

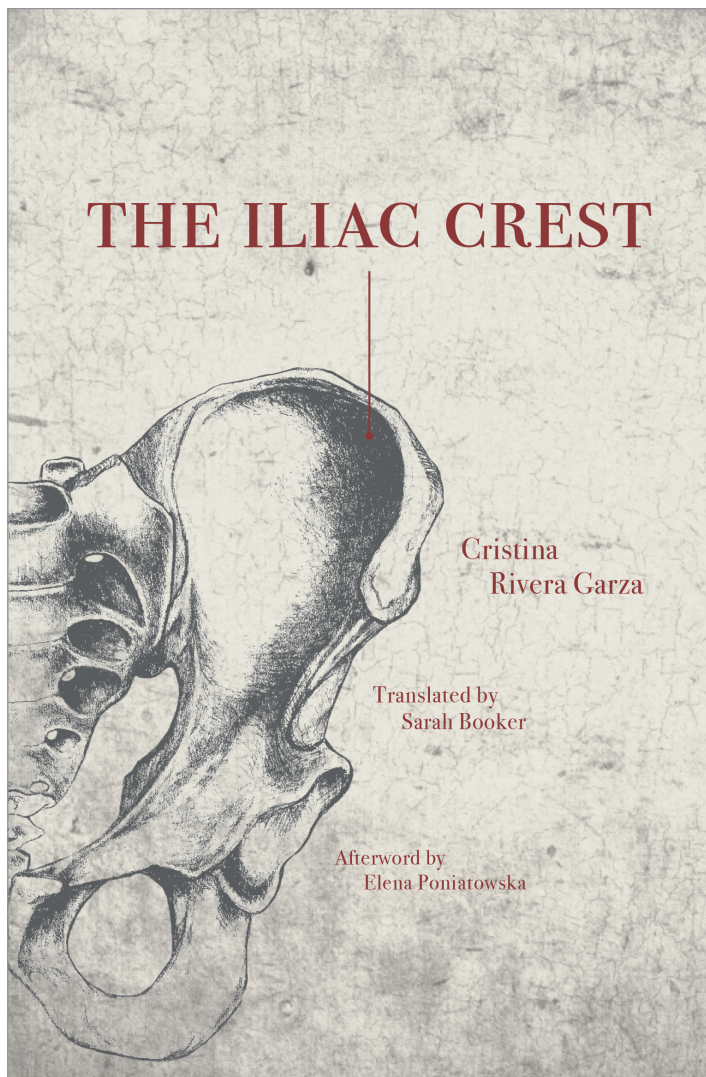
# EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

## THE ILIAC CREST

CRISTINA RIVERA GARZA | Translated from the Spanish by Sarah Booker

Afterword by Elena Poniatowska

978-1-55861-435-2 • 200 pgs • \$16.95 • ebook available



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## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I have lived between Mexico and the United States for most of my life, countries characterized by rigid gender hierarchies and femicides along post-NAFTA borders. Perhaps that's one of the reasons why I took to writing a novel delving into the fluid nature of gender des/identifications. I chose writings by Amparo Dávila, a marginalized Mexican woman writer of the so-called Midcentury Generation, to be the center of the novel's enigma, set in a time in which disappearance has become a plague.

Borders are a subtle but pervasive force in this book. I was born on the eastern tip of the US-Mexico border and lived in between San Diego (California) and Tijuana (Baja California) when I wrote *The Iliac Crest*. There are questions you cannot escape when approaching immigration: Who are you? Where do you come from? Anything to declare? Awareness of geopolitical borders soon leads to questions about the many lines we cross—or don't, or aren't allowed to—as we go about our daily lives. Our bodies are keys that open only certain doors. Our bodies speak indeed, and our bones are our ultimate testimony. Will we be betrayed by our bones?

While women's voices throughout the world continue to be silenced and those in power still argue for the irrelevance of gender equality, characters in this book understand that gender—and what is done in the name of gender—can be lethal. When disappearing becomes an epidemic, especially among women, this book reminds readers that there is always a trace left: a manuscript, a footprint, a dent, an echo worthy of our full attention and our inquiries. When women disappear from our factories and our history—from our lives—we have to reexamine what is normal. Reality may have become inexplicable or impenetrable, and therefore maddening, but questioning such circumstances lies at the core of this novel.

—CRISTINA RIVERA GARZA, Houston, Texas, 2017

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In “A Note from the Author,” Cristina Rivera Garza explains that *The Iliac Crest* was inspired by the effects of NAFTA and the rise of femicides in Mexico.

### NAFTA

In 1994, the United States entered the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Canada and Mexico, an agreement aimed at liberalizing trade, eliminating tariffs and duties, and reshaping North American economics. Between 1993 and 2016, regional trade tripled from \$290 billion USD to about \$1.1 trillion USD. Mexican farm exports to the United States have tripled, and hundreds of thousands of automobile manufacturing jobs have been created in Mexico.

