

American Dirt

American Dirt, a novel by Jeannine Cummins, centers on the perilous journey that a Mexican mother, Lydia, and her son, Lucas, undertake in order to seek refuge in the United States. The book is fast-paced and engrossing, and received widespread interest and acclaim leading up to its release in January, 2020. Cummins received a seven-figure advance from her publisher; the book was optioned for a film adaptation prior to its release; Oprah picked up the title for her book club.¹

Immediately following the release, however, there was a massive backlash against the novel and against Cummins. Critics maintain that the book is rife with problematic stereotypes, and does little to address some of the biggest challenges facing immigrants from Latin America. In an influential review, Parul Seghal of the *New York Times* says that the book, despite its topic, is “determinedly apolitical. The deep roots of these forced migrations are never interrogated; the American reader can read without fear of uncomfortable self-reproach. It asks us only to accept that ‘these people are people,’ while giving us the saintly to root for and the barbarous to deplore—and then congratulating us for caring.”²

Complicating issues is the fact that Cummins herself is white (though she has some latinx heritage), and is not an immigrant. This leads many people to wonder why Cummins’s voice should get so much uptake and acclaim, when people of more relevant demographics aren’t receiving comparable attention. Furthermore, there are questions about how accurately a white, non-immigrant woman can represent the struggles that she herself has never faced.

Some disagree, however. Sandra Cisneros, a well-known Mexican American author, wrote a blurb endorsing the book. Even after the backlash, she came out in the support of the novel.³ The likely reader, said Cisneros, is “going to be someone who wants to be entertained, and the story is going to enter like a Trojan horse and change minds. It’s going to change the minds that, perhaps, I can’t change.”

Cummins stands by her novel. She says: “Not everyone has to love my book. I endeavored to be incredibly culturally sensitive. I did the work, I did five years of research. The whole intention in my heart when I wrote this book was to try to upend the stereotypes that I saw being very prevalent in our national dialogue. And I felt like there was room ... for us to examine the humanity of the people involved.”⁴

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. To what extent do we have a duty to refrain from telling certain stories, even if these stories are fictional?
2. To what extent does who we are impact the sorts of stories we can and should tell?
3. Parul Seghal criticizes the book for being “determinedly apolitical”. What is the purpose of fiction? What is the proper place of fictional stories, ethically? Politically?
4. Do the intentions of the artist make a difference to the quality of the art that artist creates? Does the moral character of the artist make a difference to the quality of the art that artist creates?
5. Cummins maintains that she “did the work” and only wanted to “upend the stereotypes that I saw”. Did Cummins herself do anything morally blameworthy in writing the novel?

¹ [The Atlantic](#), “The ‘American Dirt’ Controversy Is Painfully Intramural”

² [The New York Times](#), “A Mother and Son, Fleeing for Their Lives Over Treacherous Terrain”

³ [The Los Angeles Times](#), “As the ‘American Dirt’ backlash ramps up, Sandra Cisneros doubles down on her support”

⁴ [NPR](#), “Latinx Critics Speak Out Against ‘American Dirt’; Jeanine Cummins Responds”

