



# Esperanza Rising

## Pre-Reading Activity

Pam Muñoz Ryan's novel *Esperanza Rising* is a historical fiction novel set in Mexico and California in the 1930s. The four topics below play a major role in the story's setting. Before reading the book, read the background information provided below about each topic, and then consider the discussion prompts that follow.

### The Mexican Revolution and the Effect of Spanish Colonial Rule

**Background:** Starting in the 1500s, Spanish explorers conquered Mexico, a land that had been home to many great cultures over the centuries, including the Maya and the Aztecs. Mexico fought and gained its independence from Spain in 1821. But, a century later, wealthy descendants of Spanish colonists still owned most of the land, and most of the workers in the field were poorer descendants of indigenous peoples. The growing anger against large landowners played a part in the Mexican Revolution, which lasted from about 1910 to 1920.



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#### DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

- Esperanza is the daughter of a wealthy landowner and a descendant of Spanish colonists. How do you think this history affects her and her family?
- How do you think this history affects the people who work for her family?

### The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl in the United States



Dust storm approaching Stratford, Texas.  
NOAA George E. Marsh Album, Historic  
C&GS Collection

**Background:** In the 1930s, two major events caused many people in the United States to lose their jobs, homes, and access to basic necessities: the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. The Great Depression began when the stock market crashed in 1929, causing economic troubles across the country and the world. Around the same time, a catastrophic drought from 1930 to 1936 in the Great Plains dried up the soil and caused farmers to lose their land. This time period became known as the Dust Bowl due to the enormous dust storms caused by wind erosion of dried-out topsoil. Because of both the Great Depression and the drought, many people ended up moving west to California to compete for jobs on large farms.

#### DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

- What do you already know about the Great Depression or the Dust Bowl?
- How do you think these events affected people in the western United States?
- What challenges do you think families faced during this time?



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Keep going! Read the background information about each topic, and then consider the discussion prompts that follow.

### Farmworkers and America's Food Production

**Background:** Due to its climate and fertile soil, the state of California has historically produced a large amount of America's food, including vegetables, fruits, and nuts. The large farms that grow these crops require lots of workers to plant, harvest, and prepare the crops for shipment across the country. Many of the workers are migrants, meaning people who move from one area to another to find jobs. These jobs are often temporary or seasonal. Farmworkers, both seasonal and permanent, play an important role in the food production process, but they have historically faced poor working conditions.



Field workers harvest onions in the Imperial Valley, El Centro, California. Carol M. Highsmith, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

#### DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

- Do some research: What kind of conditions do farmworkers face today? What kind of conditions did they face in the 1930s?
- Why do you think farmworkers have historically faced poor working conditions?
- What might it be like to live and work on a farm with other migrant and seasonal workers?

### Immigration in the United States and Mexico



Mexicans entering the United States. United States immigration station, El Paso, Texas. June 1938, Dorothea Lange, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

**Background:** Immigration is the process of moving into a new country with plans to live there permanently. Many countries have rules about who can immigrate and for what reasons, such as work or education. Most countries require some kind of paperwork to prove a person's identity and their purpose for migrating. During the Great Depression, many Mexican immigrants were sent back to Mexico by the U.S. government in order to decrease competition for the few available jobs. However, many American citizens of Mexican descent were also sent to Mexico during this period, even though many of them had never lived in Mexico.

#### DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

- What are some reasons people might leave their home country or state and go somewhere else?
- What challenges might migrants face?
- How might immigration affect the people already living in an area?