



The Undocumented Americans

by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio

About the Book

Writer Karla Cornejo Villavicencio was on DACA when she decided to write about being undocumented for the first time using her own name. It was right after the election of 2016, the day she realized the story she'd tried to steer clear of was the only one she wanted to tell. So she wrote her immigration lawyer's phone number on her hand in Sharpie and embarked on a trip across the country to tell the stories of her fellow undocumented immigrants—and to find the hidden key to her own.

Looking beyond the flashpoints of the border or the activism of the DREAMers, Cornejo Villavicencio explores the lives of the undocumented—and the mysteries of her own life. She finds the singular, effervescent characters across the nation often reduced in the media to political pawns or nameless laborers. The stories she tells are not deferential or naively inspirational but show the love, magic, heartbreak, insanity, and vulgarity that infuse the day-to-day lives of her subjects.

In New York, we meet the undocumented workers who were recruited into the federally funded Ground Zero cleanup after 9/11. In Miami, we enter the ubiquitous botanicas, which offer medicinal herbs and potions to those whose status blocks them from any other healthcare options. In Flint, Michigan, we learn of demands for state ID in order to receive life-saving clean water. In Connecticut, Cornejo Villavicencio, childless by choice, finds family in two teenage girls whose father is in sanctuary. And through it all we see the author grappling with the biggest questions of love, duty, family, and survival.

In her incandescent, relentlessly probing voice, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio combines sensitive reporting and powerful personal narratives to bring to light remarkable stories of resilience, madness, and death. Through these stories we come to understand what it truly means to be a stray. An expendable. A hero. An American. (From the publisher.)

Suggested Opening Prayer

Prayer for Healing and Wholeness in our Country of Immigrants by Kathy McGourty

Lord God, Giver of Life, Source of all healing,
You alone can help us grow in wholeness:
Be with us as we welcome the immigrant and listen to their voice.
Guide us as we work for immigration reform in our country.
Hear our prayer as we pray with those being deported and
with their families, broken and separated.
Lord, God Giver of Life, Source of all healing,
who alone can help us grow in wholeness:
Deepen our faith,
Strengthen our hope,
Heal our divisions,
Be our guiding light.
We ask this through Christ, Our Lord. Amen.

Discussion Questions

These are some suggested questions to get your discussion started.

- What forms your opinions and images of undocumented immigrants? How can we, as readers, shift away from those preconceived notions to a space of openness and listening?
- How do you perceive undocumented individuals and immigrants to be treated by our immigration system? Did this book challenge any of your ideas about how they are treated?
- What did you learn from this book that you didn't know before? Did anything surprise you?
- Discuss how the book was put together. Did you like how the stories focused on different locations and situations? What did you think about the information that the author included about her own life?
- Talk about your experience with undocumented immigrants in your own community. Do you know any undocumented immigrants? Do you feel your area welcomes undocumented immigrants? If not, after reading the book (or from your own experience) what changes would you like to see?

Discussion Questions Continued

- Villavicencio often discusses mental health, self harm, and addiction within the undocumented community. Reflect on the lack of access to healthcare, for both physical health and mental health, that undocumented immigrants face.
- Why do you think the author chose to highlight healthcare access as one of the major problems affecting undocumented immigrants?
- What did you notice about how the author notes what she does and does not do or ask of the people she interviews? For example, when visiting Leonel while he is in sanctuary, she states: “I shed my outer clothing as soon as I’m in the church to try to hide the changing seasons from him. I try to wear basically the same thing. I do not want to cause him pain by reminding him of the outside world.”
- What do you know about sanctuary churches or sanctuary cities? What do you know about why someone would choose to seek sanctuary and how that process works? How does this book differ from stories you have read about undocumented immigrants that were written by others who are documented or are citizens? Did this book feel more or less honest or insightful?
- What do you notice is absent from this book that is usually part of books or articles about undocumented immigrants? What is different about this book when compared to how the stories of undocumented immigrants are usually told?
- Do you have ideas for how to help undocumented immigrants in your community? Has this book given you insight into what kind of services or resources you could provide undocumented immigrants?
- After reading this book, what is one conversation you’d like to have with someone you know (or even don’t know), and what would you like to say?

About the Author

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio has written about immigration, music, beauty, and mental illness for The New York Times, The Atlantic, The New Republic, Glamour, Elle, Vogue, n+1, and The New Inquiry, among others. She lives in New Haven with her partner and their dog.

New York Times Review

Guernica: Karla Cornejo Villavicencio: DREAMer memoirs have their purpose. But that’s not what I set out to write.

Electric Lit: A Book About Undocumented Americans That Doesn’t Pander to White Expectations

Immigration and Democracy podcast: S1. Ep2. Youth Memoirs: Growing Up Undocumented
C-SPAN & The Free Library of Philadelphia (video interview): The Undocumented Americans

Further Reading

Backgrounders & Resources

- EMM Webinar June 2020: [Episcopal Action on DACA](#)
- Episcopal Church's Office of Government Relations: [Ten Actions You Can Take to Accompany Undocumented Immigrants](#)
- National Immigration Law Center: [DACA](#)
- [United We Dream](#)
- [Sanctuary Movement](#)
- Immigrant Legal Resource Center: [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival](#)

Books

- [America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States](#) by Erika Lee
- [Barrio America](#) by A. K. Sandoval-Strausz
- [Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza](#) by Gloria Anzaldúa
- [Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen](#) by Jose Antonio Varga
- [The Devil's Highway](#) by Luis Alberto Urrea
- [A Good Provider Is One Who Leaves: One Family and Migration in the 21st Century](#) by Jason DeParle
- [The Good Immigrant: 26 Writers Reflect on America](#), edited by Nikesh Shukla and Chimene Suleyman
- [Homelands: Four Friends, Two Countries, and the Fate of the Great Mexican-American Migration](#) by Alfredo Corchado
- [Somewhere in the Unknown World: A Collective Refugee Memoir](#) by Kao Kalia Yang
- [Tell Me How it Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions](#) by Valeria Luiselli