



Book of the Week

***American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins**

Book Review by Nancy Hargrove, William L. Giles Distinguished Professor Emerita of English and Starkville Library Discussion Leader

American Dirt is exciting, suspenseful, terrifying, heartbreaking, and incredibly moving. I found myself on the verge of tears a number of times. It describes in nerve-wracking detail the struggles of Lydia Pérez and her 8-year-old son Luca to get to the USA from their home in Acapulco after the massacre of their extended family of 16 in retaliation for her journalist husband's exposé of the head of a drug cartel, with whom Lydia had formed a close friendship (unaware of his identity) at her bookstore. Indeed, the book opens with that massacre, which Lydia and Luca escaped only because they had gone to the bathroom. She realizes that now they will be sought-after and killed

by members of the cartel, whose tentacles reach throughout Mexico; hence the attempt to get to the USA, where they will be safe.

So begins a long, arduous journey to survive that goes from one frightening episode to another, all of which the reader cannot help but experience along with the mother and son. They meet many different people, both sinister and dangerous as well as kind and helpful. An old friend of her husband smuggles them to Mexico City in a church van, despite the hair-raising stop by members of the cartel on the look out for them. Even more terrifying are their rides on the top of La Bestia, freight trains going north, when they realize that they are now migrants. Here they meet two young women who become their close friends. When they finally are near the border after many terrifying episodes, they (and the reader)



believe that they have reached safety—but no! Other dangers await them as they and other migrants attempt to cross the border, led by a coyote (a person who will guide them across for an exorbitant fee). I will not give away the ending, but I hope that I've whetted your appetite to read this extraordinary novel.

The literature professor in me cannot end without making a few comments on other aspects of the book. It is extremely well-written, with excellent concrete details and a sprinkling of words in Spanish (you can look them up on your cell phone) that make it very realistic; she has included a helpful map of the relevant parts of Mexico and the southwestern United States as the end papers so you can always see where they are in their long journey. The author is not Mexican, but she obviously did a great deal of research and even interviewed migrants who had undertaken this journey. In the novel she adeptly alternates between the present and the past, thus filling in important background information and giving you a sense of what their lives had been like before the massacre. While she mainly reveals the plot from the points of view of Lydia and Luca, she also occasionally gives other points of view. She has created two memorable characters in the mother and the son. Lydia is most of all a loving and protective mother, but in addition, she is resourceful, tough, and flexible; however, she is also subject to brief moments of despair and uncertainty about whether she has made the right choices along the way, so she is entirely human and believable. Luca is an amazing young boy who is resilient and smart, with an incredible ability to memorize geographic facts. He encourages his mother, and he stands up for the two young women whenever they are threatened by dangerous men. Finally, as you can tell from this synopsis, the themes are familial love, courage, cruelty, kindness, endurance, and numerous others that I will let you discover.

This is the best book that I have read in a long time, and I could not put it down. I re-read it for this review, and it was just as engaging as the first time. It also is particularly appropriate now and gave me an insight into the plight of migrants crossing our southern border. I will be thinking about it for a long time and may choose it for my reading group when we can meet again.

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