

Literature Circle Guide to  
ESPERANZA RISING by Pam Muñoz Ryan

**Book Summary**

Esperanza believed her life would be wonderful forever. She would always live on her family's ranch in Mexico. She would always have fancy dresses and a beautiful home filled with servants. Papa and Abuelita would always be with her.

But a sudden tragedy shatters her world and Esperanza and Mama flee to California, where they settle in a camp for Mexican farm workers. Esperanza isn't ready for the hard labor, financial struggles brought on by the Great Depression, and lack of acceptance she now faces. When Mama gets sick, and a strike for better working conditions threatens to uproot their new life, Esperanza must find a way to rise above her difficult circumstances—because Mama's life and her own depend on it.

**Author Information**

Pam Muñoz Ryan, has written over 25 books for young people including the novel, *Esperanza Rising*, winner of the Pura Belpre Medal, the Jane Addams Peace Award, an ALA Top Ten Best Book for Young Adults, and the Americas Award Honor Book. Her novel, *Riding Freedom* has garnered many awards including the national Willa Cather Award, and the California Young Reader Medal. Her picture books for the very young and picture books for older readers, include the award-winning *Amelia and Eleanor Go for a Ride* and *When Marian Sang*, the recipient of the ALA Sibert Honor and NCTE's Orbis Pictus Award. She received her Bachelor's and Master's Degrees at San Diego State University. She now lives in north San Diego County with her husband and four children.

Pam Muñoz Ryan was born and raised in California's San Joaquin Valley. She is the oldest of three sisters and the oldest of twenty-three cousins on her mother's side. She grew up with many of her aunts and uncles and grandparents nearby and considers herself truly American because her cultural background is an ethnic smorgasbord. She is Spanish, Mexican, Basque, Italian, and Oklahoman. During many long, hot valley summers, she spent most of her time riding her bike to the library. It became her favorite hang out because her family didn't have a swimming pool and the library was air-conditioned! That's how she got hooked on reading and books. After college, she knew that she wanted to work in a profession that had something to do with books, and she thought that would be teaching. She became a teacher, an administrator and then, at the encouragement of a friend who thought she could write, began her first book. That's when she finally knew what she really wanted to do.

**Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions**

- \* 1. How is Esperanza planning to spend her birthday? What does she anticipate happening? What actually happens?

Esperanza anticipates a *fiesta* on her birthday, beginning with a serenade from her father and the men on the ranch, followed by many beautiful gifts (pp. 9-10).

Instead, her father does not return from the field and later his body is found (p. 22) and she learns he has been killed by bandits (p. 24).

- \* 2. Who is Tío Luis? What does he want from Esperanza's mother? Does Esperanza like him? Why?

Tío Luis is one of Papa's stepbrothers (Tío Marco is the other) and the local bank president. After Papa's death, he wants to marry Mama so that he not only inherits the land, but also influence and power so that he can run for governor (pp. 31-33). Esperanza does not like Tío Luis, she thinks he is too "serious and gloomy," and that he and Tío Marco "looked like two underfed billy goats," (p. 19). Her father had said Tío Luis loves "money and power more than people," and he is considered a "devious, dangerous man," (p. 33). He threatens to make life impossible for Mama if she will not marry him, and to send Esperanza away to boarding school if she does.

- \* 3. Why do Esperanza and Mama have to leave El Rancho de las Rosas? Why do they have to leave in secret?

Tío Luis burns the ranch to the ground (pp. 39-42) and threatens to do the same to the servants' homes if Mama will not marry him. She agrees, but instead makes plans to escape to America (pp. 46-50). They must depart in secret because Tío Luis' anger at the humiliation would be so great that he would do anything to find them and take revenge.

- \* 4. What kind of people does Esperanza meet on the train? How does she feel about them and treat them? What does her mother think of her behavior?

Esperanza meets peasants and beggars on the train, thinking "they do not look very trustworthy," (p. 67) although they are in fact all very kind. She does not feel she belongs with them. When a peasant girl tries to touch her doll, she jerks it away and puts it back in her valise, causing her mother to apologize for her bad manners (p. 69) and selfishness.

5. Describe Miguel and Esperanza's friendship. What do they have in common? What are their differences?

Miguel and Esperanza both grew up on El Rancho de las Rosas, and would play together often when they were little. Both loved and respected Papa, and Papa treated Miguel almost like a son. Esperanza had wanted to marry Miguel when she was a young girl, but as she became older she felt the differences in their stations—she as the ranch owner's daughter, and he as the housekeeper's son—and that "between them ran a deep river," (pp. 17-18). Despite this they have great fondness for one another, even though they rarely speak.

When they move to California and the work camp, Miguel is more practical about what needs to be done because he has worked all his life. It takes Esperanza time to learn this. By the end of the book, the river between them has been removed; they have much in common (and it does seem likely they may one day marry).

- \* 6. List some of the challenges that Esperanza encounters when she comes to the farm workers' camp. Why were they so difficult for her?

