



Book Club Set

American Dirt

By Jeanine Cummins

About the Author



Jeanine Cummins is the author of the bestselling memoir *A Rip in Heaven*, and the novels *The Outside Boy* and *The Crooked Branch*. Her fourth book, *American Dirt*, was an Oprah's Book Club and a Barnes & Noble Book Club selection. It has been translated into 37 languages and has sold more than three million copies worldwide. She lives in New York with her husband and two children.

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About the Book

También de este lado hay sueños. On this side too, there are dreams.

Lydia Quixano Perez runs a bookstore in the Mexican City of Acapulco until one violent day changes everything. Forced to flee, Lydia and eight-year-old Luca soon find themselves miles and worlds away from their comfortable middle-class existence. Instantly transformed into migrants, Lydia and Luca ride *la bestia*—trains that make their way north toward the United States, which is the only place they might feel safe. As they join the countless people trying to reach *el norte*, Lydia soon sees that everyone is running from something. But what exactly are they running to?

American Dirt will leave readers utterly changed when they finish reading it. A page-turner filled with poignancy, drama, and humanity on every page, it is a literary achievement.

Discussion Questions



1. Throughout the novel, Lydia thinks back on how, when she was living a middle-class existence, she viewed migrants with pity: “All her life she’s pitied those poor people. She’s donated money. She’s wondered with the sort of detached fascination of the comfortable elite how dire the conditions of their lives must be wherever they come from, that this is the better option. That these people would leave their homes, their cultures, their families, even their languages, and venture into tremendous peril, risking their very lives, all for the chance to get to the dream of some faraway country that doesn’t even want them” (chapter 10, page 94). Do you think the author chose to make Lydia a middle-class woman as her protagonist for a reason? Do you think the reader would have had a different entry point to the novel if Lydia started out as a poor migrant? Would you have viewed Lydia differently if she had come from poor origins? How much do you identify with Lydia?
2. Sebastián persists in running his story on Javier even though he knows it will put him and his family in grave danger. Do you admire what he did? Was he a good journalist or a bad husband and father? Is it possible he was both? What would you have done if you were him?
3. Lydia looks at Luca and thinks to herself: “Migrante. She can’t make the word fit him. But that’s what they are now. This is how it happens” (chapter 10, page 94). Lydia refers to her and Luca becoming migrants as something that happened to them rather than something they did. Do you think the author intentionally made this sentence passive? Do you think language allows us to label things as “other” that is, in a way, tantamount to self-preservation? Does it allow us to compartmentalize things that are too difficult to comprehend?
4. When Lydia is at the Casa del Migrante, she learns the term *cuerpomático*—“human ATM machine”—and what it means. Were you surprised to learn how dangerous the passage is, and for female migrants in particular?

5. When Lydia, Luca, Soledad, and Rebeca are at the Casa del Migrante, the priest warns them to turn back: “If it’s only a better life you seek, seek it elsewhere.... This path is only for people who have no choice, no other option, only violence and misery behind you” (chapter 17, page 168). Were you surprised that he would be issuing such a dire warning when he must know how desperate they are to be there in the first place? Under what conditions might you decide to leave your homeland?
6. When they get to the US–Mexican border, Beto says, “This is the whole problem, right? Look at that American flag over there—you see it? All bright and shiny; it looks brand-new. And then look at ours. It’s all busted up and raggedy” (chapter 26, page 273). Later he says, “I mean, those estadounidenses are obsessed with their flag” (chapter 26, page 274). Do you agree with Beto? Do the flags symbolize something more than just the countries they represent?
7. The term “American” only appears once in the novel. Did you notice? Why do you think the author made this choice?
8. When Luca finally crosses over to the United States, he’s disappointed: “The road below is nothing like the roads Luca imagined he’d encounter in the USA. He thought every road here would be broad as a boulevard, paved to perfection, and lined with fluorescent shopfronts. This road is like the crappiest Mexican road he’s ever seen. Dirt, dirt, and more dirt” (chapter 31, page 329). Discuss the significance of the title, *American Dirt*. What do you think the author means by it?
9. “Lydia had been aware of the migrant caravans coming from Guatemala and Honduras in the way comfortable people living stable lives are peripherally aware of destitution. She heard their stories on the news radio while she cooked dinner in her kitchen. Mothers pushing strollers thousands of miles, small children walking holes into the bottoms of their pink Crocs, hundreds of families banding together for safety, gathering numbers as they walked north for weeks, hitching rides in the backs of trucks whenever they could, riding La Bestia whenever they could, sleeping in fútbol stadiums and churches, coming all that way to el norte to plead for asylum. Lydia chopped onions and cilantro in her kitchen while she listened to their histories. They fled violence and poverty, gangs more powerful

