

ARRT Literary Book Discussion

The Book of Unknown Americans by Cristina Henriquez

Thursday, July 9, 2015

Hinsdale Public Library

Leader: Emily Borsa

Note Taker: Becky Spratford

33 participants present

[Please refer to the [ARRT Literary Book Discussion Website](#) for more documents and information]

CAUTION! CONTAINS SPOILERS!

- Emily began with basic biographic information about Henriquez and introduced the book using information in the Hinsdale Public Library's prepared book discussion guide, pdf [available on our website](#).
- **Question:** Who listened to this book on audio? Almost 50% did. Comments:
 - I loved how it was a full cast. Since the book is written from multiple perspectives, this full cast recording captured the voices perfectly.
 - I found the Alma narrator to be particularly poignant. Even more so than I would have found her in print.
 - I loved how they did not get a bunch of "white people pretending to be ethnic," to read this novel. It felt authentic.
- The discussion of the audio led to a larger discussion by the entire group about the way the book is written. **Question: Did you enjoy the style of this novel with the two main points of view of Alma and Mayor with only short statements by the other residents of their building?** Comments:
 - I would have found the book "too loud" if everyone had time to give me their full stories.
 - I disagree. I was frustrated that all I got was a little "blip" about some of the people.
 - I agree there were so many unknown secondary characters who seemed so interesting. They needed their own novel.
 - I too was frustrated but isn't that the point, to make us feel a small fraction of the frustration they have by being "unknown Americans."
 - We all loved that Arturo did not get his chance to speak until the very end, after he is dead. What restraint by the author to save it. His comments and their placement say so much about everything here.
 - With all the voices here, it was interesting that the Riveras, and in particular Maribel, are the center of the story. They are the only ones who

did not want to come to America. Only came for a school to help Maribel's brain injury. They loved their life in Mexico before her accident

- Comments about Alma and Mayor came up throughout our discussion as they are the two main narrators. I have compiled these comments together below:
 - Alma:
 - There were times when she was so frustrating. Why did it take her so long to come to terms with her part in Maribel's injury? Why didn't she express her guilt to Arturo sooner? Why did she insist on keeping so much inside and suffering?
 - I would have enjoyed the novel more if Alma had stayed in America and followed through with Maribel's education at the special school and so we can make sure that Arturo's murderer is brought to justice.
 - On the other hand, someone else shared that they thought it was a sign of strength in Alma and improvement in Maribel that Alma was able to go back home.
 - Alma and her family came to America "Unknown" and left a mark on their community and the people there. We see that. It is powerful.
 - I was so frustrated for Alma. When she goes to the police station the first time and they don't help her. She gets a translator but her guilt stops her from explaining that Maribel is brain damaged.
 - As a mother, I felt her physical pain when she misses the bus stop and can't be home in time for Maribel. She was in the middle of nowhere and couldn't speak the language. For her it seemed like hours, but later we see from Mayor's perspective that it wasn't that long.
 - Mayor:
 - His sections read like a YA novel to me. I am not sure if I liked that but it makes sense.
 - I liked it because this book is as much about Mayor and the adult he will become as it is about Alma.
 - I wish I knew what Mayor is up to now? How did he turn out?
 - The scenes with Mayor's older brother-- the golden boy who returns from college show us a lot about Mayor. He is Mayor's only example of "how to get out of here." He is a symbol of "America" and is the opposite of "Unknwon" [Literally as his name is often in the newspaper for his sports feats.]
 - Mayor is going to become the bridge to being American to the people in his apartment complex.

- **Question: Are you surprised that the last words of the novel are Arturo saying, “I loved this country.” ?** Comments:
 - I didn't buy it. It works as a storytelling device but I don't believe the character did love America.
 - I did. His love for his daughter drove every decision he made. She was getting better and he loved this country for that opportunity.
 - I felt his depth more when we see his conversation with Alma just before he dies. I liked his final thoughts.
 - I felt like it was a perfect ending to the book. We don't know what will become of Mayor or Alama or Maribel but we do know the end of Arturo's story. Ending with him is good.
- **Question: Who is to Blame? In the book? In life?** Comments:
 - Most of Alma's issues were driven by guilt. Everything she did was because she never dealt with her guilt or shared it with others.
 - The entire book takes the whole notion of blame and throws it out the window. It makes the point that life is a series of events with choices and actions by so many people. You cannot go back and blame just one thing when something bad happens. Everyone is to blame for everything.
 - Mayor makes this point very well when he talks about this at the end. We shared a few of those passages as a group.
 - His tracing of blame to Arturo's death mirrors the conversation Alma and Arturo had the chapter before when they admit their own guilt about what happened the day Maribel was injured.
 - These conversations felt so realistic. Blame and guilt are universal issues-- across all people and cultures.
- **We talked for a bit about Alma and Arturo as a couple:**
 - They were so close and happy before the accident, but that moment changed them forever.
 - The scene with the oatmeal was a turning point for the family. We could see the old family coming back into focus; the family we never got to see in the book/
 - We know they had a great love story because at the end we see Alma struggling to save a part of Arturo. She tries to save his scent on the sheets, she wears his cowboy hat, she finds a way to bring him home with them.
- **Question: Were you surprised the book was set in Delaware?** Comments:
 - I loved the various stories of how all of these people ended up in Delaware. Ironically, only the Riveras were there on purpose.
 - Emily shared some information from an interview where the author said she did not want to set the book in a large metro area that already had

entrenched Latino communities. This way all the people from the different countries were forced to live together.

- Henriquez is from Delaware also.
- We liked how Delaware, a small state without much of its own identity [to us at least] made it feel ubiquitous.
- Also we agreed, if it were in Chicago, the different nationalities would have had their own enclave. This is a better book because of the mix of people living together in the building.
- The setting harkens back to the ideas of America as a melting pot. This apartment complex is that melting pot.
- Language also united them, even though their culture was not the same.
- Other comments worth sharing:
 - I liked how we saw a glimpse into Garrett's poor family. That is a whole different type of "unknown Americans."
 - This would be a great read for high school students.
 - The entire book was filled with three dimensional characters.
 - We liked how the book was titled, "The Book of Unknown Americans." and not "Unknown Immigrants." It was a subtle but powerful distinction.
 - And a final comment before Henriquez joined us-- Maribel is the central figure, the catalyst of this novel, but she has no agency. She is the only voice we DO NOT hear from. Emily brought up an interview with CH when she was asked about this. We decided we would also ask her when she joined us.