

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Jeanine Cummins was born on a US Naval Base in Rota, Spain, and spent most of her childhood in Gaithersburg, Maryland. When she was sixteen, Jeanine’s family experienced a horrific violent crime: the double-homicide of her two cousins by four strangers. Her brother was the only surviving victim of the attack. The crime and the impact it had on her family became the subject of her best-selling 2004 memoir *A Rip in Heaven*.

After that publication, Jeanine began speaking publicly about victims’ rights, and specifically about her family’s experiences with the criminal justice system. Jeanine is a death penalty opponent and can speak to the ways death row further persecutes victims of violent crime. She has addressed college, high school, and middle school students about topics from writing to victimology, to turning trauma into art. She’s spoken to first responders about best practices when dealing with victims of violent crime and trauma. She has also visited prisons where she spoke with inmates about using art or stories as a way to take ownership over trauma.

With her new book, *American Dirt*, Jeanine looks forward to the opportunity to discuss her extensive research into the origin stories of migrants and refugees who attempt to get to the US via the southern border with Mexico. During her research, Jeanine visited migrant shelters and orphanages in Mexico, met with humanitarian aid workers who provide water to migrants in the desert, interviewed lawyers who provide pro bono legal services for unaccompanied minors, and volunteered at a *desayunador* (soup kitchen) in Tijuana. Those experiences, among many others, were deeply influential in helping Jeanine understand why Mexican and Central American migrants are willing to undertake such a perilous journey, crossing Mexico atop the treacherous freight trains known as *La Bestia*, all in the hopes of reaching a hostile and closed foreign border. — Macmillan Speakers

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Throughout the novel, Lydia thinks back on how, when she was living a middle-class existence, she viewed migrants with pity. 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 refers to her and Luca becoming migrants as something that happened to them rather than something they did. Do you think the author did this intentionally? 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. 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. The term “American” only appears once in the novel. Did you notice? Why do you think the author made this choice?
7. 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?
8. This novel introduces characters that are seeking asylum. If you were writing the rules for asylum eligibility, what would they be?
9. 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?
10. 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?
11. Why do you think there are birds on the cover of the novel?
12. At the actual moment Lydia crosses the border, she is unaware of the significance. 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 done be undone, the past rewound?

13. 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?

<https://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/american-dirt/guide>

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### Booklist

Lydia Perez's life is not extraordinary; she is a bookstore owner with a husband and eight-year-old son, Luca, in Acapulco. When cartel jefe Javier Fuentes has her entire extended family killed while Lydia and Luca are fortuitously hiding in a bathroom, Lydia realizes they must leave Mexico immediately or be killed when Javier finds out she is still alive. Luca, confused but trusting in his mother, embarks with her on an odyssey to the north, joining other migrants trying to make it to the U.S. border. What they see along the way will bring readers both heartbreak and hope, pain and promise. While Cummins alternates points of view, Luca's voice in particular sings with innocent optimism in the face of a series of near misses. The journey towards the prospect of safety is not only that of Luca and Lydia but of many other migrants, and complex secondary characters serve as both warnings and signs of possibility. Beautiful, straightforward language drives home the point that migration to safer places is not a political issue but a human one. HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: With a story line sure to be much discussed this election year plus a film in the works *American Dirt* may be the don't-miss book of 2020.--Tracy Babiasz.

### Publisher's Weekly

With this devastating yet hopeful work, Cummins (*The Crooked Branch*) breathes life into the statistics of the thousands fleeing their homelands and seeking to cross the southern border of the United States. By mere chance, Lydia Quixano Pérez and her eight-year-old son, Luca, survive the massacre of the rest of her family at her niece's quinceañera by sicarios of the Los Jardineros cartel in Acapulco. Compounding the horror of the violence and loss is the fact that the cartel's leader is a man that Lydia unwittingly befriended in her bookstore. Lydia and Luca flee north to the only refuge that she can imagine: her uncle's family in Denver. North of Mexico City, all other sources of transportation become impossible, so mother and son must risk traveling atop *La Bestia*, the freight trains that are the only way to reach the border without being seen. They befriend two beautiful sisters--Soledad, 15, who is "a living miracle of splendor," and Rebeca, 14--who have fled life-threatening circumstances in Honduras. As the quartet travel, they face terror on a constant basis, with danger possible from any encounter, but also compassion and occasionally even wonder. This extraordinary novel about unbreakable determination will move the reader to the core. (Jan.)

