship and fear, and now they suddenly find themselves facing a stranger who asks them oddly official questions. To make matters worse, Luiselli is forced to "transform" their stories into "succinct sentences" and "barren terms" that will make sense on the forms she's required to fill out. Luiselli's work with these children shows how the country's immigration system doesn't accommodate the complexity that often comes along with a migrant's personal history. "Stories often become generalized, distorted, appear out of focus," Luiselli notes, emphasizing the extent to which the process is impersonal and limiting. In turn, these narrative simplifications make it that much easier for people to dismiss the dire stakes that these child migrants face.

Unlike the immigration system and the interview process, Luiselli herself is closely attuned the nuances of language. This is especially true when it comes to the terms people use when discussing the country's "immigration crisis." "In the media and much of the official political discourse, the word 'illegal' prevails over 'undocumented' and the term 'immigrant' over 'refugee,'" she writes. This, she argues, affects the way migrants view their own situations. For instance, two of the interview questions Luiselli is supposed to ask are, "Are you happy here?" and "Do you feel safe?" Considering the negative connotations that the public "discourse" forces upon migrants, Luiselli can't help but feel that these are absurd questions. "How would anyone who is stigmatized as an 'illegal immigrant' feel 'safe' and 'happy'?" she wonders. Through Luiselli's experiences, readers see that the immigration system is not only incapable of grasping the complexity of the immigrant narrative, but it also actively uses problematic language that only further stigmatizes a group of people who are already disenfranchised both in their own countries and in the United States.

It might seem trivial to pay such close attention to language, but Luiselli demonstrates that linguistic precision can affect a child's legal status in the United States. Indeed, the way children answer the questions Luiselli asks them largely determines whether or not lawyers will choose to work on their cases. "If the child answers the questionnaire 'correctly,' he or she is more likely to have a case strong enough to increase its chances of being placed with a pro bono attorney," she explains. "An answer is 'correct' if it strengthens the child's case and provides a potential avenue of relief." Simply put, lawyers are more likely to advocate for a child if he or she says something in the interview that could be useful in court. For instance, the chance of a lawyer taking on a case increases if the child has an abusive parent or if he or she has become the target of gangs. "When children don't have enough battle wounds to show, they may not have any way to successfully defend their cases and will most likely be 'removed' back to their home country, often without a trial," Luiselli notes.

Of course, the vast majority of these children *do* have terrifying stories about their pasts, but they don't always feel comfortable answering Luiselli's questions. This is rather unsurprising, considering that they have been stigmatized as "illegal immigrants." Migrant children are unlikely to share intimate details with a stranger if they think that stranger represents the country's scorn for immigrants (which Luiselli doesn't, though the children don't always know or understand that). Afraid to speak the truth, then, many children don't give "correct answers" to Luiselli's questions and are thus deported without a trial, a fact that illustrates the extent to which language and storytelling directly affect their lives.

Having shown the power of language to influence immigration proceedings, Luiselli suggests that open communication and accurate storytelling will help both Americans and new immigrants navigate the complicated situation taking place in the United States today. It is, she admits, a multilayered issue that is difficult to understand, one that will perhaps only make sense "retrospectively." "In the meantime," she writes, "while the story continues, the only thing to do is tell it over and over

again as it develops […]. And it must be told, because before anything can be understood, it has to be narrated many times […]." In other words, it will be difficult to find a solution to this problem, so it's vital that people listen to the stories coming from the immigrant community. Only by engaging in a robust discourse, Luiselli argues, will Americans and immigrants alike find a way to address this otherwise unapproachable challenge.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

In *Tell Me How It Ends*, Valeria Luiselli argues that the influx of migrants into the United States since 2014 should be considered in the context of international relations and political history. This doesn't align with the way the United States typically approaches the issue, as the government tends to frame the crisis as "some distant problem in a foreign country." Eager to shift blame onto Central American nations, the United States ignores its own culpability, refusing to consider the fact that the gang problems driving people north actually originated in cities like Los Angeles before moving south due to the United States' deportation policies. Luiselli unearths the American origins of gangs like MS-13 as a way of underlining the fact that the United States has played a significant role in the spread of violence in Central America, which is why so many migrants are now fleeing their countries. Presenting the immigration crisis (or, more accurately, "the refugee crisis") as cyclical and not confined to just one country, Luiselli suggests that the problem is a "transnational" one that comes from the shared and embattled history between multiple cultures. Given this history and context, she maintains that the United States should work together with Central American countries to create "combined policies" that address this complex challenge.

Luiselli characterizes the United States' involvement in the origins of the immigration crisis as "an absurd, circular nightmare." This is because the country's foreign policy has played a direct role in the formation of gangs like MS-13—groups that are the primary reason so many people are now fleeing their homes in Central America. During the Salvadoran Civil War, which took place between 1979 and 1992, the United States allied with the Salvadoran government, which Luiselli describes as a "military-led" group that "relentlessly massacred left-wing opposition groups." During this time, the United States funded the government and offered it "military resources" to carry out its violent ends. As a result, roughly a fifth of El Salvador's population left the country to seek refuge, with a vast number of them going to the United States as "political refugees." Because the Salvadoran government was so violent, a large number of Salvadorans themselves had become guerilla fighters in their home country, doing whatever they needed to do in order to survive. When they finally came to the United States, then, they were already accustomed to lives of violence—thanks to the actions of the United States itself.

On top of this, Luiselli outlines, these new arrivals found themselves facing new gangs in Los Angeles, so they formed MS-13, which began as "a small coalition of immigrants" trying to defend themselves. By the mid-1990s, MS-13 had become the ruthlessly violent and dangerous gang it's known as today. Around this time, the United States put in place a number of "anti-immigration policies and programs" that resulted in "massive deportations of Central Americans." As a result, many MS-13 members were sent back to Central America, where the gang continued to grow. "Now the gang has become a kind of transnational army," Luiselli writes, "with more than seventy thousand members spread across the United States, Mexico, and the Northern Triangle." By shedding light on the details of this history, Luiselli demonstrates the extent to which the United States has helped create the immigration crisis, despite the prevailing belief that countries like El Salvador are solely responsible for the mass exodus of migrants.

Luiselli notes that although the United States was involved in the genesis of the immigration crisis, it now wants to wash its hands of the problem. To do this, it has paid Mexico to strengthen border control on the Mexico-Guatemala border, hoping to "filter the migration of Central Americans." "In other words," Luiselli writes, "following the old tradition of Latin America-U.S. governmental relations, the Mexican government is getting paid to do the dirty work." Luiselli argues that this approach fails to properly address the situation, treating it like something that can be solved with strict border control and deportation. This, she argues, ignores the roots of the problem itself. "No one suggests that the causes are deeply embedded in our shared hemispheric history and are therefore not some distant problem in a foreign country that no one can locate on a map, but in fact a transnational problem that includes the United States," she writes, adding that the United States should stop seeing itself as a "distant observer or passive victim" of the crisis. Instead, she argues, all of the countries involved—the United States, Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala—should work together to "acknowledge the hemispheric dimensions" of this problem. More specifically, she suggests that the crisis should be referred to as a "hemispheric war," since this term would help the governments involved see that it is everyone's problem. And if this can be done, Luiselli asserts, then the countries in question might finally find a way to cultivate "combined policies" that will actually address the multifaceted, international nature of the crisis.

GANG LIFE VS. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Though much of *Tell Me How It Ends* concerns Valeria Luiselli's large-scale ideas for reframing the present-day "immigration crisis," she also suggests ways to

make life better for the individual migrants already living in the United States. The book follows Manu López's struggle to avoid gangs like MS-13 in both Honduras and the United States. When Luiselli first meets him, he is sixteen and has recently made the dangerous journey to the United States from Tegucigalpa, Honduras—a passage he undertakes because of threats from the Barrio 18 gang. Even in the United States, though, he isn't safe from gang violence, as he encounters MS-13 and Barrio 18 members at his high school in Hempstead, Long Island. As a result, he tells Luiselli and his immigration lawyers that he wants to leave school. This isn't an option, however, since his immigration status in the United States depends upon whether or not he's a student. It is because of stories like Manu's that Luiselli and her students at Hofstra University form a group to provide teenage immigrants with support, doing so by organizing language classes, soccer games, and other activities intended to keep them from gang life. Spotlighting the positive effect of such programs on teenagers like Manu, Luiselli champions education and civic engagement, suggesting that a strong sense of community support can help at-risk immigrant teenagers withstand the threat of violence and the coercive tactics of dangerous gangs.

Luiselli emphasizes how little support Manu had in his hometown in Honduras, as seemingly nobody in the community was willing or able protect him from the Barrio 18 gang. He even filed an official **police report** registering that gang members used to wait for him outside school every day and often followed him home while "threatening to kill him." Luiselli notes that in the last lines of the typewritten report (which Manu still has), the Honduras police department "promised to 'investigate' the situation." Despite this claim, Manu was never offered protection of any kind. Shortly thereafter, Barrio 18 members followed him and his friend home and murdered his friend, at which point Manu himself escaped, called his aunt Alina, and arranged to join her in the United States as soon as possible. That Manu had to leave his home country just to feel safe going to school illustrates how isolated he was in Honduras from any kind of support network that might have helped him avoid Barrio 18.

However, Luiselli also calls attention to the fact that moving to the United States doesn't solve Manu's problems. Although a team of powerful lawyers agrees to take on his case and help him stay in the country, he soon encounters the same kind of danger he faced in Honduras, as Hempstead High School is full of MS-13 and Barrio 18 members. "Hempstead is a shithole full of pandilleros [gang members], just like Tegucigalpa," he says, telling his lawyers that he wants to drop out of high school. However, they inform him that he *can't* drop out, since he "has to be enrolled in school" to be "considered for any type of formal [immigration] relief." Due to these restrictions, Manu finds himself in a difficult position, one in which he's required to endure the same dangers from which he originally fled. And though this time he has certain forms of support, they are (at first) primarily legal and thus don't offer him day-to-day help with avoiding gangs.

Tell Me How It Ends is first and foremost a book that encourages readers to consider the underlying problems of the immigration crisis, so it doesn't offer many concrete solutions. However, its final chapter—aptly titled "Community"—suggests that Americans can help young at-risk immigrants like Manu by providing them with communal support. Luiselli explains that she has turned her Spanish conversation course at Hofstra University into a "migration think tank," in which she and her students discuss the nuances of the crisis and brainstorm the best ways to address this challenging situation. These conversations inspire her students to found the Teenage Immigrant Integration Association (TIIA), an organization devoted to helping teenage migrants become "quickly and fully integrated" into life in the United States, thereby giving them the support networks necessary to stay away from gang life. Luiselli's students decide that TIIA should offer "intensive English classes, college prep sessions, team sports, a radio program, and a civil rights and duties discussion group." Organizing events like pickup soccer games, TIIA reaches out to migrants and provides them with the kind of support and encouragement they need to establish themselves independently from gang affiliation.

