



The Asylum Seekers: A Chronicle of Life, Death, and Community at the Border

by Cristina Rathbone

About the Book

The Asylum Seekers offers a rare narrative account of the horror of the US-Mexico border. Borders run through author Cristina Rathbone too, whose mother was a Cuban refugee. So in 2019 she travels to Juarez, unsure what to do but determined to learn.

Weaving intimate portraits of individuals with broader stories about the community, reporting from the border as a whole, and reflections on the meaning of faith in a place of suffering, Rathbone tells the story of Mexican asylum seekers living in a makeshift tent camp at the foot of a bridge to the US. Life in the camp is both hectic and harrowing. Families arrive. Families leave. Families get through to the US. Families are returned from the US. Women weep, children squabble, and grown men sob over photographs of their murdered sons' mutilated bodies.

Here too, however, are beauty, and empathy, and hope. Over time, a leadership team emerges. The community begins to convene daily meetings, establish systems of distribution for donations, and start classes for the kids. Serving as an unofficial chaplain, Rathbone is there through it all: listening, receiving, assisting, and most of all learning about what authentic faith looks like under conditions such as these.

Written in the tradition of *My Fourth Time, We Drowned* and *Rivermouth*, *The Asylum Seekers* renders in startling, intimate detail the day-to-day lives of people who are determined to enter the US legally and who often suffer for it. The result is a fierce, poignant inquiry into the dignity of those who seek asylum--and into what we owe each other.

Suggested Opening Prayer

Strangers in a Foreign Land

Lord God, help us to remember those who tonight will go to sleep unfed and unwelcome, strangers in foreign lands, people who have fled for their lives and are far from their homes. We lift up to you those who are escaping persecution and conflict, having fled death, torture or ruthless exploitation. So many carry wounds, mental and physical. So many have suffered greatly. Lord Jesus, give us more of your compassion for their plight, soften our hearts to their situation, and help us follow your lead in seeking justice and mercy on their behalf. We pray for an end to the wars, poverty and human rights abuses that drive desperate people to leave their homes in the first place. We give thanks for people working in troubled places and ask for more of your blessing so we can bring life, dignity and hope to those that remain. We thank you that you are Lord of all the earth and all its people are loved by you. We pray these things in the name of your Son who was himself born into the troubled life of a refugee.

- Author Unknown

Before You Start

How much do you know about the geography and history of the U.S./Mexico borderlands? It might help your group's discussion to look together at:

- A map of the borderlands that shows states and cities on BOTH sides of the border
- An overview of the history of immigration to the U.S., especially a timeline of U.S. government decisions about seeking asylum on the U.S./Mexico border.
 - PBS News Hour 10-min video on history of immigration to the U.S., created in 2025

Discussion Questions

These are some suggested questions to get your discussion started.

- Who is Cristina Rathbone? When, where, and how did she end up serving people on the U.S./Mexico border?
- The introduction to the book provides several clues about Cristina's intentions or goals in spending time with Mexican asylum seekers in Ciudad Juarez. How would you summarize her intentions at the outset? What did she see as the advantage of going to the border without a clear plan or a defined ministry?

- Cristina calls her book “a collection of stories.” These include stories about:
 - the people she encountered (mostly within the community she worked with, but also some people who came to help would-be asylum seekers)
 - her own learning during this time
 - God

Which of these stories most resonated with you or opened your eyes to something new?

What was most meaningful, compelling, or impactful to you in specific stories?

- In chapter 2, Cristina explains why the people she met were fleeing their homes and seeking to request asylum in the U.S. What stands out to you about their reasons for fleeing and wanting to request asylum?
- As more Mexican citizens joined the community on the street near the bridge, what practical challenges appeared? How did they and others respond to these challenges?
- In chapter 7, Cristina writes about “accompaniment” and the importance of being together with people in community, as distinct from “goal-oriented” projects or ministries. What strikes you and/or what questions do you have about this approach to working with people in difficult circumstances? During her time on the border, what does Cristina learn about how to make “being with” people more important than “doing things for” people?
- As Cristina listens to the stories that people share with her – stories of violence, fear, flight, love, loss, hope, trust in God – what does she learn from them? What do you learn from her retelling of these stories?
- What do you notice about Cristina’s interactions with and descriptions of children who live on the street? How do the activities she has with groups of children and her interactions with individual children (and their families) develop and change over time?
- What parallels does Cristina draw between what happens within the street community in Juarez and what happens within the walls of a church? (Think about the meaning of words such as “liturgy, communion, sacrament,” and notice how Cristina uses these words.) Where and how is God present in this community and its specific, embodied experiences and relationships?

- What have you learned about the process of seeking asylum – as it is supposed to play out, and given what was happening at the U.S./Mexico border during the time Cristina was there?(You may want to review chapters 8, 11-13, 17, 25, and 29, as you think about the gaps between law and practice.)
- How did this account of the actual functioning of “the system” make you feel – especially if you are a US citizen, voter, and witness?
- What further questions about asylum seeking do you have?
- Think about chapter 31, where Cristina describes the posada celebrated with the community. Here, she asks: How can Christians support immigration policies that turn away people just the same way the Holy Family was turned away ? How would you answer that question?
- In the epilogue, Cristina writes: “People on the move have a lot to teach the rest of us about what it means to be human” (p. 261). Discuss this with your group. What have you learned about our “need for hope and help and peace,” and “how we might get there... together”?
- Cristina Rathbone’s approach to “being with” people has taken her to places where you might not envision going yourself. But if you see the power and potential of this approach, how might you adapt it to your current circumstances?
- Who are the people in your community or region whose experiences and perspectives could offer you a chance to “be with” others and discover the “life force” that Cristina has found among asylum seekers in Juarez?
- What steps could you take to start to notice, listen to, befriend, and learn from those people?

Further Reading

Books

- *Everyone Who is Gone is Here: The United States, Central America and the Making of a Crisis* by Johnathan Blitzer
- *The Edge of the Plain: How Borders Make and Break Our World* by James Crawford
- *Tell me How it Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* by Valeria Luiselli
- *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail* by Óscar Martínez
- *The Line Becomes a River* by Francisco Cantu
- *Solito* by Javier Zamora
- *Rivermouth: A Chronicle of Language, Faith, and Migration* by Alejandra Oliva

Websites:

- <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/asylum-united-states>
- <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/shifting-realities-us-mexico-border>
- <https://episcopalmigrationministries.org/ministrynetwork/>