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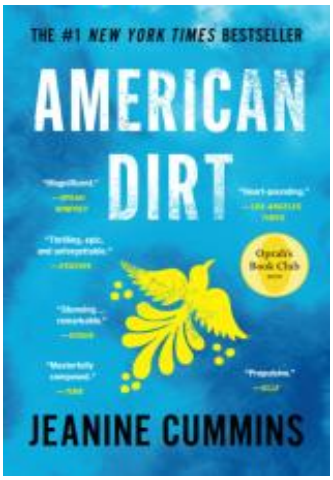
American Dirt

by Jeanine Cummins



About the Book

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

Lydia Quixano Pérez lives in the Mexican city of Acapulco. She runs a bookstore. She has a son, Luca, the love of her life, and a wonderful husband who is a journalist. And while there are cracks beginning to show in Acapulco because of the drug cartels, her life is, by and large, fairly comfortable.

Even though she knows they?ll never sell, Lydia stocks some of her all-time favorite books in her store. And then one day, a man enters the shop to browse and comes up to the register with a few books he would like to buy --- two of them her favorites. Javier is erudite. He is charming. And, unbeknownst to Lydia, he is the *jefe* of the newest drug cartel that has gruesomely taken over the city. When Lydia?s husband?s tell-all profile of Javier is published, none of their lives will ever be the same.

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 Javier?s reach doesn?t extend. 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. It is a literary achievement filled with poignancy, drama and humanity on every page. It is one of the most important books for our times.

Already being hailed as "a GRAPES OF WRATH for our times" and "a new American classic," Jeanine Cummins' AMERICAN DIRT is a rare exploration into the inner hearts of people willing to sacrifice everything for a glimmer of hope.

Discussion Guide

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 done 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 Bio

Jeanine Cummins is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of AMERICAN DIRT, which was an Oprah?s Book Club and a Barnes & Noble Book Club selection, as well as a #1 Indie Next pick. The novel has been translated into 37 languages and sold more than three-and-a-half million copies worldwide. Her other works include the memoir A RIP IN HEAVEN, and the novels THE OUTSIDE BOY, THE CROOKED BRANCH and SPEAK TO ME OF HOME. She lives in New York with her husband, their two daughters, and their dogs.

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