Of course, these efforts don't guarantee that MS-13 will completely leave people like Manu alone, but they at least give young migrants resources and allies, which in turn help them stay strong in the face of danger. Considering how hard it must be to resist gang-related pressure, this sense of community is vital. "It only takes a group of ten motivated students to begin making a small difference," Luiselli writes, suggesting that even small-scale manifestations of civic engagement can go a long way in helping at-risk migrants. As for Manu, he now has permanent residency in the United States, belongs to a church "where he feels welcome," has relationships with mentors at a Long Island anti-gang nonprofit, and participates in TIIA's soccer games. Much of his success, Luiselli implies, comes from his newfound sense of belonging to a community that has his best interests in mind. In this way, the author makes a case for the power of community building and civic engagement to help migrants lead safe and rewarding lives.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE POLICE REPORT

In *Tell Me How It Ends*, the police report that Manu presents to Luiselli (and later to his lawyers) comes

to represent the stringent nature of the United States' immigration system. The police report itself outlines the fact that Manu reached out to the authorities for help when he was living in Honduras and trying to seek protection from gangs like Barrio 18 and MS-13. Because the police didn't do anything to help him, he was forced to take matters into his own hands, ultimately doing so by fleeing to the United States. The police report factors heavily into his defense against deportation, since it proves that he would have no form of reliable protection if he were sent back to Honduras. It is because of this concrete evidence of the Honduran police's failure to keep him safe that Manu eventually wins special immigrant juvenile status (SIJ) and is able to stay in the United States. However, the fact that the immigration courts require such scrupulous evidence of violent persecution is worth noting, as it indicates the extent to which the government is unwilling to believe children who have suffered intense but physically unprovable trauma. In this sense, the police report symbolizes just how difficult it really is for undocumented minors to defend themselves against deportation, since very few children have "material evidence" of the danger they faced in their home countries.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Coffee House Press edition of *Tell Me How it Ends* published in 2017.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ I hear words, spoken in the mouths of children, threaded in complex narratives. They are delivered with hesitance, sometimes distrust, always with fear. I have to transform them into written words, succinct sentences, and barren terms. The children's stories are always shuffled, stuttered, always shattered beyond the repair of a narrative order. The problem with trying to tell their story is that it has no beginning, no middle, and no end.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Early in *Tell Me How It Ends*, Valeria Luiselli characterizes the manner in which child migrants tell stories. Because it's her job to interview them in order to potentially match them with attorneys willing to represent them in immigration court, she has to pay close attention to the specifics of their personal histories. This, however, isn't always easy, since they're so young and therefore aren't always prepared to outline "complex narratives." On top of this, many of the child migrants are reticent to share their stories with Luiselli because they aren't sure they can trust her. Having experienced trauma and fright, they're hesitant to speak plainly about their journeys to the United States. To add to this dynamic, Luiselli has to "transform" their tales into "written words" set forth in "succinct sentences." This means that she has to distill what they tell her, despite the fact that their stories are difficult to understand, often including "no beginning," "middle," or "end." By beginning *Tell Me How It Ends* with a meditation on the difficulties of her job as an interpreter, Luiselli invites readers to consider the nuanced nature of language and storytelling, which isn't always as straightforward as one might assume.

❝ We wanted to become "resident aliens," even though we knew what applying for green cards implied: the lawyers, the expenses, the many vaccinations and medical exams, the months of sustained uncertainty, the rather humiliating intermediate steps, such as having to wait for an "advance parole" document in order to be able to leave the country and be paroled back in, like a criminal, as well as the legal prohibition against traveling abroad, without losing immigration status, before being granted advance parole. Despite all that, we decided to apply.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker), Luiselli's Stepson, Luiselli's Daughter, Luiselli's Husband

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Luiselli considers the many difficulties that come along with seeking permanent residency in the United States. Because she and her family members want to live and work in the country without having to lead the lives of undocumented immigrants, they have applied for green cards, despite the fact that this process means they have to face massive "expenses." In addition, they also have to undergo a number of other tasks, like "the many vaccinations and medical exams" the country requires all migrants applying for green cards to have. Most notably, they can't even "leave the country" without jeopardizing their residency statuses, effectively restricting their

freedom, which is rather ironic, considering that becoming permanent residents in the United States supposedly entitles people to the freedoms often associated with the nation. Luiselli delivers this list of sacrifices she and her family are required to make so that she can show readers that becoming a permanent resident in the United States isn't easy. On the contrary, it is a grueling process that no migrant takes lightly, since it requires so much time, effort, and money.

❝ The green card application is nothing like the intake questionnaire for undocumented minors. When you apply for a green card you have to answer things like "Do you intend to practice polygamy?" and "Are you a member of the Communist Party?" and "Have you ever knowingly committed a crime of moral turpitude?" And although nothing can or should be taken lightly when you are in the fragile situation of asking for permission to live in a country that is not your own, there is something almost innocent in the green card application's preoccupations with and visions of the future and its possible threats: polyamorous debauchery, communism, weak morals! […] The intake questionnaire for undocumented children, on the other hands, reveals a colder, more cynical and brutal reality.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Comparing the green card application with the intake questionnaire that she and others present to undocumented child migrants, Luiselli highlights the discrepancies between the two forms. Although one might think the government would be compelled to treat children in a welcoming, kind way, Luiselli suggests that they are actually treated with "cynic[ism]" and distrust. The disparity between the green card application and the intake questionnaire might have to do with the fact that the two documents were created under significantly different circumstances. The green card application has been in circulation for quite some time, which is why it includes questions about the Communist Party, a holdover from the twentieth century, long before the immigration crisis had worked its way into the public consciousness. In keeping with this, people have been applying for green cards for generations, whereas Central American children have only started seeking asylum in the United States in recent years (in large numbers, that is). Consequently, the intake questionnaire's cynicism and distrust reflects the government's present reluctance to allow undocumented migrants to stay in the country—a reluctance that manifests in the form's "cold," suspicious tone.

❝ Their answers vary, but they often point to a single pull factor: reunification with a parent or another close relative who migrated to the U.S. years earlier. Other times, the answers point to push factors—the unthinkable circumstances the children are fleeing: extreme violence, persecution and coercion by gangs, mental and physical abuse, forced labor, neglect, abandonment. It is not even the American Dream that they pursue, but rather the more modest aspiration to wake up from the nightmare into which they were born.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

This is an explanation of how child migrants typically respond to the intake questionnaire's first question, which is, "Why did you come to the United States?" Luiselli pinpoints what she calls "pull" and "push factors," or the situations that have either drawn the children to the United States or pushed them out of their homes. In some cases, she explains, children want to reunite with relatives who have already immigrated to the United States. In other cases, though, they are running from "extreme violence" and other bleak "circumstances." Either way, Luiselli makes it clear that these children are not after the "American Dream," which is perhaps what many Americans might assume. They are, after all, mere children, which means it's unlikely that they've traveled so far just to capitalize on some exaggerated dream of economic prosperity and upward mobility. Instead, these undocumented minors have come to the United States to simply escape "persecution" and danger.

❝ We wonder if the reactions would be different were all these children of a lighter color: of better, purer breeds and nationalities. Would they be treated more like people? More like children? We read the papers, listen to the radio, see photographs, and wonder.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker), Luiselli's Stepson, Luiselli's Daughter, Luiselli's Husband

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

As Luiselli and her husband drive toward the southern border of the United States with their children, they contemplate the implications of how the nation has reacted—on the whole—to the sudden arrival of so many undocumented Central American minors. Taken aback by the scorn certain American citizens have directed at mere children, Luiselli wonders if their "reactions would be different" if the children themselves weren't Latinx. This thought is worth noting, since it indicates that Luiselli is aware of the racial and cultural factors that influence the way people respond to the arrival of people from other countries. In this moment, it becomes clear that the immigration crisis is complicated not only because so many children have arrived in the United States seeking residency, but because many people in the country have trouble embracing and showing kindness to nonwhite individuals.

> It's curious, or perhaps just sinister, that the word 'removal' is still used to refer to the deportation of "illegal" immigrants—those bronzed barbarians who threaten the white peace and superior values of the "Land of the Free."

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker), Luiselli's Stepson, Luiselli's Daughter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs shortly after Luiselli tells her children about the Indian Removal Act of 1830, in which President Andrew Jackson ordered the "removal" of all Native Americans to reservations. Explaining this history of the American Southwest to her children, Luiselli is disconcerted by the striking similarities between nineteenth-century practices and the country's contemporary immigration policies. Characteristically, she focuses on the linguistic overlap between the Indian Removal Act and the government's present-day agenda to deport undocumented immigrants—both practices, she notes, make use of the word "removal." By referencing the United States' embattled history, Luiselli reminds readers that the country has a track record of racial discrimination and intolerance, which laid the groundwork for problematic policies during the current immigration crisis. In the same way that President Andrew Jackson forced Native Americans off their own land to supposedly protect "white peace" and the "Land of the Free," she argues, contemporary politicians justify their decision to deport innocent immigrants by suggesting that such people threaten the stability and health of the nation.

> But, despite the dangers, people continue to take the risk. Children certainly take the risk. Children do what their stomachs tell them to do. They don't think twice when they have to chase a moving train. They run along with it, reach for any metal bar at hand, and fling themselves toward whichever half-stable surface they may land on. Children chase after life, even if that chase might end up killing them. Children run and flee. They have an instinct for survival, perhaps, that allows them to endure almost anything just to make it to the other side of horror, whatever may be waiting there for them.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Luiselli directs her attention to the many ways in which migration is a personal sacrifice. Having outlined the fact that riding on "La Bestia"—freight trains that travel through Central America to the United States—is a dangerous endeavor, she points out that "people continue to take the risk." In particular, child migrants put their lives in danger simply to escape the nightmarish circumstances of their home lives. This, she upholds, is because children have a certain "instinct for survival." "Children chase after life," she writes, implying that to stay behind would be to die. Of course, this is quite often the case, since many children have to flee their home countries in order to stay alive. Consequently, they're willing to "to endure almost anything just to make it to the other side of horror," even when this means risking their lives on a dangerous journey north. Establishing this ultimately helps Luiselli show readers that migration is rarely a casual choice—rather, it's a last resort, a decision that arises only when all else has failed. Otherwise,

people wouldn't "continue to take the risk[s]" necessary to come to the United States.

So when I have to ask children that seventh question—"Did anything happen on your trip to the U.S. that scared you or hurt you?"—all I want to do is cover my face and my ears and disappear. But I know better, or try to. I remind myself to swallow the rage, grief, and shame; remind myself to just sit still and listen closely, in case a child does happen to reveal a particular detail that can end up being key to his or her defense against deportation.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Because Luiselli herself is from Mexico, she finds it difficult to hear the horror stories child migrants tell about crossing through the country. Accordingly, she wants to "cover [her] face and [her] ears" when they answer the seventh question on the intake questionnaire, which addresses whether or not they experienced danger during their journey to the United States. However, she recognizes that simply blocking these stories out isn't an option. Even though she feels "rage, grief, and shame" when she hears child migrants enumerating the devastations they faced in Mexico, she forces herself to "sit still and listen closely." This is because it's up to her to identify whether or not something about their stories might be of use in immigration court. In this way, the importance of storytelling comes to the forefront of the book once more, as Luiselli takes it upon herself to scrutinize even the most disturbing details of a child's personal history so that she can help them use these details to their benefit, working their stories into a narrative that will enable the child to avoid deportation.

Numbers and maps tell horror stories, but the stories of deepest horror are perhaps those for which there are no numbers, no maps, no possible accountability, no words ever written or spoken. And perhaps the only way to grant any justice—were that even possible—is by hearing and recording those stories over and over again so that they come back, always, to haunt and shame us. Because being aware of what is happening in our era and choosing to do nothing about it has become unacceptable. Because we cannot allow ourselves to go on normalizing horror and violence. Because we can all be held accountable if something happens under our noses and we don't dare even look.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Luiselli addresses the fact that the immigrant narrative is widely unknown throughout the United States. She has just explained that a nonprofit organization recently developed a tool with which a person can search for a loved one's name and—in some cases—find out if he or she died while trying to immigrate to the United States. This interactive map, she notes, tells "horror stories," since the statistics about migrant deaths are so devasting. At the same time, though, Luiselli is primarily concerned with the stories "for which there are no numbers, no maps, no possible accountability, no words ever written or spoken." This, it seems, is the case for the majority of stories about immigration, which is why Luiselli wants to encourage people to listen to and repeat the immigrant narrative. She asserts that this is "perhaps the only way to grant any justice" to the hardships so many migrants face as a result of unempathetic government policies. In keeping with this notion, she maintains that it's "unacceptable" to ignore the immigration crisis, though this is what many people in the United States are doing. To eradicate this complacency, then, Luiselli wants disseminate stories about immigrants so that the travesties they endure don't go unnoticed. This, she hopes, will perhaps inspire people to work toward ways of responding to the crisis.

Chapter 2 Quotes

In real and practical terms, what the creation of that priority docket meant was that the cases involving unaccompanied minors from Central America were grouped together and moved to the top of the list of pending cases in immigration court. Being moved to the top of a list, in this context, was the least desirable thing—at least from the point of view of the children involved. Basically, the priority juvenile docket implied that deportation proceedings against them were accelerated by 94 percent, and that both they and the organizations that normally provided legal representation now had much less time to build a defense.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Luiselli describes in this passage why nonprofit organizations are working so tirelessly to match children with lawyers as quickly as possible. She explains that the Obama administration reacted to the sudden influx of undocumented minors by creating a "priority juvenile docket," which effectively expedited any case "involving unaccompanied minors from Central America." This means that children who arrive in the United States are quickly sent to immigration court to determine whether or not they'll be deported. Although speeding up this legal process might seem at first glance like a logical decision, Luiselli says that it is the "least desirable thing" for any undocumented Central American minor. With only a small window of time to prepare an entire defense, children stand little chance in immigration court, which is why the rate of deportations has "accelerated by 94 percent." This is why nonprofit organizations like The Door are trying to find lawyers to work pro bono for child migrants, ultimately scrambling to find attorneys willing to represent these disenfranchised children. By describing the real-life consequences of the juvenile priority docket, Luiselli illustrates to readers the power of government policy, demonstrating why it's so important for pro-immigrant activists to rally against unempathetic federal decisions.

