



Penguin
Random
House

The Undocumented Americans

by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio

One World

Hardcover | 978-0-399-59268-3 | 208 pages | \$26.00

Also available in e-book format and as an audio download

Finalist for the National Book Award for Nonfiction and
the National Book Critics Circle John Leonard Prize

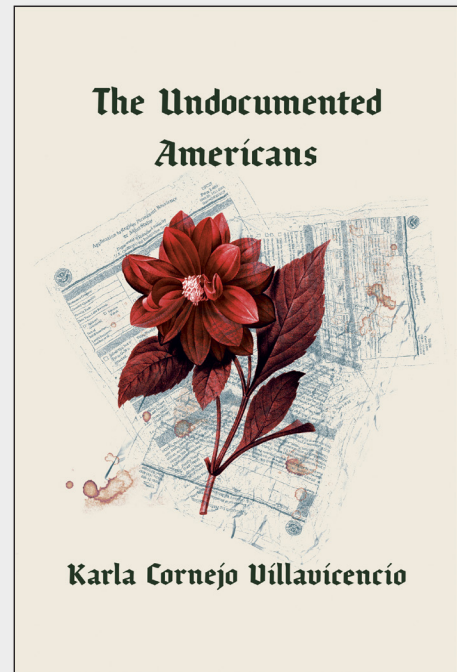
ABOUT THE BOOK

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

First-Year and Common Reading Guide



“Karla Cornejo Villavicencio offers an unflinching indictment of our current immigration system, one that separates families, inflicts trauma, and every day eats away at people’s dignity. At the same time, she writes about migrants in a way they’ve never been written about before—in all their complexity, messiness, humanity, and beauty. Cornejo Villavicencio understands in her bones that writers cannot give people voices or faces. *The Undocumented Americans* succeeds precisely because she sees their faces and hears their voices.”

—Roberto G. Gonzales, author of
*Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and
Coming of Age in America*

ABOUT THE BOOK (CONTINUED)

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.

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.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who did the author contact the day after the 2016 presidential election? Although Cornejo Villavicencio had previously turned down offers from agents to write a memoir, what made her change her mind about writing a book? What did she hate about other books and stories about migrants and how did she intend for her book to be different? Why does the author say that her book is “not a traditional nonfiction book” and why does she decline to “put on the drag of a journalist” (xv)? Unlike many other writers, how did she approach research and translation and why were these decisions crucial in her storytelling about the lives of undocumented Americans?
2. What place does Cornejo Villavicencio say that she attempts to write from (vi)? Who does she indicate is the intended audience for her book and what does she hope they will feel when they read it? What does she say that the book will give them permission to do?
3. Why did the author make the decision not to write about DREAMers or DACA? Likewise, why do you think that she chose not to write in detail about the reasons the undocumented people featured in the book left their home country or their journey to the United States? What effect does this decision have on the narrative that follows? How does this set *The Undocumented Americans* apart from the prevailing national conversation on immigrants and conversations you may have had previously with peers, family members, friends, or teachers?
4. When and why did Staten Island first enter the author’s consciousness? Who are the day laborers and why does Cornejo Villavicencio travel to Staten Island in 2017 to meet them and speak with them? What does the author mean when she says that “Historically, legislators and immigration advocates have parted the sea of the undocumented with a splintered staff” (9) and why is this segmentation so troublesome? What pervasive lies and myths about undocumented people does the author call out and what kind of abuses do the day laborers particularly, including her father, suffer as they seek out jobs and perform their work? Why were worker centers established and what assistance do they provide for the undocumented people who use them?
5. Why is the prevalent use of the term “undocumented workers” hugely problematic? What troublesome ideas about human value does it reinforce or emphasize? Likewise, why does the author write in her book about the 2010 Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act? How does this law emphasize discrimination and endanger undocumented people? In Chapter One and the chapters that follow, how does the author challenge these ways

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
(CONTINUED)

