

# Books by the Stack



## ***The Book of Unknown Americans* by Cristina Henríquez**

Moving from Mexico to the United States when their daughter suffers a near-fatal accident, the Riveras confront cultural barriers, their daughter's difficult recovery, and her developing relationship with a Panamanian boy.

**Why you'll like it:** *Immigrant experience. Compassionate. Heartbreaking.*

**About the Author:** Cristina Henríquez is the author of the story collection *Come Together, Fall Apart*, which was a New York Times Editors' Choice selection, and the novel *The World in Half*. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The American Scholar*, *Glimmer Train*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Ploughshares*, *TriQuarterly*, *AGNI*, and *Oxford American*, as well as in various anthologies. She lives in Illinois.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. How does Alma's perspective in the novel's first chapter illustrate her and her family's hope for their new life in America? Take another look at her statement after the trip to the gas station: "The three of us started toward the road, doubling back in the direction from which we had come, heading toward home" (page 11). What are the meanings of "home" here, and how does this scene show how America meets and differs from the Riveras' expectations of it?
2. Mayor describes how he's bullied at school and his general feelings of not fitting in. How do you think this draws him to Maribel? What do they have in common that perhaps those around them, including their parents, cannot see on the surface?
3. How does Alma's lingering guilt about Maribel's accident affect her choices and interactions when she's in America? Do you think she still feels this way by the end of the book? What does she have to do, and realize within herself, to move beyond her feelings?
4. Discuss Quisqueya's role in what happens to Mayor and Maribel. Without her intervention, how might have their relationship, and ultimately the novel, ended differently?
5. How would you describe the atmosphere of the impromptu Christmas party in the Toros' apartment (p. 137)? What brings the residents of the building together, as a group and in more intimate settings?
6. How does the Toros' buying a car influence the course of event in the novel? What does the car mean for Rafael and Mayor individually and for their father-son relationship?
7. Was Alma's decision to return to Mexico with Maribel the best one? Were there alternatives, or did their departure seem inevitable to you?

- 8.** Alma and Mayor are the primary narrators of the book, yet they have very different voices and perspectives. How does pairing these points of view affect the telling of this story, even as they are punctuated by the voices of the neighbors in Redwood Apartments? How does the chorus of voices affect the main story and pose larger questions of immigration and the Latino experience in the United States?
- 9.** Were you surprised that the book takes place in Newark, Delaware, rather than in the larger Latin American communities of Florida, New York, Texas or California? What does this setting suggest about immigrant families like the Riveras and the Toros across the country? Do you feel differently about the immigrant debate now raging in the United States after reading this book?
- 10.** How does the final chapter, told in Arturo's voice, influence your understanding of what he felt about America? What do you make of how he ends his narrative, "I loved this country," and that it is the last line of the book (p. 286)?



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