The priority juvenile docket, in sum, was the government's coldest, cruelest possible answer to the arrival of refugee children. Ethically, that answer was more than questionable. In legal terms, it was a kind of backdoor escape route to avoid dealing with an impending reality suddenly knocking at the country's front doors.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Continuing her examination of the Obama administration's decision to hear child migrant cases within 21 days of a minor's arrival, Luiselli maintains that the priority juvenile docket is "cold" and "cruel." Although it may help the government get rid of migrant children at a faster rate—94% faster, to be exact—the docket doesn't address the actual cause of the immigration crisis. Instead, it serves as a "backdoor escape route," which enables the United States government to ignore the roots of the problem. Consequently, it's easy to see that the docket will do nothing to actually help the country in any long-term way. More and more children will be deported, but more and more children will also continue coming to the country in the first place. This is because these children are running from serious danger, so they're willing to risk the possibility of deportation. By making this evident, Luiselli prepares readers to understand one of the only concrete proposals she makes in *Tell Me How It Ends*—namely, that the United States needs to work in tandem with Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to create "combined policies" that will alleviate the conditions of the crisis.

From the beginning, the crisis was viewed as an institutional hindrance, a problem that Homeland Security was "suffering" and that Congress and immigration judges had to solve. Few narratives have made the effort to turn things around and understand the crisis from the point of view of the children involved. The political response to the crisis, therefore, has always centered on one question, which is more or less: What do we do with all these children now? Or, in blunter terms: How do we get rid of them or dissuade them from coming?

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Luiselli considers the discourse surrounding the immigration crisis. She points out that people in the United States tend to see the problem as nothing but an "institutional hindrance," something that needs to be addressed quickly and with little thought paid to the actual origins of the issue. "Few narratives have made the effort to turn things around and understand the crisis from the point of view of the children involved," she writes, underlining the fact that the nation's entire approach to the crisis fails to recognize it as a humanitarian emergency. Rather, people see it as something of a bureaucratic inconvenience, opting to focus on specific governmental policies rather than on the real-life consequences of these decisions. What Luiselli wants, it seems, is to remind readers that what's happening along the country's southern border has to do with people—with *children*. In other words, she's trying to highlight the lack of empathy in the current discourse. Rather than wondering how the United States can "get rid of" these child migrants, she intimates, people should concentrate on the horrors these children are up against.

> In the media and much of the official political discourse, the word "illegal" prevails over "undocumented" and the term "immigrant" over "refugee." How would anyone who is stigmatized as an "illegal immigrant" feel "safe" and "happy"?

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Applying pressure to the language used to describe undocumented migrants in the United States, Luiselli makes a case for why unaccompanied child migrants are unlikely to feel comfortable in their new environment. One of the questions on the intake questionnaire asks if the children feel "safe" and "happy" in the United States, so Luiselli scrutinizes the ways in which the discourse most likely influences how child migrants feel. Instead of using the term "undocumented," many Americans refer to immigrants without visas or permanent residency as "illegal." To add to this, people also tend to call child migrants "immigrants" even though many of these children have come to the United States to avoid danger, meaning that it would be more accurate to refer to them as "refugees." Considering that the term "illegal immigrant" "stigmatize[s]" children who have simply come to the country in search of safety, Luiselli asserts that it would be surprising if these undocumented minors feel "safe" or "happy." Instead, she posits that they feel ostracized from American society—an unfortunate fact that could easily be undone if people simply adopted a more inclusive way of talking about immigration.

> The MS-13 was originally a small coalition of immigrants from El Salvador who had sought exile in the U.S. during the long and ruthless Salvadoran Civil War (1979-1992), in which the military-led government relentlessly massacred left-wing opposition groups. [...] The primary ally of that government, we discover (and should have predicted), was the United States. The Carter administration and, perhaps more actively, the Reagan administration funded and provided military resources to the government that massacred so many and led many others to exile. Around one-fifth of the population of El Salvador fled. Many of those who sought exile ended up as political refugees in the United States—around three hundred thousand of them in Los Angeles. The whole story is an absurd, circular nightmare.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker), Luiselli's Niece

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Because Luiselli and her niece want to understand the circumstances that led to the immigration crisis, they decide to learn about Central America's (recent) history. One of the most notable things they discover is that the United States funded the Salvadoran government during the Salvadoran Civil War. That government was ruthlessly violent, but the United States provided it with support, apparently not thinking or caring about the possible consequences of strengthening such a brutal regime. As a result, "one-fifth of the population of El Salvador fled." Since the United States is a relatively safe country that isn't particularly far from El Salvador, it makes sense that a large number of Salvadorans ended up crossing the southern border and settling in various locales around the country. By narrating this history,

Luiselli invites readers to examine the true causes of the immigration crisis. Rather than simply pointing to a country like El Salvador and blaming it for the mass exodus of its citizens, Luiselli unveils the fact that the United States was involved in the country's destabilization. Consequently, it's rather illogical for Americans to blame the immigration crisis solely on a country like El Salvador.

❝ Later on, in the 1990s, anti-immigration policies and programs in the U.S. led to massive deportations of Central Americans. Among them were thousands of MS-13 members—those perhaps quite understandably unwanted in the country. But the policies backfired: gang deportations became more of a metastasis than an eradication. Now the gang has become a kind of transnational army, with more than seventy thousand members spread across the United States, Mexico, and the Northern Triangle.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

Continuing her examination of El Salvador's history, Luiselli explains the origins of MS-13. After the United States aided the Salvadoran government in its violent oppression of its citizens, many Salvadorans fled to places like Los Angeles, where they encountered many gangs. To protect themselves, some of these Salvadoran immigrants formed MS-13. Then, in the 1990s, the United States government set forth a number of "anti-immigration policies and programs" that resulted in "massive deportations of Central Americans." Luiselli acknowledges that it makes sense that the country would want to deport gang members, but she says that doing so ultimately "backfired." When she asserts that "gang deportations became more of a metastasis than an eradication," she means that the government's decision to send MS-13 members back to Central America only helped the gang spread to other regions. As a result, the gang has turned into a "transnational army," one that exists both in the United States and in Central America. This is exactly why undocumented migrants are often in such precarious situations—they leave their homes to evade gangs only to find those gangs in the United States. And the fact that the United States played a role in the dissemination of such gangs only further supports Luiselli's argument that the country needs to accept its share of responsibility for the immigration crisis.

❝ […] until all the governments involved—the American, Mexican, Salvadoran, Honduran, and Guatemalan governments, at least—acknowledge their shared accountability in the roots and causes of the children's exodus, solutions to the crisis will be impossible.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

This passage closely follows Luiselli's overview of the history and origins of gangs like MS-13. Having shown that the United States played a crucial role in not only the formation but the spread of MS-13 and Barrio 18 throughout the Americas, she challenges the idea that the country can in good conscience expect Mexico and the nations in the Northern Triangle to solve the immigration crisis. An active participant in the genesis of this crisis, the United States should work alongside Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, she upholds, insisting that recognizing a sense of "shared accountability" will help each nation come closer to a solution to the problem. As it stands, though, the United States is unwilling to take political responsibility for what has happened in Central America, ultimately turning away from the problem and expecting other countries to solve the issue on their own.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ If the child answers the questionnaire "correctly," he or she is more likely to have a case strong enough to increase its chances of being placed with a pro bono attorney. An answer is 'correct' if it strengthens the child's case and provides a potential avenue of relief. So, in the warped world of immigration, a correct answer is when, for example, a girl reveals that her father is an alcoholic who physically or sexually abused her, or when a boy reports that he received death threats or that he was beaten repeatedly by several gang members after refusing to acquiesce to recruitment at school and has the physical injuries to prove it.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

As Luiselli reflects upon the nature of the intake questionnaire, she observes that certain answers are more helpful than others when it comes to "increas[ing]" a child's chance of attracting the attention of a pro bono lawyer. Luiselli refers to these responses as "correct" answers, though she feels odd saying this because of the implications that come along with building a strong case. Simply put, if a child has experienced trauma in his or her home country, it's more likely that he or she will be able to avoid deportation. Subsequently, lawyers are more willing to work with children who have extenuating circumstances that preclude them from returning to their countries. The fact that certain answers can lead to better outcomes is worth noting, since it justifies Luiselli's close attention to language. As the person listening to migrant children tell their stories, it's up to her to draw "correct" answers out of them (if she can). This role is very important, since—as she has previously stated—many children struggle to string together cohesive narratives. As a result, Luiselli has to be an alert and receptive listener, constantly trying to find out if a child has a good reason to stay permanently in the United States.

> If the children are very young, in addition to translating from one language to another, the interpreters have to reconfigure the questions, shift them from the language of adults to the language of children.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after Luiselli notes that interpreters have no control over the interview process when speaking to undocumented minors. Although a child's future largely depends upon what they say, there's only so much Luiselli can do to help them. One thing she *can* do, though, is make sure the children understand the questions she's asking them. This often means manipulating the language she uses, especially "if the children are very young." It's worth keeping in mind that the questions on the questionnaire aren't necessarily tailored to children, and especially not to children who have been through traumatic experiences. Consequently, Luiselli often has to "reconfigure the questions," moving from "the language of adults to the language of children." By meeting her interviewees on their own linguistic grounds, she gives them the best possible chance to provide answers that might help them avoid deportation. Once again, then, she demonstrates the important role language plays in the arena of human rights activism.

> Because immigration court is a civil court, these child "aliens" are not entitled to the free legal counsel that American law guarantees to persons accused of crimes. In other words, that fourth sentence in the well-known Miranda rights—"If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you"—does not apply to them. Therefore, volunteer organizations have stepped in to do the job.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Luiselli highlights the fact that undocumented immigrants aren't given automatic rights to legal representation. Unlike criminals, who under the Miranda rights are represented by attorneys even if they can't afford legal counsel, undocumented immigrants are left to fend for themselves. This is especially problematic in the case of child migrants, since they aren't necessarily capable of pursuing legal representation on their own. After all, very few children would be able to find a lawyer—let alone one that will work for free—on their own in a foreign country. Because of this, organizations like The Door and other nonprofits have taken it upon themselves to help pair undocumented minors with attorneys. This is a critical job, one for which there is a great demand, since there are so many child migrants in need of legal representation. In keeping with this, it's unsurprising that Luiselli was immediately put to work without training on her first day as a volunteer at The Door—an indication of just how hard these organizations are working to advocate for the large numbers of child migrants requiring legal assistance.

As the Mexican government has progressively increased its hold on La Bestia, travel aboard the trains has become more and more risky and new routes have been improvised. There are now maritime routes that begin on the coasts of Chiapas, along which the migrants travel with coyotes aboard rafts and other precarious vessels. We've heard the many stories about migrants crossing the Mediterranean—that massive cemetery of a sea—so it's easy to imagine what kinds of stories we'll hear in the next few years, of migrants amid the enormous waves of the Pacific Ocean.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Luiselli doesn't only focus on the United States' immigration policies. She also applies analytical pressure to Mexico's deportation practices, explaining that the country has in recent years increased its efforts to deport Central Americans making their way north from their own nations. Part of this means policing La Bestia, the trains that most Central Americans take to reach the United States' southern border. However, Luiselli makes it clear that, although Mexico has made it much harder for migrants to get to the United States, this doesn't change the fact that Central Americans are still fleeing their own countries. In fact, the only thing it changes is the "route" migrants take, as Mexico's recent control of La Bestia has forced people to make "maritime" passages. When Luiselli says, "We've heard the many stories about migrants crossing the Mediterranean," she's referring to the Syrian refugee crisis, as vast numbers of Syrians have tried to cross the Mediterranean—a phenomenon that has resulted in many, many deaths. Bearing this in mind, Luiselli is wary of the new "maritime routes" that Central Americans have been forced to adopt, ultimately suggesting not that Mexico's strict policies will stop the influx of migrants traveling to the United States, but that these migrants are desperate enough to subject themselves to increasingly dangerous journeys.

