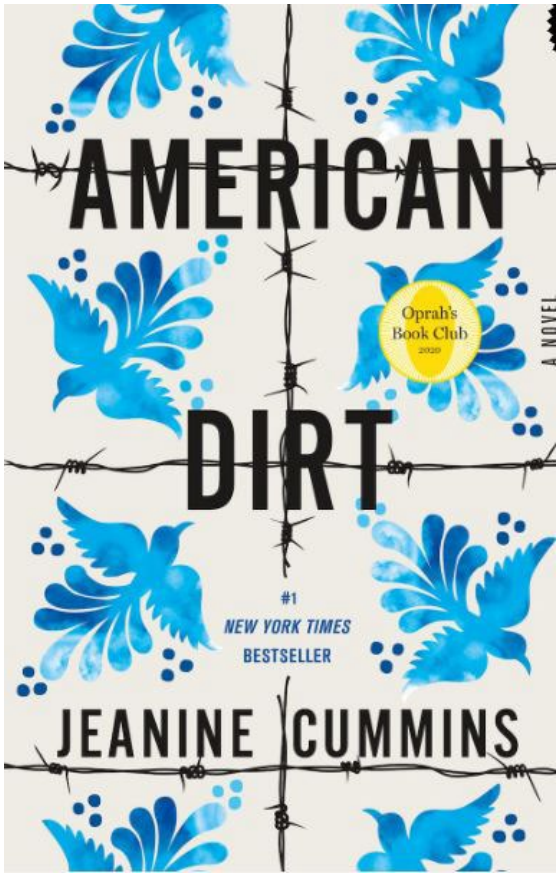
# American Dirt
## by Jeanine Cummins

*Martin County Library System Book Discussion Kit:*

# *American Dirt by Jeanine Cummins*




## Included in the Kit:


- Book summary
- Controversy surrounding the book
- Author biography
- Discussion questions
- Recipe suggestions


## Book summary

*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

*also available to download from Libby*

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?

Source: MacMillan.com

https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781250209764/americandirtoprahsbookclub/

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### Controversy surrounding the book

The book was subject to a bidding war from publishers in 2018. The winner, Flatiron Books, paid Cummins a seven-figure advance. Flatiron engaged in a massive publicity campaign, including sending boxes of copies to libraries near the Mexican border, holding a release party, and obtaining blurbs from Stephen King, Sandra Cisneros, Don Winslow and John Grisham. On January 20, 2020, the day before the book's release, Oprah Winfrey announced that she had selected *American Dirt* for her book club. *American Dirt* remained on the *New York Times* Bestseller List for 36 weeks and was one of the best-selling books of 2020. It has been published in 37 languages and has sold over 3 million copies worldwide.

Oprah Winfrey, in selecting *American Dirt* for her book club, said, "Jeanine Cummins accomplished a remarkable feat, literally putting us in the shoes of migrants and making us feel their anguish and desperation to live in freedom." The book also received glowing reviews from Mexican-American writer Sandra Cisneros, who called it "the great novel of las Americas" and "the international story of our time" and Washington Post critic Polly Rosenwaike, who wrote that it "offers both a vital chronicle of contemporary Latin American migrant experience and a profoundly moving reading experience." NPR's Maureen Corrigan was equally positive, writing that "Cummins' novel brings to life the ordeal of individual migrants, who risk everything to try to cross into the U.S." Jacob M. Appel, in New York Journal of Books wrote, "American Dirt is going to be the defining book of 2020."

Myriam Gurba was one of the first reviewers to give a negative review. Originally requested by Ms. magazine, her review was considered too negative, and she instead posted it to the academic blog Tropics of Meta. She says of the protagonist, "That Lydia is so shocked by her own country's day-to-day realities [...] gives the impression that Lydia might not be… a credible Mexican. In fact, she perceives her own country through the eyes of a pearl-clutching American

tourist." On Medium, writer David Bowles called the book "harmful, appropriating, inaccurate, trauma-porn melodrama."