than their governments. She listened to their fear and determination, how resolved they were to reach Estados Unidos or die on the road in that effort, because staying at home meant their odds of survival were even worse. On the radio, Lydia heard those walking mothers singing to their children, and she felt a pang of emotion for them. She tossed chopped vegetables into hot oil, and the pan sizzled in response. That pang Lydia felt had many parts: it was anger at the injustice, it was worry, compassion, helplessness. But in truth, it was a small feeling, and when she realized she was out of garlic, the pang was subsumed by domestic irritation. Dinner would be bland” (chapter 26, pages 276–77). Do you think the narrator intends for the reader to wholeheartedly censure Lydia in this scene? Do you think Lydia is a stand-in for the reader and that the author is sending a broader message? After reading the author’s note, do you think the author includes herself in this group?

10. “I heard if your life is in danger wherever you come from, they’re not allowed to send you back there.” To Lydia it sounds like mythology, but she can’t help asking anyway, “You have to be Central American? To apply for asylum?” Beto shrugs. “Why? Your life in danger?” Lydia sighs. “Isn’t everyone’s?” (chapter 26, page 277) If you were writing the rules for asylum eligibility, what would they be?
11. Toward the end of the novel, Soledad “sticks her hand through the fence and wiggles her fingers on the other side. Her fingers are in el norte. She spits through the fence. Only to leave a piece of herself there on American dirt” (chapter 28, page 301). Why do you think Soledad spits over the border? Is doing so a victory for her?
12. “Luca wonders if they’re moving perpendicular to that boundary now, that place where the fence disappears and the only thing to delineate one country from the next is a line that some random guy drew on a map years and years ago” (chapter 30, page 317). In his 1971 book *Theory of Justice*, the philosopher John Rawls came up with what he called the “veil of ignorance.” Rawls asked readers to think about how they would design an ideal society if they knew nothing of their own sex, gender, race, nationality, individual tastes, or personal identity. Do you think the decision-makers of the borders might’ve made a different decision if

they'd donned the veil of ignorance? Do you think borders are a necessary evil or might their delineation serve a societal good? Do you think that the world would be a better place if we all brought Rawls's thought experiment to bear in our everyday individual and collective decision making?

13. Why do you think there are birds on the cover of the novel?

14. "But the moment of the crossing has already passed, and she didn't even realize it had happened. She never looked back, never committed any small act of ceremony to help launch her into the new life on the other side. Nothing can be undone. Adelante" (chapter 30, page 323). Do you think Lydia is better or worse off for not having known about the moment of her boundary crossing? What importance do rituals have in marking milestones in our lives? Can the past be undone, the past rewinded?

15. Was Javier's reaction to Marta's death at all understandable? Humanizing? Do you believe that he didn't want Lydia dead? Is what he did, in the name of his daughter, any less paternal than what Lydia does for Luca is maternal?

Author Interview



Thank you so much for your time and willingness to sit down with *Rivertown*. Can you share with us a little about the conception of *American Dirt*? I have read that you felt “compelled” to write this story. What ignited this desire in you?

It was something I felt passionately about. It was a subject I felt was misrepresented and underrepresented in mainstream fiction. I saw the way we were talking about migration in this country and our national dialogue is incredibly superficial and riddled with stereotypes on both sides. I felt like there was a whole lot of gap in the middle where humanity should be. That’s why I wanted to write this book.

Part of what makes your storytelling of Lydia’s journey so powerful is the exquisite attention to detail. To write with such a command of the language, geography and authentic nuances of the characters makes me imagine that your research must have been exhaustive. What exactly did that research entail?