Between Hempstead and Tegucigalpa there is a long chain of causes and effects. Both cities can be drawn on the same map: the map of violence related to drug trafficking. This fact is ignored, however, by almost all of the official reports. The media wouldn't put Hempstead, a city in New York, on the same plane as one in Honduras. What a scandal! Official accounts in the United States—what circulates in the newspaper or on the radio, the message from Washington, and public opinion in general—almost always locate the dividing line between "civilization" and "barbarity" just below the Río Grande.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker), Manu López

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

By this point in *Tell Me How It Ends*, Luiselli has explained that Manu traveled from Tegucigalpa, Guatemala to the United States in order to escape gangs like MS-13 and Barrio 18. When he arrived in Hempstead, Long Island, he discovered that both gangs have a strong presence in the community, especially at his new high school. In light of this similarity, Luiselli connects the two locations, suggesting that they are united by "violence related to drug trafficking." She maintains that the two cities exist on "the same map," since there are drug routes between both locations. Despite this fact, the discourse in the United States surrounding immigration refuses to acknowledge the connection between places like Hempstead and Tegucigalpa. To do so would be to recognize the role the United States has played in the proliferation of violent gangs—gangs that many anti-immigration politicians have pointed to as a way of justifying harsh deportation policies. As a result, many Americans act as if the United States is completely different than places like Tegucigalpa. In reality, Luiselli asserts, this is not the case.

No one suggests that the causes are deeply embedded in our shared hemispheric history and are therefore not some distant problem in a foreign country that no one can locate on a map, but in fact a transnational problem that includes the United States—not as a distant observer or passive victim that must now deal with thousands of unwanted children arriving at the southern border, but rather as an active historical participant in the circumstances that generated the problem.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

Once again, Luiselli implicates the United States in the makings of the immigration crisis. Having laid out the nation's historical involvement with the "circumstances that generated the problem," she suggests that the United States should stop acting as if the crisis is "some distant problem in a foreign country." This, she implies, only makes the issue harder to address. The term "shared hemispheric history" is an important one, as it articulates the fact that the mass exodus of Central Americans is a communal concern, one that isn't confined to just one region. As long as the United States continues to act like a "distant observer or passive victim," though, Luiselli believes it will be impossible to find a solution to what's going on.

The belief that the migration of all those children is "their" (the southern barbarians') problem is often so deeply ingrained that "we" (the northern civilization) feel exempt from offering any solution. The devastation of the social fabric in Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and other countries is often thought of as a Central American "gang violence" problem that must be kept on the far side of the border. There is little said, for example, of arms being trafficked from the United States into Mexico or Central America, legally or not; little mention of the fact that the consumption of drugs in the United States is what fundamentally fuels drug trafficking in the continent.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

Nearing the end of her examination of the immigration crisis, Luiselli makes sure to enumerate the ways in which the United States has played a role not only in the history of the problem, but also in its continuation. She bemoans the fact that the discourse surrounding the topic in the United States fails to acknowledge the extent to which the country is still "fueling" the crisis. After all, the United States actively sends weapons into Central America, which ultimately contributes to the region's violent landscape. Furthermore, the "consumption of drugs in the United States" provides a demand for the production and trafficking of drugs, thereby feeding into the activity of cartels. In these ways, the United States continues to contribute to the conditions in Central America that make it necessary for children (and adults) to flee.

Chapter 4 Quotes

But not all schools are complying. For months now, Alina has been trying to find a different school for Manu. The two girls are not as vulnerable to gang coercion, she thinks, provided that they keep to themselves. But she tells me that Manu can no longer go unnoticed. For a while he was admitted to a school in Long Beach, but then they told him his English wasn't good enough and that he needed to take language classes first. Other schools said he didn't meet the eligibility criteria, or that he's missing some document or another, or that there's simply no space.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker), Alina's Daughters, Alina López, Manu López

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

Luiselli has already explained that all children in the United States are entitled to free public education, regardless of their immigration status. Despite this, she says, "not all schools are complying" with the law. This makes it difficult for people like Manu to avoid MS-13 and Barrio 18, which have made their way into schools like Hempstead High School. To help him avoid these gangs, Alina has tried to get him into different schools, but none of them have allowed him to enroll, making excuses for why they're turning him away. Of course, this isn't legal, but Alina and Manu aren't in the best position to challenge the school districts. As a result, Manu is forced to endure pressure from gangs, essentially finding himself in the same exact position from which he tried to escape by migrating to the United States in the first place.

> There are things that can only be understood retrospectively, when many years have passed and the story has ended. In the meantime, while the story continues, the only thing to do is tell it over and over again as it develops, bifurcates, knots around itself. And it must be told, because before anything can be understood, it has to be narrated many times, in many different words and from many different angles, by many different minds.

Related Characters: Valeria Luiselli (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

In *Tell Me How It Ends*, Luiselli doesn't offer many concrete or definitive solutions to the immigration crisis. This is because the topic is so complex and nuanced, making it difficult to fully grasp and, thus, even more difficult to solve. In this moment, she recognizes that the complexity of the problem likely means that it will "only be understood retrospectively, when many years have passed and the story has ended." And though this might be the case, she believes that "the only thing to do" is pay attention to the immigrant narrative. Despite the fact that it's nearly impossible to come up with any answers that directly address the situation, she believes that listening to the stories of immigrants is a worthwhile endeavor, since a comprehensive understanding of the crisis will only come after the tale has been "narrated many times, in many different words and from many different angles, by many different minds." Once again, then, she puts her faith in the power of language and storytelling, this time suggesting that they are the only means by which people might begin to grasp an otherwise unfathomably intricate problem.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: BORDER

In 2015, Valeria Luiselli begins volunteering as an interpreter whose job it is to interview undocumented child migrants in New York City. She explains that the questions she asks these children are part of an "intake questionnaire" used by the city's immigration court system. The first question on the form is, "Why did you come to the United States?" This is only one of 40 questions that Luiselli poses to child migrants, whose answers she translates from Spanish to English and writes on the questionnaire. Although this question might seem straightforward, Luiselli notes that the answers she receives are rarely "simple." Instead, children tell her long and complicated stories about why they came to the United States, stories that she has to "transform" into "succinct sentences." This, she says, is especially difficult because the narratives often have "no beginning, no middle, and no end.

Luiselli begins Tell Me How It Ends *by calling attention to the nuances of language. Because she is interviewing children, she can't always count on receiving "simple" responses to the questions she asks, so it's her job to sort through the disparate narrative threads the child migrants deliver, trying to make sense of their situations. The book's title itself highlights the human tendency to yearn for cohesion and logical conclusions, so it's worth noting that the stories Luiselli hears when interviewing undocumented minors have "no beginning, no middle, and no end." By emphasizing the fluid nature of these stories, Luiselli presents the immigrant narrative as complex and nuanced, thereby preparing readers to approach such stories with open minds.*

After Luiselli interviews child migrants, she convenes with lawyers, relaying the information she has gathered. This is the primary purpose of her job, since what the children tell her ultimately determines whether or not an attorney will agree to represent them pro bono in immigration court. When Luiselli presents them with what she has learned, the lawyers "analyze the child's responses, trying to come up with options for a viable defense against a child's deportation and the 'potential relief' he or she is likely to get." If a lawyer chooses the represent a child, "the real legal battle begins"—a battle that determines whether or not the child will be deported.

The fact that the possibility of a child's deportation is tied to the information Luiselli gathers in her interviews is worth noting, since it emphasizes the importance of storytelling and language. This is why Luiselli is so attuned to the way child migrants tell their stories, since what they say to her largely dictates whether or not they'll be sent back to the dangerous circumstances from which they've fled.

In 2014, before Luiselli—a Mexican immigrant herself—volunteers as an interpreter, she goes on a road trip with her husband, daughter, and stepson (who's visiting from Mexico). She and her family are waiting for their green card requests to go through, so they decide to take a vacation in the meantime, driving from their home in Harlem, New York, to Cochise County, Arizona, which is close to the country's southern border. Because they haven't yet received their green cards, they are technically considered "nonresident aliens," at least in the "slightly offensive parlance of U.S. immigration law." "There are 'nonresident aliens,' 'resident aliens,' and even 'removable aliens,'" Luiselli writes. She and her family, she says, want to become "resident aliens," even though the bureaucratic process of becoming a United States citizen is quite grueling, arduous, and characterized by uncertainty.

Luiselli demonstrates her close attention to language, scrutinizing her own status in the United States and the various terms that people assign to it. The very language used to describe her and her family members, she points out, is "slightly offensive," as the law refers to them as "aliens," using a term that denies their humanity, even if only for legal purposes. Although this sends the message that immigrants are unwelcome in the United States, Luiselli still wants to gain residency in the country, demonstrating how willing she is to undergo various sacrifices in order to go on living her life in a more secure and stable fashion.

Luiselli compares the green card application with the intake questionnaire for child migrants. Next to the questionnaire, the application seems rather "innocent," asking questions like, "Do you intend to practice polygamy?" By way of contrast, the suspicious and "cynical" nature of the questionnaire makes Luiselli feel as if "the world has become a much more fucked-up place than anyone could have ever imagined."

Juxtaposing her own experience of trying to live permanently in the United States with the adversity child migrants face, Luiselli frames the country's reluctance to accept undocumented minors as cruel. She herself isn't running from violence, but the process of getting a green card is—apparently—somehow easier than the process children must undergo simply to seek safety. Outlining this discrepancy, Luiselli emphasizes the immigration system's bureaucratic flaws and lack of empathy.

The process of asking undocumented minors questions about their journey to the United States is called "screening," a term Luiselli finds justifiably "cynical," as if "the child is a reel of footage." In these circumstances, she says, their stories become "generalized, distorted," and seem "out of focus." As she writes down the children's answers, she often has to leave entire spaces blank, since they don't always know—for example—where their parents are.

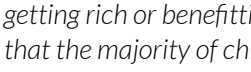
Luiselli's attention to language continues, though she begins to doubt the process by which she's forced to gather information about the child migrants. She has already established that it's vitally important to relay the stories they tell about their lives, since these narratives are what might help them attract pro bono lawyers. However, the questionnaire itself doesn't necessarily accommodate the complex nature of their stories, a representation of the fact that the United States' immigration system struggles to truly account for what undocumented migrants have been through.

During Luiselli's family road trip in 2014, she and her husband listen to the radio and hear about the "wave of children arriving, alone and undocumented, at the border." As they drive, they follow this story, taking note of how the nation is responding to the sudden influx of child migrants. Soon enough, people start referring to the phenomenon as the "immigration crisis," though Luiselli points out that some people suggest it should be called the "refugee crisis" instead. As the news of these children spreads across the country, everyone wonders where their parents are, what will happen to them, and—most of all—why they came to the United States.

When Luiselli addresses the national response to the immigration crisis, she focuses on the language used to describe what's happening. To call the problem a "refugee crisis" instead of an "immigration crisis" is more accurate and descriptive, since so many of the child migrants come to the United States to escape danger. In this way, the term "refugee crisis" bears an implicit acknowledgement of the factors contributing to the problem—an important point, since the nation is otherwise so perplexed by the unfolding situation.

"Why did you come to the United States?" Luiselli asks every child migrant she interviews in New York. Their answers, she explains, often differ, though they frequently identify the "pull factor" as their desire (or need) to reunite with a family member who has already settled down in the United States. The children also pinpoint "push factors," referencing "the unthinkable circumstances" that have driven them from their homes. These circumstances include gang violence, abuse, "forced labor," and "abandonment." Given these motives, Luiselli sees that these migrants aren't chasing the "American Dream," but simply the chance to survive.

Describing the "pull" and "push factors" that motivate children to migrate to the United States, Luiselli attempts to dispel the idea that these kids make the arduous journey north to take advantage of the United States' economic prosperity. Whereas some people might think that all immigrants are pursuing the "American Dream," Luiselli illustrates that their reasons for leaving their own countries are often far more simple: they want to lead safe lives. Whether they're actively running from violence or just trying to reconnect with stable caretakers, their main motivations have little to do with getting rich or benefitting from the American economy. By revealing that the majority of child migrants are trying to avoid violence and other horrible fates, Luiselli ultimately invites readers to empathize with their predicament and see that migrating isn't such an easy choice.



