

The Undocumented Americans



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did author Karla Cornejo Villavicencio hate about other books and stories about migrants and how did she intend for her's to be different?
2. Why did the author make the decision not to write about DREAMers or DACA?
3. Why is the prevalent use of the term “undocumented workers” hugely problematic? What troublesome ideas about human value does it reinforce or emphasize?
4. How did 9/11 “change the immigration landscape forever” and why does Cornejo Villavicencio say that it was the day that her father started dying?
5. How does the healthcare system fail and endanger undocumented Americans, and what role do alternative medicine and ceremony play in their lives? How else do they seek healing?
6. What literary device does the author use to highlight the violence enacted on people of color, including those in the undocumented community, by their own government? What effect do you think the author intended for this to have on readers?
7. Where does the author say that stories about deportation often end and why is this problematic?
8. What are sanctuary spaces, and what “higher moral law” do these spaces help to enforce? What is life like for those who are forced to live in these spaces and their families?
9. What moment does Cornejo Villavicencio say she has “been preparing for [her] entire life”? What is life like for aging undocumented immigrants in America? What strain does this place on their children?
10. When Cornejo Villavicencio asks those she interviews about regrets, how do they respond? What is it that she says they remember of their time in the United States?
11. Why do you think that the author chose to weave memoir with reportage, creative ethnography, and elements of fiction such as magical realism?
12. Explore the motifs of trauma and mental illness. What does the author reveal about the relationship between illness—and especially mental illness—and the experience of migration?

PRAISE FOR

The Undocumented Americans

“For all the political debate that surrounds them, it remains rare for undocumented Americans to share their own stories in full. In this nearly decade-long feat of reporting, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio’s book, now a National Book Award finalist, shows the complex nature of undocumented immigrants’ lives.” —**TIME**

“There’s nothing to do but sit down and read this book. Inside it, I feel deep in being, immersed in a frankness and a swerving bright and revelatory funkiness I’ve not encountered ever before concerning the collective daily life of an undocumented family in America. It’s a radical human story and Karla Cornejo Villavicencio is a great writer.”

—**EILEEN MYLES**

“This is the book we’ve been waiting for. Karla Cornejo Villavicencio offers an unflinching indictment of our current immigration system, one that separates families, inflicts trauma, and every day eats away at people’s dignity. At the same time, she writes about migrants in a way they’ve never been written about before—in all their complexity, messiness, humanity, and beauty. Cornejo Villavicencio understands in her bones that writers cannot give people voices or faces. *The Undocumented Americans* succeeds precisely because she sees their faces and hears their voices. Deeply personal and so superbly told, this is a work we will be talking about for a long time to come.” —**ROBERTO G. GONZALES, author of *Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America***

“This valuable and authentic inquiry is powerfully embellished with magical imaginings, as when she envisions a man drowning during Hurricane Sandy’s last moments. [Karla] Cornejo Villavicencio’s unfiltered and vulnerable voice incorporates both explosive profanity and elegiac incantations of despair, as, for example, when she internalizes the hatred toward brown people manifest in the poisoning of Flint, Michigan’s water supply. She gives of herself unstintingly as she speaks with undocumented day laborers, older people working long past retirement age, and a housekeeper who relies on the botanica and voodoo for health care. Cornejo Villavicencio’s challenging and moving *testimonio* belongs in all collections.”

—**BOOKLIST (starred review)**

“Profoundly intimate . . . highly personal and deeply empathetic . . . Readers will be deeply moved by this incandescent account.” —**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY**

“Memorable . . . compelling . . . heartwrenching . . . A welcome addition to the literature on immigration told by an author who understands the issue like few others.”

—**KIRKUS REVIEWS**