- of thinking and emphasize a more humane definition of “value”? How does she support and reinforce this redefinition of human value via her characterization of the undocumented Americans in her book? What kinds of things do undocumented immigrants like Julián and Joaquín most want others to know about them? What questions does the author ask readers to consider at the end of Chapter One following her fictionalized retelling of the story of Ubaldo’s death (30)?
6. Who were “the second responders” in the aftermath of 9/11? Who made up more than half of the reconstruction crews in New Orleans post-Katrina and took on many of the most difficult and dangerous tasks post-Hurricane Sandy? What happened to these responders after they completed their work and what does the author say is “all anyone can talk about” when she returns to visit some of them in 2017 (35)? Discuss how 9/11 affected Paloma and Milton. What does the title of Milton’s memoir *Sueño, pesadilla, paraíso* represent? How did 9/11 “change the immigration landscape forever” (40) and why does Cornejo Villavicencio say that it was the day that her father started dying (41)? Who does Cornejo Villavicencio remind readers have been largely omitted from 9/11 memorials and narratives and how does she highlight the enormous personal impact of this via the story of Fernando?
 7. Explore *The Undocumented Americans* as a “story about illness and healing in migrant communities through the lens of women—caretakers and rebels” (62). How do the women featured in the book fulfill these two roles? In what ways are they rebellious? What are “the pressing issues” around healthcare for undocumented Americans and how do the women in the book cope with these issues (67)? How does the healthcare system fail and endanger undocumented Americans and what role do alternative medicine and ceremony play in their lives? How else do they seek healing? Do the people Cornejo Villavicencio writes about ever seem to experience catharsis or healing? Why is this significant?
 8. How has the undocumented community been affected by the water crisis in Flint, Michigan? What does the author say is one of the most striking aspects of the streetscape in Flint and what does it reveal about the experience of those who live there? What are the effects of lead in water and why does the author say that she fears for children of color especially? When the author returns to Flint a year after her initial visit, what progress has there been?
 9. What literary device does the author use to highlight the violence enacted on people of color, including those in the undocumented community, by their own government (114)? What effect do you think the author intended for this to have on readers? What does the passage—and the use of this device within it—reveal about the enormity and urgency of this problem?
 10. Why does Cornejo Villavicencio say that she is not a journalist? What kinds of things does she do that other journalists do not attempt? What kind of professional does she consider herself to be and what does she say her job is? As she attempts to do this job, what connection does she find between what she witnesses in Flint and the treatment of undocumented people everywhere? Why couldn’t the author connect with the youth of Flint and how did they defy her expectations? What does this suggest about social mobility and the American dream?
 11. Why does the author travel to Willard, Ohio? What does she tell the three boys who just watched their father be deported that it’s up to them to do and how does she believe they should accomplish this? Where does the author say that stories about deportation often end and why is this problematic? Although “there are no clowns in fields with machetes in America,” what does the author say menaces undocumented families (128)?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
(CONTINUED)

12. What are sanctuary spaces and what “higher moral law” do these spaces help to enforce (138)? What is life like for those who are forced to live in these spaces and their families? When it comes to sanctuary, what does the author say is “the most beautiful thing [she has] ever seen” (137)?
13. What moment does Cornejo Villavicencio say she has “been preparing for [her] entire life” (148)? What is “the twisted inversion that many children of immigrants know” (148)? What is life like for aging undocumented immigrants in America and how is elder care for undocumented people different than the elder care provided to American citizens? What strain does this place on their children? Who in particular ends up feeling “an unescapable burden” (166)?
14. What is the “public health crisis” that’s “hard to know how to talk about” without feeding into the lie that undocumented people are a burden on the healthcare system (155)? What does the author say is the “trick to doing it” (155)? What myth does she say they must employ in order to reassure other Americans? Why is this problematic?
15. When Cornejo Villavicencio asks those she interviews about regrets, how do they respond? What is it that she says they remember of their time in the United States? With what Bible passage does the author conclude the book and why do you think she chose to end the book in this way?
16. Some critics and reviewers have evaluated *The Undocumented Americans* solely from a sociological standpoint, but how does it also function as literary nonfiction? Consider genre. Why do you think that the author chose to weave memoir with reportage, creative ethnography, and elements of fiction such as magical realism? How does the book also fit within the Latin American genre of testimonio? What broader questions does this raise about what it means to bear witness to what is happening to undocumented immigrants in America not only for the author (who is both witness and subject) and other writers, but for all readers of the book? Consider, also, the form of the book. Why do you think the author chose to organize the chapters on the basis of place?
17. Explore the motifs of trauma and mental illness. What does the author reveal about the relationship between illness—and especially mental illness—and the experience of migration? Why do you think that Cornejo Villavicencio decided to share details of her own mental and physical illness with readers? How was the health of the many people featured in the book impacted by their own journey as migrants and their lives as undocumented people living in the United States? How does the book challenge or confront the heavy cultural stigma around illness—and mental illness particularly—both within the undocumented community and at large in America?
18. *The Undocumented Americans* ultimately resists romanticized accounts and inspirational stories of immigration. Why is this so important? In a 2020 *New York Times* article, the author said that it was important to her to tell the stories of “[p]eople who don’t inspire hashtags or t-shirts.” Why do you think the author made this choice and how does Cornejo Villavicencio’s book ultimately challenge and break apart pervasive myths about undocumented immigrants and immigration? How did *The Undocumented Americans* change your own thinking about these subjects?

**ABOUT THIS
GUIDE'S WRITER**

JE BANACH was an original member of the Resident Faculty in Fiction at the Yale Writers' Workshop. She has written for PEN, *Vogue*, *ELLE*, *Esquire*, *Granta*, *The Paris Review*, *Electric Literature*, and other venues and was a long-time contributor to Harold Bloom's literary series. She is the author of more than 90 literary guides including guides to works by Maya Angelou, Salman Rushdie, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Haruki Murakami, and many others.



Penguin Random House Education
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

CommonReads.com

Queries: **CommonReads@PenguinRandomHouse.com**



/CommonReads



@CommonReads



/CommonReads