The children who arrive in the United States aren't always able to give an exact account of the details of their journey. The second question on the intake questionnaire asks them to state their date of arrival, information many child migrants are unable to provide. "They've fled their towns and cities; they've walked and swum and hidden and run and mounted freight trains and trucks," Luiselli writes. "They've turned themselves in to Border Patrol officers." After this long journey, they can't always identify when, exactly, they crossed the border.

Luiselli explains the ins and outs of what it takes to come to the United States as an undocumented minor from Central America. In doing so, she encourages readers to recognize that migrating requires a great deal of personal sacrifice, since the journey is dangerous and difficult. In fact, it's so intense that many children can't even piece together the entire story of their travels. In turn, Luiselli implies that nobody would undergo such a trek unless it was absolutely necessary.

On the road trip in 2014, Luiselli and her husband try to find any information they can about the child migrants coming into the United States. They scour the news, but it's rare that a source provides any answers to the many questions surrounding the crisis. In one online article, there's a picture of Americans clutching guns and flags. Beneath it, the caption reads, "Protesters, some exercising their open-carry rights, assemble outside of the Wolverine Center in Vassar [Michigan] that would house illegal juveniles to show their dismay for the situation." Another picture that Luiselli and her husband find online is of an elderly husband and wife raising signs that say, "Illegal Is a Crime" and "Return to Senders." Luiselli studies their faces and asks herself what they must have been thinking about while showing such vehemence toward child migrants.

In this section, Luiselli continues to portray the scorn many Americans have for immigrants. Considering that she is an immigrant herself dedicated to helping undocumented minors ensure their own safety, it is understandably hard for her to understand why others would show such resentment and hate to children. However, she doesn't simply write these people off—instead, she tries to comprehend what must be going through their heads, thereby trying to empathize with them even as she bristles at the hateful message they send to migrants.

Some of the news sources that Luiselli and her husband read frame the crisis as something like a "biblical plague." Reading these sources makes Luiselli wonder if "the reactions would be different were all these children of a lighter color." Thinking this way, she asks herself if the child migrants would be "treated more like people" if they were white.

When Luiselli wonders if migrants would be "treated more like people" if they had "lighter" skin, she frames the vitriol surrounding immigration in the United States as a form of bigotry. The intolerance that many citizens exhibit toward immigrants provides ample reason to believe that their anger comes from an inability or unwillingness to embrace people from other cultures, even when those people are running from danger, Luiselli intimates.

To pass the time in the car, Luiselli and her husband tell their children stories about the history of the American Southwest, "back when it used to be part of Mexico." Narrating these stories, Luiselli talks about President Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830, when the United States forced Native Americans onto reservations. "It's curious, or perhaps just sinister," she writes, "that the word 'removal' is still used to refer to the deportation of 'illegal' immigrants—those bronzed barbarians who threaten the white peace and superior values of the 'Land of the Free.'"

Luiselli's consideration of the similarities between the Indian Removal Act and the detainment and deportation of undocumented immigrants shows her interest in the ways history repeats itself. By comparing what's happening now to the brutal treatment of Native Americans in the nineteenth century, she suggests that contemporary nationalism has its roots in very ugly, fraught histories. Luiselli thus presents a new way to contextualize the issue of immigration in the U.S., applying a historical lens to illustrate the extent to which injustice is often cyclical.

Luiselli and her husband try to talk to their children about the immigration crisis, but they have trouble answering their questions. "How do you explain any of this to your own children?" Luiselli wonders. When her children fall asleep in the backseat, she looks at them and thinks about whether or not they'd "survive" the journey from Mexico to the United States. Questions three and four on the intake questionnaire are "With whom did you travel to this country?" and "Did you travel with anyone you knew?" Luiselli notes that seemingly all of the child migrants travel with a "coyote," someone who takes children across the border for a fee. Watching her children sleeping in the backseat, Luiselli thinks about what would happen to them if a coyote "deposited" them at the border.

Because it's so difficult to make the journey from Central America to the United States, there is quite a bit of uncertainty that comes along with the process of migration. With this uncertainty comes danger, a fact that Luiselli doesn't know how to explain to her children, who under different circumstances might have faced the same adversities that unaccompanied child migrants currently face every day.

The intake questionnaire's fifth question is, "What countries did you pass through?" Following this is, "How did you travel here?" Luiselli explains that the vast majority of the children she interviews come from Mexico, though there are also migrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. To answer the sixth question (about how they traveled), almost every child says that he or she took "La Bestia," or "The Beast." This is a freight train that runs throughout Mexico, upon which roughly 500,000 Central Americans ride every year. On La Bestia, Luiselli notes, "the most minor oversight can be fatal." It is a very dangerous mode of transport, since the train often derails, and people frequently fall off during the night. "But," Luiselli writes, "despite the dangers, people continue to take the risk. Children certainly take the risk. Children do what their stomachs tell them to do."

The danger that comes along with migrating to the United States is worth noting, since it sheds light on just how desperate migrants are to escape their current circumstances. When Luiselli says that children flee home "despite the dangers" of the journey, she underlines how untenable their home lives must be. The notion that "children do what their stomachs tell them to do" illustrates that coming to the United States is, at least for undocumented minors, a last resort, something that is little more than an instinctual attempt to survive. Again, then, readers see that such migrants aren't chasing the "American Dream," but merely trying to stay alive.

Once child migrants reach the United States' border, the "coyotes" leave them. At this point, the children try to find Border Patrol officers, wanting to turn themselves in because they know it's safer to be "formally detained" than to wander in the desert. Luiselli notes that the children will most likely remain "undocumented" forever if the "legal proceedings" don't begin shortly after they arrive in the country. "Life as an undocumented migrant is perhaps not worse than the life they are fleeing," she writes, "but it is certainly not the life that anyone wants."

Luiselli upholds that "life as an undocumented immigrant" is undesirable, but it's usually better than the circumstances child migrants are fleeing. The fact that living as an undocumented individual in the United States is so hard is yet another testament that most migrants aren't trying to obtain the "American Dream," because although they want to find ways to earn permanent residency, they would still prefer to remain in the States without documentation over going home.

Once child migrants are detained by Border Patrol, they're put into a detention center known as the "icebox." It is called this because it's operated by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) and because the entire facility is kept at extremely cold temperatures, as if the children are meats that must be refrigerated. Worse, children experience "verbal and physical mistreatment," often have nowhere to sleep, are unable to use the bathroom when they need to, and don't receive enough food. To illustrate the negligence that runs rampant in the icebox, Luiselli references a mishap that took place in 2015, when a Texan detention center gave 250 children adult doses of hepatitis vaccinations. "The children became gravely ill and had to be hospitalized," Luiselli writes. According to the law, migrants are only allowed to stay in the icebox for 72 hours. However, many children stay much longer than this.

Luiselli presents the bleak conditions of the "icebox" in order to spotlight the troubling nature of how the United States is responding to the sudden influx of undocumented child migrants. The subject of immigration is a controversial topic in the U.S., but Luiselli attempts to transcend the political argument by simply inviting readers—even those who advocate for strict border control and harsh deportation practices—to recognize the inhumane circumstances of the country's detention centers. Regardless of what a person believes, it's hard to ignore the fact that children are suffering because of the country's failure to properly address the immigration crisis.

Driving through New Mexico in 2014, Luiselli and her family pass groups of men driving pickup trucks. These people are "vigilante, patriotic men who carry pistols and rifles by constitutional right and feel entitled to use them if they see a group of *aliens* walking in the desert." While they're in this region of the country, Luiselli and her husband avoid talking about the fact that they're Mexican. Still, Border Patrol officers stop them several times. One asks what they're doing in New Mexico, and they say that they're writers working on a "Western." This isn't true, but they feel they need a concrete reason for visiting the American Southwest.

It's worth keeping in mind that Luiselli and her husband aren't in the United States illegally. Since they're waiting to receive their green cards, they're allowed to be in the country. All the same, they feel as if they need to justify their presence in the Southwest. This illustrates the extent to which the nation's overall response to the immigration crisis has altered the lives of all migrants, regardless of their official statuses in the country. What's more, that they're pulled over several times once again demonstrates that there is a racial aspect to this subject, since the officers are apparently suspicious of them for no other reason than that they are Latinx.

The intake questionnaire's seventh question is, "Did anything happen on your trip to the U.S. that scared you or hurt you?" This, Luiselli explains, rarely elicits answers from the children. They are reticent to speak about the hardships they've encountered, but Luiselli knows that most of them have experienced trauma. Because she herself is Mexican, she feels "ashamed" by this question, since she knows that these children have most likely seen horrible things on their journey through her country. The statistics, Luiselli says, are illustrative of this "horror." To that end, she notes that 80% of "women and girls" who cross the border are raped at some point in their travels. "The situation is so common that most of them take contraceptive precautions as they begin the journey north," she writes. Furthermore, vast numbers of migrants are "abducted" and "disappear."

Once again, Luiselli's description of the dangers related to migration portray the entire endeavor as an intense sacrifice. If so many women are willing to risk getting raped in order to leave their homes, it seems clear that their decision to migrate is a last resort. This aligns with Luiselli's previous suggestion that the crisis actually has to do with "refugees," not just "immigrants." Running from dangers that are even more threatening that the ones they encounter on their journey north, migrants seek refuge because they've most likely exhausted all other options.

Luiselli relates a story from 2010, when 72 migrants from Central and South America were found dead in a mass grave in Mexico. "Some had been tortured, and all had been shot in the back of the head," she writes. Three of these migrants pretended to be dead, which is how they escaped to tell the tale. Apparently, the drug cartel Los Zetas killed the 72 migrants because the migrants "refused to work for them and did not have the means to pay a ransom." Stories like these are why Luiselli hates asking children if anything terrible happened to them during their travels. Whenever she asks this, she wants to block her ears, but she knows she can't. Instead, she forces herself to listen intently, understanding that the children might say something that will make it possible for her to match them with a lawyer and, thus, avoid deportation.

Luiselli's determination to listen to the children's stories is a testament to her belief in the power of narrative and language. Although hearing about the trauma undocumented minors have been through deeply troubles her, she commits herself to listening carefully to their tales, since this is the only way she'll be able to relay their information to a team of lawyers. Consequently, she must do all that she can to understand their stories, even if it pains her to do so.

Violence isn't the only danger migrants face when trying to reach the United States' southern border. Starvation and dehydration in the desert are also very real threats, as over 2,200 "human remains" have been found since 2001. Most of these remains are "unidentified," which is why a nonprofit organization called Humane Borders created an "online search mechanism that matches names of deceased migrants to the specific geographical coordinates in the desert where their remains were found." With this tool, people can search for missing family members and see if they have perished in the desert.

Humane Borders's invention of this interactive map helps family members find out once and for all if their loved ones have died. Of course, the tool itself only provides users with information if a migrant has died (and been found), but it at least eliminates uncertainty in some cases. Given that there are so many dangers and uncertainties that come along with the decision to migrate, this is a very meaningful resource.

Luiselli upholds that "numbers and maps tell horror stories," but she also points out that the true horror stories are the ones that never get told. "And perhaps the only way to grant any justice—were that even possible—is by hearing and recording those stories over and over again so that they come back, always, to haunt and shame us," she writes. "Because being aware of what is happening in our era and choosing to do nothing about it has become unacceptable." In the current political climate, she upholds, "horror and violence" have been "normalized." This, she asserts, is unacceptable, since "we can all be held accountable if something happens under our noses and we don't dare even look."

Again, Luiselli shows her commitment to the importance of language and storytelling. This time, she urges people to repeat immigrant narratives "over and over again" so that the related horrors don't slip through the cracks of public consciousness. Storytelling, she implies, is perhaps the only way to hold society "accountable" for the travesties currently taking place between and in Central America and the United States.

Luiselli's family returns from their road trip to find their green cards waiting for them in the mail. Luiselli's, however, isn't among them. Her lawyer asks if she's ever visited "Muslim-majority countries," but Luiselli says it has been ten years since she last traveled to such a place. She also can't think of any organizations she belongs to that would qualify as "a threat to the United States." Determining why she hasn't been issued a green card takes up much of her time, as she's forced to file "petitions" and place calls to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Fortunately, she has already obtained a temporary work permit, meaning she can continue her job as a lecturer while she waits to find out more about her green card.