However, critics blame the agreement for job loss and wage stagnation in the US, as some corporations have outsourced production to Mexico.

In Mexico, poverty levels have remained the same since 1994, and per capita income has risen annually at around only 1.2 percent during that time. While NAFTA drove industrial growth in the north, the rural south did not reap the same benefits. Additionally, Mexican unemployment has risen, which some blame on competition between Mexican farmers and the subsidized US agricultural industry. Job loss has driven illegal immigration to the United States from Mexico.

According to the Citizens Trade Campaign, the implementation of NAFTA has negatively impacted Mexican women in particular. The majority of Mexican small farmers are women, and competition with US agribusiness has pushed many of them off their land, forcing them to migrate to cities to provide for their families. Work opportunities are centered in maquiladoras, factories run by foreign companies that export their products to their home countries. Women are not paid a living wage yet have to keep up with the higher costs that accompany city life, or are forced to commute long, unsafe distances. Women also confront employment discrimination, sexual harassment, and violence in factories.

Trade liberalization caused a paradox in which the US-Mexico border became more economically open, yet physically and politically closed. As trade increased between the US and Mexico from 1994 to 2001, so did immigration. To combat this trend, the US toughened its stance on immigration. Ten thousand US soldiers were deployed along the border, creating a highly militarized zone that led to an increase in smuggling, both of drugs and of people.

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Carlsen, Laura. "Under Nafta, Mexico Suffered, and the United States Felt Its Pain." *The New York Times*. November 24, 2013.

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## FEMICIDES

The word "feminicidio" first became popular as a term of resistance in the 1990s as rates of disappearances and murders of women in Ciudad Juárez, a city on the US-Mexico border, rose rapidly. The extremely violent and sexual nature of femicides distinguishes them from other homicides. Maria de la Luz Estrada, head of the National Citizen Femicide Observatory, told *Al Jazeera*, "Hate is what marks these crimes. The bodies show 20 or 30 blows. They slice off breasts and faces and throw the fragments in the garbage. In a macho society like Mexico, authorities are always questioning what the women did. What was she wearing? Was she sexually active? This helps the impunity and lack of action."

According to the National Citizen Femicide Observatory, six women are killed every day in Mexico. However, only 24 percent of the femicides identified in 2012 and 2013 were investigated, and 1.6 percent led to sentencing. Vulnerable young women are targeted in these attacks, and their families generally lack the economic resources to ensure justice. Within a corrupt system, authorities warn families against speaking out, effectively allowing these women to remain "disappeared."

Femicides happen all across Mexico. Between 2005 and 2013, 1,500 women—mostly teenagers—disappeared in Mexico. In 2016, 1,185 femicides were committed between January and mid-October. However, 77 percent of these crimes were not prosecuted, and many victims were never identified. The exploitation of rural Mexican women contributes to the devaluation of working women and the normalization of gendered violence in Mexican society.

### Sources:

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Encinas, Mabel. "Femicide in Mexico and Guatemala." *OpenDemocracy*. December 4, 2016.

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Amparo Dávila (born 1928)**, a prominent Mexican literary figure, was born in Zacatecas, Mexico. She wrote primarily in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. Dávila is known for her fantasy and horror short stories, blurring the line between reality and dreams. Many of her protagonists are mentally ill and lash out violently. Translator Sarah Booker states that “Dávila’s inclusion in *The Iliac Crest* is an attempt to shine light onto the marginalized voices of Mexican literature and resurrect long-forgotten, disappeared voices” (3–4). Dávila’s works include *Salmos bajo la luna* (1950), *Meditaciones a la orilla del sueño* (1954), *Perfil de soledades* (1954), *Tiempo destrozado* (1959), *Música concreta* (1964), *Árboles petrificados* (1977), and *Muerte en el bosque* (1985). She has never had a full-length work translated into English.

Edward Livingston Trudeau built the first American **sanatorium** in 1885 after having supposedly cured himself of his tuberculosis symptoms by staying in the mountains. Tuberculosis patients at his sanatorium would walk, ride horses, relax, and eat hearty meals. The sanatorium movement aimed to cure tuberculosis rather than prevent new cases, and they employed “experts” who exercised extreme control over patients, implementing routines that dictated every aspect of the patients’ daily lives. In 1900, there were 34 sanatoriums in the United States, and by 1925, there were 536.

The image of the **pelican** recurs throughout the novel. Pelicans have a long-standing significance as Christian symbols of sacrifice and charity. A legend tells the story of a mother pelican who struck herself with her beak to feed her young with her own blood, preventing the chicks’ starvation. Later, Christians adapted this tale as an analogy to Jesus Christ sacrificing his life for the people of Earth. In Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Christ is referred to as “our Pelican.” In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare wrote, “To his good friend thus wide, I’ll open my arms / And, like the kind, life-rendering pelican / Repast them with my blood.”

**Juan Escutia** was one of Los Niños Héroes, six young military cadets who died defending Mexico in the Mexican-American War. When American forces advanced on Chapultepec Castle in 1847, the Mexicans were greatly outnumbered. The military cadets who trained at the facility were ordered to evacuate when it became clear that the castle could not be defended. However, Los Niños Héroes stayed behind to meet the Americans; Juan Escutia was one. Escutia supposedly wrapped himself in Mexico’s flag before jumping out a window to his death, becoming a symbol of courage and rebellion in the face of American imperialism.

In *The Iliac Crest*, the character of Juan Escutia is referred to as the “new **Prometheus**” (42). A prominent figure in Greek mythology, the Titan Prometheus

took pity on humans and gave them the gift of fire despite the will of Zeus, the king of the gods. Zeus condemned Prometheus to eternal punishment for his actions: Prometheus was chained to a rock, and every day an eagle devoured his liver, which then grew back every night, causing perpetual torment.

On the last page of the novel, the narrator remembers the name of the “bone that had simultaneously awoken both my desire and my fear. The ilium, one of three bones that make up the hip bone” (131). The narrator claims that “the pelvis is the most definitive area to determine the sex of an individual” (131). The **iliac crest** is the largest of the three bones that form the hip bone, located very close to the surface of the skin.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. At the very beginning of the book, the unnamed narrator only reveals a few markers to describe himself. Given this ambiguity, what assumptions did you make about the narrator's identity, and did your assumptions change throughout the book? Why do you think you made those assumptions?
2. At the beginning of *The Iliac Crest*, the narrator characterizes himself as honest, insistent upon telling the whole truth about his initial encounter with Amparo Dávila. But then, in the next chapter, he admits, "I would've liked for the whole thing to have happened like this, but that's not how it went" (12). The narrator also repeatedly speculates, fantasizes, and lies. Often times he enters an altered reality in which his consciousness is impaired. As a reader, how do you relate to an unreliable or intentionally ambiguous narrator?
3. Analyze the narrator's fixation on the ocean as a point of return and comfort (24). What is the significance of the fact that he enjoys being made to feel insignificant because of a body of water, but feels disturbed when a woman invokes the same feeling with her gaze (34)?
4. The novel has a very ambiguous setting. However, there are also some historical references within the text. Given these references, when and where did you imagine the story taking place? Why?
5. Silence is a major theme in *The Iliac Crest*. Cristina Rivera Garza explores how, throughout history, men have exerted their power to silence women's voices and issues, such as in the case of Amparo Davila, the False One. However, in the novel, the supposedly male narrator is eventually silenced by the female characters.
  - a) What devices are used to silence the narrator, both on the part of the author and of the characters?
  - b) Considering the historical silencing of women, how does it impact the story to reverse the conventional paradigm and silence the male narrator?
6. How is "terminally ill" (22) defined in the society of the novel?
7. Toward the end of the book, the narrator is finally able to understand the language that the Betrayed and the False One speak (115). What do you think causes this breakthrough?
8. What do you think about the narrator's final assertion that gender can be identified by the pelvic bone, also known as the iliac crest? Having read the book, what characteristics—physical or not—do you believe are best in determining "the sex of an individual" (131)?

9. Why did the author choose to write this novel as a retrospective, narrating events in the past tense? What effect does this have on your reading of the book?
10. Rivera Garza highlights the borders between the living and the dying, the North and South Cities, male and female, and sanity and madness. She also deliberately blurs these borders. How does the idea of “borders” play out in *The Iliac Crest*? What other borders can be found in the book? How, if at all, did reading this novel change your ideas about borders?



## THE FEMINIST PRESS

The Feminist Press is an educational nonprofit organization founded to advance women's rights and amplify feminist perspectives. We publish classic and new writing from around the world, create cutting-edge programs, and elevate silenced and marginalized voices in order to support personal transformation and social justice for all people.

As an independent publisher, the Feminist Press is able to provide a personalized experience for the universities and professors that adopt our books through close attention to dealing with all aspects of utilizing books in classrooms, from providing desk and exam copies, bulk sales, programming, and more.

Feminist Press authors are available for lectures, Q&A sessions, or workshops, either in person, via video conference, or through use of social media and message boards. Our authors are committed to working with your students to enrich and broaden their understanding of the commonly read text, and of the issues and themes highlighted by the book.

*This sample educator's guide was created in collaboration with an undergraduate student currently attending Georgetown University. The student volunteer wrote discussion questions and researched terms, concepts, and related resources, imagining that this text was on their syllabus.*