**The cabin they live in reminds Esperanza of a horse's stable (p. 102); she does not know how to wash diapers or clothes (pp. 114-115); how to use a broom (pp. 140-142); or how to cook or feed the babies (pp. 140-142). She thinks that Hortensia, her former servant, will still bathe her (pp. 126-127). She was pampered in her previous life in Mexico and never had to learn to take care of these things for herself. Hortensia says on page 126, "We are accustomed to doing things a certain way, aren't we?"**

7. Who are you more like—Esperanza when she first arrives at the farm camp or Isabel? Why?

**Answers will vary—some students may identify with Esperanza's difficulties adjusting to life in the camp, while others might find Isabel's optimism appealing. Conversely, Esperanza might be seen as spoiled in her initial complaints and selfishness, and Isabel as naïve - as when she dreams of being picked as Queen of the May, although no Mexican girl is ever chosen.**

8. On page 133 Esperanza asks why Marta is so angry and Josephina offers her one explanation. Do you agree with her answer? Why? What other possible reasons are there for Marta's anger?

**Josephina explains that Marta and her family are angry about the conditions in which they are forced to live as migrant workers. There is room here to discuss what feelings and actions are reasonable and unreasonable when situations are unfair. Will fighting unjust situations make a difference, or do some people just like to complain?**

- \* 9. How does working on finishing Abuelita's blanket sustain Esperanza when her mother is sick? What does it remind her of? What do you think it symbolizes?

**Working on the blanket reminds Esperanza of Abuelita's love and good wishes (p. 159), and of her promise to Abuelita to take care of Mama (p. 160). The valleys and mountains in the blanket can be seen to symbolize the ups and downs in Esperanza's journey through life. It also serves as a reminder to "not be afraid to start over," as Abuelita tells Esperanza when she is learning to crochet (p. 15) and Isabel at the end of the book (p. 253). Esperanza must start over in America, just as Abuelita did when she came to Mexico from Spain as a girl.**

10. Reread the description on pages 176-178 of Esperanza's hospital visit to her mother. Is it a hopeful visit or an upsetting one? Support your idea with details from the text.

**The visit seems hopeful, although Esperanza's mother doesn't wake up. The Christmas gifts other visitors are bringing to the hospital are cheerful, and though Esperanza wishes she could have brought more than the small stone she'd found in the fields it is still an expression of love. She tells her sleeping mother that Miguel thinks Papa's roses show signs of growth, and hopes that the blanket will bring color to her cheeks. In parting Esperanza says, "Don't worry. I will take care of everything. I will be *la patrona* of the family now." Esperanza is gaining confidence**

and strength, and hopes her mother will improve, as well.

11. Imagine you were taken out of your life right now and put in a work camp like Esperanza's. How would you react? What would be hard for you? What would be easy?

**Answers will vary. Life at the work camp is difficult and unfair, especially compared to Esperanza's previous position of wealth. While students may feel sweeping the platform or taking care of the babies are things they could handle, there would be many other things about their present life they take for granted which would be missed. There is room for discussion as to whether they would immediately take the side of Marta and the strikers, or if they would be more concerned with continuing to work in the fields so they could take care of their families' immediate needs.**

12. Imagine you could write a letter to Esperanza. What would you want to say to her? What would you want to ask her?

**Answers will vary. Students may want to tell Esperanza that everything will turn out all right in the end, or that she should understand more quickly that the work camp will very different from Rancho de las Rosas, and that she shouldn't expect to be taken care of in the same way.**

13. On page 208 it says, "Something seemed very wrong about sending people away from their own "free country" because they had spoken their minds." Do you agree? Why?

**It is likely that students will be especially surprised that even citizens born in the United States who had never even been to Mexico would be deported. There is much room for discussion as to what rights citizens should have, or expect. Some may also believe that there are situations where the government may think deportation is a good idea, although the book's point of view would not support this.**

\* 14. Explain the title of the book. How does it relate to the story? Use details from the story to support your point of view.

***Esperanza* is Spanish for "hope." There is the literal meaning of "hope rising" which Esperanza feels when her life improves as she learns to take care of herself and others, as her mother's health improves, and when Abuelita joins them in California.**

**Abuelita has told Esperanza the story of the phoenix (pp. 49-50), the mythical bird which rises from the ashes. After Papa's death and the fire at Rancho de las Rosas, Esperanza, her family, and their servants also rise from these disasters as they make a new life for themselves. So, too, do the roses Miguel and Alfonso rescue from the burned ground at the ranch and plant at the work camp (pp. 122-124).**

**Esperanza also has a vision of "floating and drifting upward" (p. 92), which at first frightens her because she feels herself losing control and falling. She has not yet learned confidence in herself. But at the end of the book on pages 249-250, she has the vision again, but this time she is unafraid and "soared with the anticipation of dreams she never knew she could have, of learning English, of supporting her family, of someday buying a tiny house." She is no longer afraid of starting over.**