As Luiselli considers the influx of child migrants, she also has to deal with complications pertaining to her own residential status in the United States. That she has to apply for a temporary work permit accentuates just how difficult it is to live and work in the United States as an immigrant. Given that Luiselli—a responsible adult—is having trouble with the nation's immigration system, it's easy to see why children in even more precarious situations need so much help.

While Luiselli is sorting out the problems related to her green card, her lawyer gives her case to a colleague, since she herself has decided to take a job at a nonprofit organization advocating for undocumented child migrants. This is because the Obama administration has recently made a "priority juvenile docket in immigration courts to deal with the deportation proceedings of thousands of undocumented children." This means that the courts are suddenly in desperate need of Spanish-speaking attorneys. When Luiselli's lawyer tells her why she's leaving, Luiselli asks if there's any way she too could become involved, perhaps as a translator or interpreter. Consequently, her lawyer connects her with someone from the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

Although Luiselli is fighting her own battle to remain in the United States as a permanent resident, she's eager to help child migrants in any way that she can. Since she's a bilingual writer who works closely with language, it makes sense that she would seek volunteer work as an interpreter or translator for undocumented minors, effectively putting her skills to work for a cause she adamantly supports.

CHAPTER 2: COURT

In March of 2015, Luiselli begins work as an interpreter. She has encouraged her nineteen-year-old niece to join her, since she has just moved to New York and is living with Luiselli and her family until she hears back from colleges. On their first day, they go to lower Manhattan and meet a group of lawyers from a nonprofit organization called The Door, which "provides kids and teenagers with services ranging from legal assistance to counseling to English and hip-hop classes." Luiselli and her niece undergo some cursory training, and although the plan is for them to "shadow" the lawyers until they understand the interview process, they're immediately put to work because there are so many children to talk to and not enough people to conduct the interviews.

The Door's urgent need for people to interview undocumented minors reveals the magnitude of the immigration crisis. With hardly any training, Luiselli and her niece are thrown into conversations with these children, a fact that underlines just how badly nonprofit organizations advocating for immigrants need help from volunteers to address the vast numbers of children requiring legal assistance.

Most of the children Luiselli and other workers at The Door speak to are from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, which are the countries that comprise what's known as the Northern Triangle. Between 2013 and 2014, the number of child migrants coming to the United States from these countries was 80,000, a "sudden increase [that] set off alarms in the United States and provoked the declaration of the crisis." The interviews, Luiselli explains, take place in a large room, where the children sit at a table with Crayons and paper for them to play with if they want. As the interview commences, the children's relatives sit on the other side of a large "balustrade" in the room, since they're not allowed to be with the children during the questioning.

Although Central American immigrants come to the United States through Mexico, it's a misconception to think that Mexicans are the only people leaving their country. In fact, the countries that make up the Northern Triangle produce many migrants, though this isn't necessarily apparent to everyone because of the way people in the United States talk about the crisis, often framing it as a problem confined to Mexico.

On her first day, Luiselli and her niece are mainly "providing backup" for The Door as it scrambles to address the "emergency" created by the governmental "decision to create a priority juvenile docket." Luiselli notes that undocumented migrants used to have a year to find legal representation before attending their immigration hearing. Since the Obama administration created the priority juvenile docket, though, they've had only 21 days to appear in court. "Being moved to the top of a list, in this context, was the least desirable thing," Luiselli writes, "at least from the point of view of the children involved." She adds that the priority juvenile docket has meant that "proceedings against" child migrants have "accelerated" by 94%. This, in turn, means that any organization seeking to represent undocumented minors has significantly less time to prepare a defense.

The Obama administration's decision to prioritize child deportation cases might seem at first glance like a reasonable way to address the sudden crisis, but Luiselli shows in this section that it is simply a way to deport large numbers of undocumented minors. Without sufficient time to find legal representation, these children stand no chance against the legal system. Because of this, it's clear that the government's solution to the crisis isn't actually a solution at all, as the United States simply sends children back to the homes they fled from, doing nothing to address the conditions that motivated them to leave in the first place.

Since the creation of the priority juvenile docket, a number of nonprofits have made enormous efforts to represent undocumented minors. Luiselli lists a handful of New York organizations, such as Make the Road New York, the Legal Aid Society, and Safe Passage, all of which have tried to "respond quickly and well to the docket." This is important, since the result of the docket is that minors are deported "in much greater numbers and at a much faster rate." Although the migrants "should be given an equal right to due process," they are frequently deported because they can't find lawyers to represent them in the short window of 21 days. "What child can find a lawyer in twenty-one days?" Luiselli writes. Given this situation, she believes the docket was a "cruel" measure, one that simply allowed the government to "avoid dealing" with the reality of the crisis.

In this moment, it becomes clear why the priority juvenile docket is so harmful to child migrants, as it makes it nearly impossible for them to undergo "due process" before getting deported. Luiselli's assertion that this policy is merely a way to "avoid dealing" with the crisis is an important point, as she will continue throughout the book to call attention to the ways in which none of the countries involved in the problem want to properly address its underlying factors.

The first interview Luiselli ever conducts with an undocumented minor is quite memorable, she writes. Over the course of the conversation, the boy takes a worn piece of paper from his pocket. Luiselli reads it and sees that it is a copy of a **police report**. The boy had filed a complaint in his home country of Honduras, telling the police that gang members had made a habit of waiting for him outside school every day. They would often follow him home, and even started "threatening to kill him." The report itself ends with a "vague promise to 'investigate' the situation." Later that night, Luiselli thinks about this piece of paper, realizing that it began as a "legal document" but has now become "a historical document that disclose[s] the failure of the document's original purpose" and, in turn, justifies the boy's reason for leaving home.

The police report that Luiselli refers to in this scene is the exact kind of evidence that she and her colleagues are looking for when they speak to undocumented minors. Since this boy has a "historical document" of his attempt to protect himself from gang violence in Honduras, it will be easier for lawyers to prove that it's unsafe for him to return. Because of this story, in other words, there's a good chance that he'll be able to avoid deportation.

Luiselli once again considers the media coverage of the "immigration crisis," illustrating that the predominant narrative fails to take the actual origins of the situation into account. Instead of interrogating why this problem has arisen, she says, Americans have fixated on the following question: "What do we do with all these children now?" Putting this in even simpler terms, Luiselli admits that the prevailing question is actually closer to the following: "How do we get rid of them or dissuade them from coming?"

Unlike Luiselli, who wants to hear the stories that undocumented minors have to tell, the majority of people in the United States are focused only on how the sudden influx of child migrants might affect their own lives. Consequently, they pay attention only to how they might "get rid of" them, refusing to consider the fact that deporting them means sending them back into dangerous circumstances. This is why it's so important to share the immigrant narrative, which might help people empathize with the life-threatening circumstances of their decision to leave home.

Luiselli turns her attention to the ninth, tenth, and eleventh questions on the intake questionnaire. These are, "How do you like where you're living now?", "Are you happy here?", and "Do you feel safe?" Luiselli points out that child migrants are frequently called "illegal" in the media, arguing that it's obvious that the United States sees them as "a hindrance." "How would anyone who is stigmatized as an 'illegal immigrant' feel 'safe' and 'happy'?" she wonders.

Once more, Luiselli suggests that the language people use to talk about the immigration crisis has a direct effect on child migrants. "Stigmatized" as "illegal immigrants," she argues, it's unlikely that these children would ever feel at ease in the United States. By spotlighting this dynamic, Luiselli urges readers to reconsider the discourse surrounding immigration.

As a way of examining the underlying causes of the refugee crisis, Luiselli considers the violent history of countries like El Salvador. The Salvadoran Civil War, she explains, took place between 1979 and 1992, when the country's militaristic government "relentlessly massacred left-wing opposition groups." During this time, the United States allied with the Salvadoran government, giving it money and "military resources." As a result, roughly one-fifth of the population fled, mostly to the United States, where approximately 300,000 refugees sought safety in Los Angeles. However, Los Angeles was full of gangs like Barrio 18 during that period (along with the Bloods, Crips, Nazi Low Riders, and Aryan Brotherhood). Accordingly, Salvadoran migrants—many of whom fought the government as guerilla soldiers in El Salvador—formed MS-13 to protect themselves. Then, in the 1990s, the United States mass deported "thousands" of gang members, which is how MS-13 spread to Central America.

In this section, Luiselli underlines the historical roots of the immigration crisis. Most importantly, she makes it clear that the United States has played a large role in creating the conditions that are now forcing Central Americans from their homes. After all, the United States helped El Salvador's government use violent measures to maintain its power and control, thereby creating a reason for Salvadorans to seek refuge. Then, when these migrants reached the United States, they encountered gang violence that made it necessary for them to create their own gang, which the government subsequently deported back to Central America, ultimately facilitating its spread. By outlining this information, Luiselli challenges the idea that the United States has nothing to do with the crisis. In turn, she makes it harder for people to argue that the government has the right to simply deport undocumented migrants and wash its hands of the entire ordeal, since the crisis has arisen in part because of the United States' various policies.

"The whole story is an absurd, circular nightmare," Luiselli writes, referring to the fact that the United States government is now trying to keep Central Americans out of the country after having played a part in MS-13's proliferation in the Northern Triangle. Luiselli upholds that nothing will be solved until "all the governments involved," including the United States, Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, "acknowledge their shared accountability in the roots and causes of the children's exodus."

As made evident by the priority juvenile docket and its decision to hear all child migrant cases within 21 days of a child's arrival, the United States is eager to send migrants away without further examination. This, Luiselli argues, is not a productive way to address the crisis. Instead, she believes that the United States and the other countries involved should work together, all of them accepting political responsibility for the problem and trying to fix its underlying causes.

The twelfth and thirteenth questions on the intake questionnaire ask child migrants to indicate whether or not they've been victims of a crime since entering the United States and whether or not that crime has been reported. Luiselli explains that victims of "certain crimes" are eligible for something known as the U visa, which provides "a path to lawful permanent residency for both the victims and their families." There is, however, one catch: the victim must help the government "in the prosecution of the crime in question."

Luiselli demonstrates in this section that the immigration system in the United States is especially interested in helping migrants when they can provide something in return. Rather than simply empathizing with children who have experienced trauma, the government is eager to use them for its own benefit.

Once more, Luiselli outlines the steps of the journey most child migrants make. However, not all stories are the same, especially if a child is from Mexico. This is because Border Patrol officers in the United States can make an on-the-spot decision to deport Mexican migrants. "They don't have to be given temporary shelter, are not allowed to attempt contact with parents or relatives in the U.S., and are certainly not granted a right to a formal hearing in court where they could defend themselves, legally, against a deportation order," Luiselli writes. All a Border Patrol officer needs to do to deport an undocumented Mexican child is decide that the child hasn't been the victim of trafficking, isn't "at risk of trafficking upon return," doesn't have a "credible fear" driving them from their home country, and "is able to make an independent decision about returning."

The fact that Border Patrol officers can deport Mexican children without going through the normal proceedings is significant, since the decision to do this is rather subjective. Indeed, an officer only needs to decide for him- or herself whether or not the child qualifies for this kind of immediate deportation, meaning that he or she has the final say in that child's future. This is troubling, since Border Control officers aren't part of the judicial branch of government, so their on-the-spot decisions might not be informed by objective interpretations of the law, but by their own opinions regarding the immigration crisis.

If a Border Patrol officer decides to deport an undocumented Mexican minor, the procedure is called "voluntary return." "And, as unbelievable as it may seem, voluntary return is the most common verdict," Luiselli writes, adding that an overwhelming majority of undocumented Mexican children are sent back to their homes because of this rule. The rule itself has arisen because of an amendment to George W. Bush's Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, signed in 2008. According to this amendment, "children from countries that share borders with the U.S. can be deported without formal immigration proceedings."