I read a lot. I read everything I could find about the Central American triangle countries and the push factors in contemporary Mexico that are leading people to make this journey. I read a lot by Central American and Mexican writers. I watched all the documentaries. Also, while I was doing all that academic research, I was beginning to sketch characters and plot ideas, but it was bad. Then, after about a year and a half in, I went to Mexico. I traveled through the borderlands and observed and witnessed as much as I could with my own eyes. I visited migrant shelters and orphanages. I volunteered at a *desayunador* (migrant soup kitchen). I met with a lot of people who were doing humanitarian aid work and pro bono legal work. I just met so many people and heard so many stories. One of the *deportados* (deportee) I met did not even speak Spanish. Before deportation, he had been in the United States since he was five years old. He was more American than me. Another I met had actually served in active combat for the United States in Iraq. Of course, I knew all of this. I had read the stories

and done the research. But, when you go there and see it with your own eyes, it's just mind boggling. The human reality and the faces of the people I met...and their courage and openness. My heart had been cracked open.

What an extraordinary experience. I can imagine how the faces and voices of those you met helped mold the characters. How did you decide from which character/s perspective you would write?

Well, I had been worried about writing from the migrant point of view. I was worried about my own limitations as a writer. Then, a week before the 2016 Presidential election, my dad died unexpectedly. It really incapacitated me. I couldn't write. I could barely function. Then, one day, when I started to emerge from that funk, I just pulled out my laptop and wrote the opening scene of *American Dirt*. I knew immediately that day that this was the story I had been resisting. This is what I had been afraid to write. There's something about that grief that gives you this painful new perspective on what matters. I was so devastated that I thought, "What's the worst that could happen?" His passing really liberated me to write the book. So, a few weeks later, I rented a casita in Arizona in the middle of the desert. I stayed there for eight days, by myself, and wrote half the book. It was all in me, you know? It had been backed up in me for those three and a half years of research. I knew the characters. I knew the story. And when I lost my dad, all the resistance fell away. There is so much grief in this book that is my grief in real time. It made it onto every page. I didn't even realize it until after, but every one of these characters is grieving for their father. I don't think I would have had the guts to go into that point of view if my dad was still here. And that's how the book developed the way it did.

John Grisham's review of the book personally resonated with me: "Its message is important and timely, but not political." Yet, there was some intense criticism about you telling this story. Was this something you anticipated?

I did expect some pushback because I'm aware of the #OwnVoices movement and also really aware of the vast inequities in the publishing world. But, prior to publication, we

sent out about 10,000 copies and the response was overwhelmingly positive. Everyone from Stephen King to Sandra Cisneros received it with universal high praise, across a very diverse landscape of readership, including Oprah Winfrey. I even got quotes from those whom we hadn't sent the book – my literary heroes, like Ann Patchett and John Grisham. I got so much support from the Latinx community. And then a month before publication the first negative comments appeared online. It was rather startling how personal it was. But, when balanced against this library of praise, it felt like an outlier. But the weekend before publication, it blew up. So even though at the beginning I had been anticipating some murmurings, in the wake of the dreamlike praises I had been receiving, to have it turn so suddenly, was very surprising.

How have you been navigating that?

All the outpouring of private support has been really, really helpful. Writers whom I've never met before even reached out. Knowing that it felt like a silent majority of people were sympathetic to my situation was really helpful. My family and friends and the people who really know me know how long I worked on this book and how important it was for me to take care to get things right and know the reasons I wrote it. Ultimately, that is the thing that no one can take from me. Oprah said to me, over and over again, "Just keep returning to your intention." Intention is the universal law. If your intention is pure, you will succeed. So, I just kept going back to that, over and over. I knew why I wrote this book. It sometimes feels hard to hold onto those truths in the eye of the hurricane, but when I take a step back and I remember who I am, I feel comforted by that.

Through your whole experience of the writing, publication and reception of the book, what is the most important thing you'd like to share?

I remember saying to my husband before the book was published, if there is a possibility that this book opens even one reader's mind... that they might think more

intimately or compassionately about migrants after they read it, well then it feels worth the risk to me. I hope it's a net positive.

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Other Links and Resources

Articles discussing Oprah interview and controversy:

<https://www.oprahdaily.com/entertainment/books/a31227918/oprah-american-dirt-jeanine-cummins-controversy-video/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jan/21/american-dirt-controversy-trauma-jeanine-cummins>

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DATE: _____

BOOK CLUB: _____

BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: