

Conditional Citizens: On Belonging in America

by Laila Lalami

About the Book

What does it mean to be American? In this starkly illuminating and impassioned book, Pulitzer Prize–finalist Laila Lalami recounts her unlikely journey from Moroccan immigrant to U.S. citizen, using it as a starting point for her exploration of the rights, liberties, and protections that are traditionally associated with American citizenship. Tapping into history, politics, and literature, she elucidates how accidents of birth—such as national origin, race, and gender—that once determined the boundaries of Americanness still cast their shadows today.

Suggested Opening Prayer

God of the journey, God of the traveler,
We pray for those who leave their homes in search of new beginnings and possibilities,
may they know your presence with them.
We pray that those who seek to make a home in this country
may find us welcoming and willing to help them find a path toward citizenship,
We pray that our legislators, as they craft new immigration legislation
may find the wisdom and courage to enact new policies that do justice for our country
and for those who would immigrate here.
We pray for those who fan the flames of fear and discrimination against the
undocumented
may be touched with your divine compassion.
We pray in Jesus' name.
Amen.

Source: The Archdiocese of Chicago

Discussion Questions

These are some suggested questions to get your discussion started.

- What surprised you about *Conditional Citizens*? What did you learn from the different sections in the book?
- What do you think are the book's strengths? Its weaknesses?
- What do you think the title means? Is Lalami only speaking about immigrants as conditional citizens?
- Why do you think Lalami includes topics like the wealth gap and sexual harassment in the book?
- What did you think about the discussion of checkpoints and the power of Border Patrol? Have you ever crossed the American border or been stopped at a checkpoint? What was your experience like?
- How did the arrangement of the book and the way Lalami tells the story impact your experience with the book? What did you like or not like about the way the story is told?
- America once prided itself on being "a nation of immigrants." How has the national view of immigrants and immigration changed since the founding of the nation, and especially over the past fifty years, since the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act? Do you believe that America is a nation of immigrants?
- What does it mean to be an American? What makes an individual a citizen? Who should get to choose who is allowed to become an American and live here and who is not?
- What is the difference between assimilation and integration? How do you think those two concepts have functioned in America?
- Lalami explores the danger involved in immigrants maintaining and displaying certain aspects of their home cultures, like speaking another language or wearing "non-American" clothing. Why are some cultures and languages seen as threatening to some?
- How has reading *Conditional Citizens* affected your opinion about immigration, migration, citizenship, and being an American?

About the Author

Laila Lalami was born in Rabat and educated in Morocco, Great Britain, and the United States. She is the author of four novels, including *The Moor's Account*, which won the American Book Award, the Arab-American Book Award, and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Her most recent work, *The Other Americans*, was a finalist for the National Book Award. Her essays have appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Nation*, *Harper's*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times*. Lalami is a professor of creative writing at the University of California at Riverside. She lives in Los Angeles.

About the Author Continued

- New York Times Review: [Life in an America Where Some Are Only 'Conditional Citizens'](#)
- NPR Interview: ['Conditional Citizens' Examines What It Means To Be An American](#)
- Los Angeles Review of Books: [Who Does the United States Belong to?: A Conversation with Laila Lalami](#)
- New York Public Library: [Conditional Citizens: Laila Lalami with Fatima Bhutto](#) (video with transcript)

Further Reading and Watching

Websites:

- Define American, defineamerican.com
- American Institute for Contemporary German Studies: ["The Dehumanization of Immigrants and the Rise of the Extreme Right,"](#) by Beverly Crawford Ames.
- Vox, ["Donald Trump and the disturbing power of dehumanizing language,"](#) by Brian Resnick.
- MPI Webinar, ["A Bumpy Path to U.S. Citizenship: A Survey of Changing USCIS Practice"](#)
- Reimagining Migration, ["Assimilation, Integration and Refugees"](#)
- Informed Immigrant, informedimmigrant.com
- Freedom for Immigrants, freedomforimmigrants.org/
- Episcopal Migration Ministries, episcopalmigrationministries.org

Books:

- [American Like Me: Reflections on Life Between Cultures](#) by America Ferrera
- [Love Thy Neighbor: A Muslim Doctor's Struggle for Home in Rural America](#) by Ayaz Virji
- [They Called Us Enemy](#) by George Takei, Justin Eisinger, Steven Scott, and Harmony Becker
- [Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen](#) by Jose Antonio Vargas
- [Good Talk: A Memoir in Conversations](#) by Mira Jacob
- [The Other Americans](#) by Laila Lalami