Tell Me How It Ends *was written in 2015. This is important to keep in mind, since the debate surrounding immigration policy in the United States has flared up even more intensely after the election of Donald Trump. Though it's certainly true that Trump's approach to immigration is quite stringent, it's clear that previous presidents have also done their share to make life for immigrants in the country difficult. Barack Obama's creation of the priority juvenile docket resulted in mass deportations, just as George W. Bush's policies under the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act heavily contributed to the government's legal ability to deprive thousands of undocumented minors of the right to due process. By acknowledging the history behind these decisions, Luiselli shows readers that anti-immigrant policies have been at work for a long time, and supported by both Democrats and Republicans.*

CHAPTER 3: HOME

"So, how does the story of those children end?" Luiselli's daughter asks her. This is a question she poses frequently, but Luiselli can't answer, because she doesn't know what happens after the interviews. Her daughter is especially interested in a story about two little girls who came to the United States from Guatemala after their mother had been living in the country for several years, saving up money for them to join her. After a long journey with a "coyote" and a stay in the icebox, the girls were reunited with their mother in New York. "That's it?" Luiselli's daughter asks. "That's how it ends?" Luiselli tells her that this is how the story ends, but she privately acknowledges that this isn't the case, since the real story has only just begun: the little girls now face a legal battle that will determine whether or not they'll be deported.

The interest Luiselli's daughter shows in hearing how immigrant narratives end is an example of the human desire for closure when listening to a story. This, Luiselli shows, isn't necessarily possible when it comes to immigrant stories. In fact, this narrative lack of conclusion reflects the uncertainty that often comes with the experience of migrating to the United States without knowing if the journey will be successful or worthwhile.

In immigration court, the only way for a lawyer to argue for "potential avenues of relief" is to first have his or her client plead guilty to coming to the United States "without lawful permission." In turn, this opens the client up to deportation, but it also gives the lawyer a chance to build a case for why the child should be allowed to stay. Luiselli explains that asylum and special immigrant juvenile (SIJ) status are the most "common forms of immigration relief." Both can even lead to permanent residency and, in some cases, citizenship. For the most part, children are often eligible to receive SIJ status if they've fled dangerous conditions. This means establishing that they "are impeded from reunification with at least one of their parents because of abuse, abandonment, or neglect." It also means showing that returning to their home country would put them in danger.

Child migrants are in an incredible position of vulnerability, one that's only exacerbated by the fact that they have to plead guilty to coming to the United States "without lawful permission" in order to seek potential forms of "relief." This, Luiselli shows, is perfectly representative of the difficult position these children are in, as they struggle to advocate for themselves in a system that is biased against them from the start.

One strange thing about the intake questionnaire is that children increase their chances of avoiding deportation if they answer the questions "correctly." Luiselli explains that a "correct" answer is one that "strengthens the child's case and provides a potential avenue of relief." This means that, in the "warped world of immigration," stories about traumatic experiences are considered "correct answers." If children don't have enough "battle wounds to show," it's unlikely that lawyers will agree to represent them, since their cases will be hard to win.

Once more, Luiselli emphasizes the importance of storytelling. In this context, she illustrates the profound effect certain stories can have on a child migrant's legal proceedings, since their ability to avoid deportation depends upon whether or not the child provides strong answers to the questions on the intake questionnaire.

Luiselli knows that the manner in which she records the children's answers might affect whether or not lawyers agree to represent them. However, she doesn't have much control over the interview process, though she can sometimes help children understand the questions more clearly and thus (in some cases) provide more in-depth answers. For instance, she has learned that she needs to "reconfigure the questions" for extremely young children, helping them approach the matter in language that makes sense to them. "I find myself not knowing where translation ends and interpretation starts," she writes.

One difficult part about Luiselli's job as an interviewer is that she can't always help the children help themselves, *since she can't interfere with the process too much. What she can do, though, is make sure that the children understand the questions, finetuning her language so that they can tell their stories in the best way possible. Once again, then, readers see the power of language to influence the lives and futures of child migrants.*

Over time, Luiselli and her niece become somewhat dispirited, though they don't stop working at The Door. On the way home one night, Luiselli's niece announces that she wants to study law in college. That way, she can make an impact in the United States' immigration system, since there aren't currently enough lawyers to represent child migrants. Luiselli notes that, because immigration cases take place in the civil courts, migrants "are not entitled to the free legal counsel that American law guarantees to persons accused of crimes." As a result, undocumented minors rely upon lawyers willing to represent them pro bono, and though this does happen, there is still a desperate need for available attorneys.

The child migrants who come to the United States end up relying on people like Luiselli's niece, who have committed themselves to helping undocumented immigrants. This is because they aren't "entitled to the free legal counsel" to which anyone else in the country is normally entitled. Consequently, lawyers willing to work for free are crucial to an undocumented minor's fight against deportation. These lawyers, Luiselli intimates, are the people who have stepped up to responsibly address the immigration crisis.

Luiselli returns to the story of her first interview. The migrant's name is Manu López, and he is a sixteen-year-old boy from Honduras living in Hempstead, Long Island with his aunt Alina. She asks where his mother and father live, and when he shrugs, she writes "?" on the questionnaire. He's terse and hesitant to speak, so she says, "I'm no policewoman, I'm no official anyone, I'm not even a lawyer. I'm also not a gringa, you know? In fact, I can't help you at all. But I can't hurt you, either." Hearing this, he asks where she's from, and when she tells him she's from Mexico City, he points out that they're "enemies." "Yeah," she replies, "but only in football, and I suck at football anyway so you've already scored five goals against me." This makes Manu smile, and Luiselli sees that he'll let her continue the interview.

One aspect of interviewing teenagers is that some of them are inevitably reluctant to talk. This, of course, would be the case for teenagers from any region of the world. Nonetheless, it's Luiselli's job to get as much information out of the undocumented minors as possible. To do this, she relies upon her interpersonal skills, leaving behind the formal language of the questionnaire in order to connect with people like Manu in a more casual manner. It is this approach that enables her to help Manu tell her the stories that will benefit his legal proceedings.

Manu doesn't like talking about his mother, but he tells Luiselli that she "came and went as she pleased" because she "liked the streets." He explains that he lived in Honduras with his grandmother, but that she died six months ago. He tells Luiselli that Alina has always sent money back to Honduras, where her two daughters (his cousins) also lived with Manu and their grandmother. Apparently, they too are now coming to the United States. Luiselli doesn't fully understand why this is the case until she reaches the questionnaire's final questions, which have to do with the influence of gangs on migrants. She notes that these questions often make child migrants—and especially older ones—"break down." This is because most of the teenagers she speaks to have "been touched in one way or another by the tentacles of the MS-13 and Barrio 18."

Once Manu opens up to Luiselli, it becomes clear that his story has to do with the history of gang violence in Central America. Because this is the case, it's worth recalling Luiselli's previous explanation of how gangs like MS-13 took hold of the Northern Triangle. Having originated in Los Angeles so that Salvadoran migrants could protect themselves from other gangs, MS-13 migrated to Central America because the United States deported large numbers of the gang's members. Now the United States government is experiencing the repercussions of that decision, as minors like Manu are forced to leave their homes and come to the United States to escape violence.

"Did you ever have trouble with gangs or crime in your home country?" Luiselli asks Manu, reciting question 34. In response, he tells her a "fragmented" story, explaining that members of Barrio 18 waited for him and his friend outside their school one day. When they saw the gang members, they knew there were too many of them to fight, so they tried to leave, eventually breaking into a run. After hearing a gunshot, Manu turned around and saw that the gang had shot and killed his friend. Unable to do anything else, he kept running, narrowly escaping by slipping into a storefront. Hearing this story, Luiselli asks questions 35 and 36: "Any problems with the government in your home country? If so, what happened?" "My government?" Manu replies. "Write this down in your notebook: they don't do shit for anybody like me, that's the problem."

In this moment, Manu confirms that he migrated to the United States to avoid gang violence. This is an important point in the development of his defense against deportation, since it suggests that his home in Honduras is indeed too dangerous for him to return to. Furthermore, it's evident that the Honduran government has done nothing to help him, providing yet another reason why sending him back would pose a threat to his life.

Having told Luiselli that the Honduran government doesn't help people protect themselves against gang violence, Manu takes out **the police report** he saved after filing a complaint about gang members harassing him. "He filed it months before his friend was killed, but the police never did anything," Luiselli writes. The night his best friend was killed, he called Alina and told her what happened. Horrified, she made immediate arrangements for him to come to the United States, instructing him not to leave the house until the "coyote" was ready to take him away. "He didn't attend his friend's funeral," Luiselli adds.

Alina's decision to bring Manu to the United States is the direct result of his close encounter with members of Barrio 18. Because of this, it's quite obvious that Manu migrated to the United States for safety reasons, thereby justifying Luiselli's belief that migrants like him are more like refugees than immigrants.

Manu tells Luiselli that Alina paid a "coyote" $4,000 to bring him to the United States. Now, Alina has paid an extra $6,000 so that her daughters can also make the journey. This is because the gang that killed his friend has started "harassing" his cousins in his absence. Because of this, Alina has decided to pay for them to come to the United States, figuring that "the dangers of the journey" are more tolerable than letting them remain in Honduras.

Once again, Luiselli illustrates the great personal cost of migration. Although Alina has been working in the United States for years in order to save money, she now has to pay exorbitant sums just to ensure the safety of her loved ones. In keeping with this, Luiselli shows readers that migrants like Manu and his cousins aren't coming to the United States because they want to chase the "American Dream," but because they've exhausted all other options.

Luiselli explains that Enrique Peña Nieto, the president of Mexico from 2012 to 2018, oversaw a "new anti-immigration plan" that has tried to "halt the immigration of Central Americans through Mexico." This has made it harder for migrants to travel north using the normal routes, so they're forced to go by sea, which Luiselli fears is even more dangerous. She also notes that many of her fellow Mexicans criticize the United States' policies, though Mexico itself has begun mass deportations of Central Americans, many of whom should be eligible for asylum. What's more, the country has strengthened its control on its own southern border. This is something the United States has been "generously financing." According to Luiselli, this accords with "the old tradition of Latin America-U.S. governmental relations," in which Mexico gets paid to "do the dirty work.."

Luiselli's description of Mexico's immigration policy helps readers see that the United States isn't the only nation with strict deportation practices. In effect, Mexico is trying to block migrants on its southern-border. It makes sense, then, that the United States would help fund this effort, since making it harder to travel through Mexico means it will be more difficult for migrants to reach the United States. However, Luiselli suggests that migrants will still find ways to come north, ultimately resorting to even more dangerous routes. These people are fleeing intense violence and miserable conditions, so desperate migrants will continue to do what they can to seek safety, in spite of harsh deportation practices. The United States' willingness to let Mexico "do the dirty work" is also indicative of its eagerness to shirk political responsibility for the crisis.

Manu and Luiselli meet again six months after their initial interview. This time, they're in a fancy building with a view of Staten Island. Because Manu's copy of **the police report** he filed counts as "material evidence," a high-powered team of lawyers has agreed to take his case. With such strong evidence, Luiselli explains, "it would be impossible for them to lose." In this next stage of Manu's legal battle, his new lawyers have asked Luiselli to continue acting as an interpreter—an offer she gladly accepts. When she sees him, she doesn't hide her excitement, telling him that she's also working at a university in Hempstead, Long Island, where he lives.

Unlike the majority of undocumented minors she interviews, Luiselli actually has the opportunity to learn about what will happen to Manu. As his personal translator and interpreter, she will find out how his story ends, receiving the kind of narrative closure both she and her daughter yearn for but rarely get to enjoy when it comes to the stories surrounding the immigration crisis.

As the meeting begins, Manu's lawyers ask him if he's still in school, and he tells them that he is. However, he says he wants to drop out. In response, they remind him that he must be enrolled in school in order to be eligible for "any type of formal relief." Manu then reveals that Hempstead High School is "a hub for MS-13 and Barrio 18." Upon hearing this, Luiselli goes "cold," but Manu continues in a calm manner, explaining that he's frightened of Barrio 18 but also doesn't want to join MS-13. "Suddenly," Luiselli writes, "we all suspect Manu and want to ask question thirty-seven: 'Have you ever been a member of a gang? Any tattoos?' No, he has no tattoos. And no, he's never been part of a gang."

