



Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen by Jose Antonio Vargas

About the Book

Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen is an urgent, provocative and deeply personal account from Jose Antonio Vargas, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who happens to be the most well-known undocumented immigrant in the United States. Born in the Philippines and brought to the U.S. illegally as a 12-year-old, Vargas hid in plain-sight for years, and went on to write for some of the most prestigious news organizations in the country while lying about where he came from and how he got here. After publicly admitting his undocumented status—risking his career and personal safety—Vargas has challenged the definition of what it means to be an American. Both a letter to and a window into Vargas’s America, *Dear America* is a transformative argument about migration and citizenship, and an intimate, searing exploration on what it means when the country you call your home doesn’t consider you one of its own.

Suggested Opening Prayer

Blessed are You, Lord Jesus Christ. You crossed every border between Divinity and humanity to make your home with us. Help us to welcome you in newcomers, migrants and refugees. Blessed are You, God of all nations. You bless our land richly with goods of creation and with people made in your image. Help us to be good stewards and peacemakers, who live as your children. Blessed are You, Holy Spirit. You work in the hearts of all to bring about harmony and goodwill. Strengthen us to welcome those from other lands, cultures, religions, that we may live in human solidarity and in hope. God of all people, grant us vision to see your presence in our midst, especially in our immigrant sisters and brothers. Give us courage to open the door to our neighbors and grace to build a society of justice. Source: Pax Christi

Discussion Questions

These are some suggested questions to get your discussion started. Some questions are from the publisher's [reading guide](#) and [teaching guide](#).

- What surprised you about *Dear America*? What did you learn from Jose's story?
- Why is acceptance in school something important for Jose to achieve? What does it mean to him?
- What is colorism? In what ways does colorism affect Jose growing up?
- Jose learns the truth about his green card from Lolo. What are the ways in which learning the truth prompts Jose to question feelings of belonging, trust, and security he's found in his life?
- How does the library help Jose create a "masked" identity? How have libraries been a part of your life?
- Jose writes about Toni Morrison's idea of the master narrative, that the stories of those in power dominate the culture and make it harder for others to see themselves in the fabric of American culture. As a young adult, he saw America's master narrative as being white or black, and that anything out of the margins of this view was not easily seen or understood by a mass audience. Do you think Jose's story and that of others have changed the master narrative overtime? Do you face versions of a master narrative of American culture in your own life?
- How did the arrangement of the book and the way Jose tells the story impact your experience with the book? What did you like or not like about the way the story is told?
- Jose discusses how national media has often used dehumanizing language of undocumented people. Do you think words matter in how Americans perceive immigrants?
- 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 (still) 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?
- Jose explains that the book is not about immigration, but about homelessness. How does he separate the two? What makes a place a home for someone? What does it mean not to have a home? Do you think you could endure living in limbo—choosing not to put down roots, moving from place to place, fearing that you will be arrested?
- How has reading *Dear America* affected your opinion about immigration, migration, citizenship, and being an American?
- *Dear America* delves into how anti-immigrant hate groups have successfully used mainstream media to legitimize hate speech. How can you combat dehumanizing and inaccurate phrases like "illegal immigrant" or "alien"? What other words do you see the media using to describe immigrants that are dehumanizing?

About the Author

Jose Antonio Vargas, a journalist and filmmaker, is the founder and CEO of the non-profit Define American. His work has appeared internationally in TIME, as well as in the San Francisco Chronicle, the New Yorker, and the Washington Post, where he won a Pulitzer Prize as part of a reporting team. In 2014, he received the Freedom to Write Award from PEN Center USA. He directed the documentary feature Documented and MTV special White People, which was nominated for an Emmy Award. An elementary school named after him will open in his hometown of Mountain View, California in 2019.

[Harper Collins Academic podcast interview with Vargas.](#)

[Recode Decode podcast interview with transcript.](#)

[Politics & Prose video Q&A](#)

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.
- Informed Immigrant, informedimmigrant.com
- Accredited Schools, [“Supporting & Protecting Undocumented Students,”](#) by Jeff Benson.
- Episcopal Church Office of Government Relations, [“Ten Actions You Can Take to Accompany Undocumented Immigrants.”](#)
- American Immigration Council, [“How the United States Immigration System Works.”](#)
- United We Dream, unitedwedream.org/.
- United Statelessness, unitedstateless.org/.
- Freedom for Immigrants, freedomforimmigrants.org/.
- Episcopal Migration Ministries, episcopalmigrationministries.org

Further Reading and Watching

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
- A Good Provider Is One Who Leaves: One Family and Migration in the 21st Century by Jason DeParle

Film:

- Remezcla, "These 15 Documentaries Dive Deep Into the Experience of Undocumented Immigrants."