### Library Journal

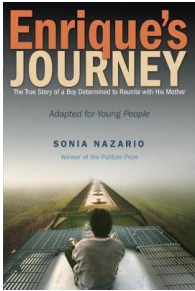
In a book both timely and prodigiously readable, Cummins (*The Crooked Branch*) offers an unrelenting and terrifyingly you-are-there account of a Mexican mother and son fleeing to America after cartel violence takes their entire family. Lydia had been comfortably running a bookstore in Acapulco, but cartel violence is escalating, and the charming customer with whom she's become friendly turns out to be the jefe of the newest, cruelest cartel in town. When he's also the subject of her journalist husband's latest reveal-all profile, vengeance is swift, which puts Lydia and Luca on the run by bus and van, in migrant shelters, on top of a train, and, finally, in the remote and blazing American Southwest. Cummins expertly balances the brutality of the cartel, its scary omniscience, and Lydia's ululating fear with Lydia's passionate commitment to Luca's survival and the numerous small, brave acts of kindness she encounters that speed this duo north. VERDICT Here, it's the journey rather than the arrival on American dirt that counts, and readers will wonder whether they could ever have survived such a trek even as they realize that this could happen to them. An important book. [See Prepub Alert, 7/15/19.]--Barbara Hoffert.

### Kirkus Reviews

This terrifying and tender novel is a blunt answer to the question of why immigrants from Latin America cross the U.S. border and a testimony to the courage it takes to do it. Cummins (*The Crooked Branch*, 2013, etc.) opens this propulsive novel with a massacre. In a pleasant Acapulco neighborhood, gunmen slaughter 16 people at a family barbecue, from a grandmother to the girl whose quinceaera they are celebrating. The only survivors are Lydia, a young mother, and her 8-year-old son, Luca. She knows they must escape, fast and far. Lydia's husband, Sebastin, is among the dead; he was a fearless journalist whose coverage of the local cartel, Los Jardineros, is the reason los sicarios were sent, as the sign fastened to his dead chest makes clear. Lydia knows there is more to it, that her friendship with a courtly older man who has become her favorite customer at the small bookstore she runs is a secret key, and that she and her son are marked for death. Cummins does a splendid job of capturing Lydia's and Luca's numb shock and then panic in the aftermath of the shootings, then their indomitable will to survive and reach el norte any place they might go in Mexico is cartel territory, and any stranger might be an assassin. She vividly recounts their harrowing travels for more than 1,000 miles by bus, atop a lethally dangerous freight train, and finally on foot across the implacable Sonoran Desert. Peril and brutality follow them, but they also encounter unexpected generosity and heroism. Lydia and Luca are utterly believable characters, and their breathtaking journey moves with the velocity and power of one of those freight trains. Intensely suspenseful and deeply humane, this novel makes migrants seeking to cross the southern U.S. border indelibly individual. (Kirkus Reviews, Oct. 14, 2019)

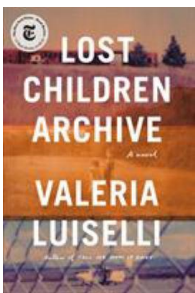
## READALIKES

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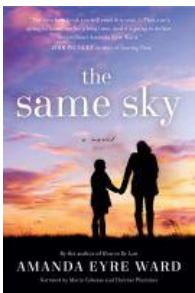
***Enrique's Journey: The True Story of a Boy Determined To Reunite With His Mother* by Sonia Nazario**

Documents the journey of a Honduran teen who braved hardship and peril to reunite with his mother after she was forced to leave him behind and seek migratory work in the United States. A nonfiction memoir.



***Lost Children Archive* by Valeria Luiselli**

A novel about a family of four, on the cusp of fracture, who take a trip across America--a story told through varying points of view, and including archival documents and photographs.



***The Same Sky* by Amanda Eyre Ward**

A childless woman looking to adopt crosses paths with a 13-year-old Honduran girl on a dangerous journey into Texas with her brother.