The unfortunate "circular nightmare" of gang violence has brought itself to bear on Manu. Although he left Honduras specifically to get away from Barrio 18 and MS-13, he now finds himself facing them once again. He is also at an extra disadvantage because he's forced to stay in school in order to qualify for any kind of permanent residency. This means that he has to endure the gangs just to ensure that he won't be sent back to Honduras, where he would also *have to endure the gangs. With this, Luiselli stresses the fact that the bureaucratic nature of the United States' immigration system often fails to recognize the extremely difficult position many migrants find themselves in.*

Manu isn't part of a gang, but this is precisely why he has "good reasons to be afraid." Apparently, people from Barrio 18 recently beat him up—he has two missing front teeth to prove it. "After the incident with Barrio 18, his aunt Alina worried he would end up in trouble because MS-13 boys saved him from losing the rest of his teeth, and now he owes them something," Luiselli writes. Despite this, Manu says, he isn't going to give in. He also vows to protect his cousins, now that they've come to the United States. When Luiselli asks what he means by the fact that he has to "look out for them," he says, "Just look out for them, 'cause Hempstead is a shithole full of pandilleros, just like Tegucigalpa."

Again, it's evident that Manu is facing the same problems from which he originally fled. In the same way that MS-13 and Barrio 18 "pandilleros" (gang members) terrorized him in Honduras, they're now terrorizing him in Hempstead, which makes him feel as if the two places are essentially the same. This similarity aligns with the fact that the gang problems plaguing Central America originated in the United States, proving once again that the nation is just as implicated in the entire crisis as its southern neighbors.

Luiselli once again considers the way people talk about immigration in the United States, suggesting that the prevailing discourse surrounding the topic fails to take into account the underlying causes of the crisis. Instead, people fixate on why migrant children aren't simply "caught" as soon as they cross the border and then "sent back quickly." "No one suggests that the causes are deeply embedded in our shared hemispheric history and are therefore not some distant problem in a foreign country that no one can locate on a map," Luiselli writes, adding that this is a "transnational problem that includes the United States." To that end, she argues that the United States should involve itself not as a "distant observer or passive victim," but as an "active historical participant in the circumstances that generated that problem."

In this moment, Luiselli makes one of her only proposals in the entire book—namely, that the United States should acknowledge its own culpability regarding the immigration crisis. This, she believes, would help all of the countries involved begin to see the problem as "transnational" and "hemispheric," which would then help them address the "circumstances that generated" the situation in the first place.

The crisis surrounding immigration, Luiselli argues, isn't confined to just one region. This, she asserts, is why it's important for people to start talking about the problem as a "hemispheric war." Doing this, she says, would help all of the governments involved recognize the extent to which this is a mutual problem, allowing them to "acknowledge the connection between such phenomena as the drug wars, gangs in Central America and the United States, the consumption of drugs, and the massive migration of children from the Northern Triangle to the United States through Mexico." At the very least, calling this situation a "hemispheric war" would encourage people to "rethink the very language surrounding the problem and, in doing so, imagine potential directions for combined policies."

As she urges Mexico, the United States, and countries in the Northern Triangle to change the way they talk about the immigration crisis, Luiselli effectively uplifts the importance of language once again, emphasizing the idea that altering a discourse can have profound effects on otherwise unapproachable problems. Simply changing the language used to describe the issue might help the involved countries understand how they could work together to form "combined policies" that will address the crisis in a smarter, more effective manner.

Several months after meeting with Manu and his new lawyers, Luiselli speaks on the phone with Alina. Alina explains that she spent years working in the United States so that she could eventually bring Manu and her daughters to the country. When she heard what had happened between Manu and the gang members pursing him, though, she gave up trying to save money and decided to put herself into debt in order to bring him to the States. Interlaced with this conversation, Luiselli lists questions 38, 39, and 40 from the intake questionnaire: "What do you think will happen if you go back home?"; "Are you scared to return?"; "Who would take care of you if you were to return to your home country?"

Yet again, Luiselli helps readers understand the significant cost that comes along with migration. Although Alina has spent years saving money, she suddenly has to put herself into debt simply to ensure the safety of her loved ones. Given this sacrifice, it's clear that bringing Manu and his cousins to the United States was something she did out of a feeling of absolutely necessity. After all, it's obvious what would happen if they went "back home": the gangs they tried to escape would terrorize them once more.

Alina tells Luiselli that she had to pay $7,500 to get her eldest daughter out of an adult detention center after she crossed the southern border, since she's 19. Hearing this, Luiselli guesses that this money came from Alina's new husband (whom she married after moving to the United States). She notes that Alina's husband has most likely depleted his "entire life savings" in order to ensure the safety of Manu and Alina's daughters.

Once more, the cost of migration comes to the forefront of Tell Me How It Ends. *In order to help her daughter get out of harm's way, Alina has to pay exorbitant sums of money, ultimately draining whatever savings she and her husband have accrued since migrating to the United States in the first place.*

CHAPTER 4: COMMUNITY

Luiselli has started teaching a Spanish conversation class at Hofstra University, which is in Hempstead, Long Island. Since the main objective of the course is simply to give students a chance to speak Spanish, Luiselli decides to talk about the immigration crisis. Her students respond very well to this, and after a few classes, everyone decides that the class should be a "migration think tank." In keeping with this, Luiselli invites various experts to visit the course, and the students participate in engaged discussions about undocumented minors.

Luiselli again shows her commitment to the importance of discussing the immigrant narrative. This time, she uses the resources she has to spread awareness about the immigration crisis, urging her students to consider the nuances of the situation. This, in turn, is a manifestation of her belief that the topic is worth talking about even if answers to the problem aren't immediately forthcoming.

There are laws in the United States dictating that all children are entitled to public education, but many school districts have created "obstacles" for child migrants, implementing rules that make it hard for them to access free education. Luiselli explains that Nassau County—where Hempstead is located—is one of the places where school districts have actively "denied entrance to many children based on their lack of appropriate immigration papers." This, Luiselli notes, is an "illegal practice," but schools nation-wide have continued to defy the law in this regard. As a result, it has been very hard for Manu to switch schools to avoid MS-13 and Barrio 18. After having gained entrance to a school in Long Beach, he was subsequently informed that he didn't speak English well enough to attend. Similarly, other high schools claimed he didn't meet their requirements because of his immigration status.

It again becomes apparent that Manu is in an extraordinarily difficult situation. He's required to go to school in order to gain immigration relief, but doing so forces him to face the same dangers he faced at home. On top of this, he can't even switch schools to avoid gangs because many school districts are blatantly breaking the law by keeping undocumented minors from enrolling. These circumstances put Manu in a dangerous position, forcing him to fend for himself against gangs like MS-13 and Barrio 18. Given these conditions, it's rather unsurprising that many undocumented migrants end up joining gangs, since there are few other options that will ensure their personal safety.

One day, Luiselli's students tell her they want to form a nonprofit organization to address the issues they've been discussing in class. Luiselli listens carefully, thinking that their idea is "simple and brilliant." "The crisis will deepen and spread," the students observe, saying that newly-arrived immigrant children will continue to suffer unless they can "find a way to become quickly and fully integrated." Otherwise, they will—like Manu—find themselves the target of gangs like MS-13 and Barrio 18, just like they would in their home countries. Since the schools in Nassau County are so "terribly deficient when it comes to public education and services," the students argue, private institutions like Hofstra should step in, using their resources to help the immigrant community.

Luiselli's students are enthusiastic when it comes to addressing the immigration crisis. Using the resources available to them as students at a well-funded private university, they recognize the value of community engagement, understanding that strong support networks have the power to keep undocumented migrants from succumbing to pressure from gangs. By providing people like Manu with an alternative to gang life, they foster a sense of community support that will help migrants "integrate" into society and thus avoid the dangers they tried to escape by migrating in the first place.


Luiselli's students decide that their organization should provide "intensive English classes, college prep sessions, team sports, a radio program, and a civil rights and duties discussion group." The group will be called the Teenage Immigrant Integration Association, or TIIA. Luiselli loves the idea, realizing that "it only takes a group of ten motivated students to begin making a small difference." And though the reach of groups like TIIA might be "small," they are one of the only things that make Luiselli hopeful about the future of the immigration crisis.

Throughout Tell Me How It Ends, *Luiselli doesn't propose many solutions to the immigration crisis—because there aren't many straightforward ways to address the situation. However, she has a rare moment of optimism here, when she points out that even small groups of committed activists can make a "difference." This, she implies, is what communities need to do. By creating support networks and helping migrants integrate, people like Luiselli's students can have a significant impact on an otherwise hopeless dilemma.*

Luiselli acknowledges that some things "can only be understood retrospectively." The nuances of the immigration crisis, she believes, are among these things. "While the story continues," she writes, "the only thing to do is tell it over and over again as it develops, bifurcates, knots around itself. And it must be told, because before anything can be understood, it has to be narrated many times, in many different words, and from many different angles, by many different minds."

Again, Luiselli draws attention to the importance of storytelling. Although people might not fully understand the immigration crisis, she believes it's still worth talking about. This will help everyone begin to grasp the subtleties of the problem. Through the use of language and narrative, then, society can begin to work toward a solution.

When Luiselli begins writing *Tell Me How It Ends* in 2015, her green card has still not come. Because her temporary work permit eventually expires, she's forced to quit her job at Hofstra right before the end of the semester. She asks lawyers if she can continue as a "volunteer" instructor, but they tell her she can't, since the country's immigration laws are quite strict. With nothing to do, then, she begins writing about the immigration crisis, feeling as if she'll never be able to write about anything else until she puts this story on paper.

It makes sense that Luiselli decides to write about the immigration crisis, considering her belief in the importance of storytelling. Committing herself to the importance of language, she takes it upon herself to clarify and spread the immigrant narrative. In this way, she emphasizes the idea that such stories "must be told" before "anything can be understood."

"Why did you come to the United States?" Luiselli asks herself, examining the question once again. "Perhaps no one knows the real answer." All she knows is that people who stay in the United States long enough are eventually willing to "give everything" to "stay and play a part in the great theater of belonging." This is because staying in the United States is, for an immigrant, "an end in itself." Staying, Luiselli writes, means relearning how to live one's life, "no matter the cost." "Why did you come here?" she once asked a little girl. "Because I wanted to arrive," the girl replied.

It's worth noting Luiselli's line equating migrating to the United States with "giv[ing] everything" to become part of the country's "great theater of belonging." This highlights the extent to which migrants make personal sacrifices just to come to the United States and live ordinary lives. It also stresses the importance of groups like TIIA, which help people build communities and, thus, assimilate into the country's "theater of belonging."

CODA: (EIGHT BRIEF POSTSCRIPTA)

Luiselli writes that it's now 2017. She has received her green card, and Donald Trump is president. She feels as if the world is "upside fucking down," though she also thinks that what happened could have been predicted. "I am a novelist," she writes, "which means my mind is trained to read the world as part of a narrative plot, where some events foreshadow others." For this reason, she feels as if she failed to properly read the political landscape that eventually led to Donald Trump's presidency. However, she has moments of hope, like when TIIA organizes events to advocate for immigrants. The group's first "public action" was on the day of the first presidential debate in 2016, which took place at Hofstra. TIIA members protested outside wearing t-shirts Luiselli ordered that said "Refugees Welcome Here." Shortly thereafter, TIIA organized a soccer game, which Manu attended, much to Luiselli's delight.

In this "coda," Luiselli admits that she feels as if she failed to "read the world" properly. This sentiment is yet another demonstration of her belief in the importance of narrative, as she sees reality as related to various "plot[s]," all of which can be studied and—if analyzed correctly—predicted. Despite her close attention to the political landscape, she failed to foresee the rise of Donald Trump, the country's most anti-immigrant president in recent years. Distraught at this oversight, the only solace she finds is in her students' efforts to keep advocating for immigrants and refugees, even when the people in charge of the country are advancing opposing ideas.

Luiselli writes that Manu has received special immigrant juvenile status. He has also become a member of a church community "where he feels welcome," and he has relationships with mentors at an anti-gang organization in Long Island called S.T.R.O.N.G. Furthermore, he's strengthening his English skills with TIIA and attending the occasional pickup soccer game that they organize. Simply put, he's doing well.

The fact that Manu has been able to resist pressure from MS-13 and Barrio 18 is a testament to the various support networks that have stepped up to help him. Becoming part of a community, it seems, has helped him integrate into American society, thereby enabling him to avoid gang life. In turn, it becomes clear that community engagement is vital to an undocumented minor's ability to establish a safe and stable life in the United States.

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