In a January 30, 2020 opinion piece in *The Guardian*, author and critic Daniel Olivas wrote: "*American Dirt* is an insult to Latinx writers who have toiled – some of us for decades – to little notice of major publishers and book reviewers, while building a vast collection of breathtaking, authentic literature often published by university and independent presses on shoestring budgets. And while the folks who run Flatiron Books have every right to pay seven figures to buy and publish a book like American Dirt, they have no immunity from bad reviews and valid criticism." He added, "it's not that we think only Latinx writers should write Latinx-themed books. No, this is not about censorship. A talented writer who does the hard work can create convincing, powerful works of literature about other cultures. That's called art. American Dirt is not art." Olivas concluded: "Perhaps *American Dirt* will be remembered not as a great novel, but as a key pivot-point for an industry that desperately needs to change."

A group of Latino writers formed a campaign and hashtag in response to the publication and initial mainstream praise of American Dirt called "#DignidadLiteraria" ("Literary Dignity"). On February 3, 2020, the group met with Macmillan, the owner of Flatiron Books, to demand greater representation of Latino writers under the publication house. Macmillan agreed to these terms. The group also demanded "investigation into discriminatory practices in the publishing industry at large."

Source: Wikipedia

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### Meet the Author



Jeanine Cummins was born in Rota, Spain, where her father, Gene, was stationed as a member of the U.S. Navy. Her mother, Kay, was a nurse. Cummins spent her childhood in Gaithersburg, Maryland and attended Towson University, where she majored in English and communications. In 1993 Cummins was a finalist in the Rose of Tralee festival, an international event that is celebrated among Irish communities all over the world; at each festival in Tralee, Ireland, a woman is crowned the Rose. After university, Cummins spent two years working as a bartender in Belfast, Northern Ireland, before moving back to the United States in 1997 and beginning work at Penguin in New York City. She worked in the publishing industry for 10 years. She is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *American Dirt*, as well as the novels *The Outside Boy* and *The Crooked Branch* and the bestselling memoir *A Rip in Heaven*. She lives in New York with her husband and two children.

Source: Wikipedia

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### Discussion Questions

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. “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?
10. 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?

11. "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?
12. Why do you think there are birds on the cover of the novel?
13. "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?
14. 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?

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## Recipes

### Mexican Corn Salad



#### Ingredients:

- 1 tbsp Butter
- 4 cups of corn
- 1 Red Pepper
- ¼ c of onion
- ¼ c green chilies
- ½ cups of cilantro
- 3 tbsp of lime juice
- ¼ cups of Mexican crema
- 2 tbsp of Mayo
- ½ tsp cumin
- ¼ tsp paprika
- ½ tsp of chili powder
- 1/3 cup of cottage cheese

#### Directions

Begin cooking corn in the butter. Add red pepper, onion, chilies, and cilantro. Begin making the dressing with the lime juice, crema, mayo, cumin, paprika, and chili powder. Toss salad and sprinkle with cheese.

Source: PBS Dinner and a Book

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### Recipes Continuation

#### Oven Baked Nachos and Cheese



Ingredients:

- 1 teaspoon vegetable oil
- 12 oz tortilla Chips
- 2 cups refried beans
- 4 oz canned green chilies chopped
- 1 tomato chopped
- 4 oz black olives sliced
- ⅔ cup black beans or pinto beans drained and rinsed
- 1 cup corn canned or frozen
- 4 cups shredded cheese such as cheddar & Monterey Jack cheese
- ½ cup salsa

Preheat the oven to 350°F/176°C

Grease a 12-inch oven-safe skillet or small sheet pan with the oil. Arrange a third of the tortilla chips in a single layer in the pan. Top chips evenly with a third of the refried beans, green chilies, chopped tomatoes, black olives, black beans, and corn, then top with a third of the cheese. Repeat with the next layer, and on the third layer, use the remaining refried beans, green chilies, chopped tomatoes, black olives, black beans, and corn Scatter with the salsa before adding the remaining cheese. Bake in preheated oven until cheese melts and browns slightly, about 8 minutes. Remove from oven, and top with Guacamole, jalapeño, and sour cream. Drizzle with hot sauce, if desired.

Source: Eren's kitchen

https://www.errenskitchen.com/oven-baked-nachos-and-cheese/