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English 1A

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Letters to my Fellow Americans

*The Book of Unknown Americans* by Cristina Henríquez is an intriguing novel that focuses on two main immigrant families and their personal stories. I loved how the book had two different narrators, by doing this Henríquez is able to give a very unique insight on every event that unfolds throughout the story. The novel also features excerpts from other background characters every few chapters, I will be honest, I did not think these added much to the overall plot, but I suppose it was interesting to hear different immigration stories. I think the main purpose of these excerpts are to appeal to the reader's emotions and seem relatable, so that one can connect with the story on a more personal level. I decided to write to Celia, Rafael, Maribel, and Alma because these four characters interested me, and while reading I felt the motivation to give them advice and reassure them of some of their actions. This novel is full of twists and interested me much more than I thought it would, I would have never guessed that this story which starts out with a humble family of three would turn into a tragedy filled with young love, a teenager's journey of self-discovery, and sudden death.

Dear Celia

Greetings my dearest. I hope you are doing well. I am happy to hear that you have made a new friend in your apartment building. Mayor tells me “The Riveras started going to the same Mass as us, and afterwards my mom usually invited them over for lunch” (67). Alma and the Rivera family sound lovely, much sweeter than a few of your other neighbors (you know who I am talking about). And it is quite nice that Mayor has made friends with their daughter, sometimes I worry about that boy, he does not seem to have many friends in general, especially the the female type, ha ha I kid. I am so sorry to hear about the soccer fiasco though, I hope Rafael is not being too harsh to the two of you. Although if I have to guess, then yes he is, just like usual. Mayor sounded so scared when explaining how Rafael reacted “His nostrils flared and he looked me right in the eyes... He dug his fingertips into my skin like he was trying to carve his way down to my bone” (132). I swear Celia, I do not know how on Earth you put up with that man. He is so unpleasant to you two, just plain mean. I know you have always said divorce is not an option... but I truly feel you should give it some thought. He is who he is and it does not sound like he will become any kinder in the future. Oh and please do your best to stand up for Mayor, I know you do, but still Rafael will have that poor boy’s head if you are not careful. Are you ready for the start of winter? Can anyone in Delaware ever be ready? 15 years there and I imagine it is still hard, nothing like the winters in Panama, of course nothing in America is like Panama. As always best wishes to you all. Sending much love your way. Please write back soon and have a very happy holiday season.

Love, Rachel

Dear Rafael

Oh Rafael. There are so many things I feel the need to say to you. Unfortunately, this will not be a pleasant letter, but that is only because you have not been a pleasant person. First: you need to cut Mayor some serious slack. All that boy does is try to please you or avoid you. You show him no love or support and that is no way to raise a child. I must say you handled the soccer thing totally wrong, the only reason he lied about it in the first place was because you left him with no other option. Mayor has made it clear that “The only reason I’d gone out for the team in the first place was because my dad forced me into it” (18). The truth is Mayor is not Enrique, he has never been good at soccer, is not good now, and frankly has never even liked it. I am sure if you gave him options to do other activities or made it clear that you were open to discussing the soccer thing, he would never have had to lie to you in the first place. You give your poor family no options it is constantly “do this, or feel my wrath”. And we both know the wrath of Rafael is something no living soul wished to deal with. Second: you must be kinder to your wife! Poor Celia all she does is cook, clean, and tend to your every need. She is her own person and deserves to have thoughts and opinions. If she wants to get a job, she should get a job. Not only would it give her something to do during her days but it would help the family financially which is never something you should refuse. Money is money it doesn’t matter who earns it. And so what if she earns it, she is your partner and the second head of the house it is just as much her responsibility to look after her family as it is yours. You are a lucky man that Celia does not believe in divorce, because she should have left you years ago. You have said yourself “My wife, Celia, saved my life. Who knows what would have become of me if I hadn’t met her” (20). You need to appreciate her every day because she deserves nothing less. You make your family miserable, and for what? What do you gain for the emotional turmoil you put them

through? It only causes you more stress and forces your own family to distance themselves from you. Why not choose happiness? You have plenty of thing to be grateful for, there is no reason you must be so bitter all the time. You must also be more kind to the Rivera's, you have not been too awful to them, but some of the things you say about Maribel are very inappropriate, especially to Mayor. You know how he feels about her, your son finally has somewhat of a girlfriend you should be supportive of that, not belittle him over it, and try to ruin things. Mayor is good for Maribel and Maribel is good for Mayor. I hope you can see that someday in the near future. You really need to clean up your act because right now you don't deserve the wonderful family you have, if you continue with your current attitude you will only continue to push them away. Just look at Enrique. He refuses to even stay at home more than one night, he has escaped and is finally happy. If you are not careful Mayor will be next and eventually Celia, leaving you all alone. Finally, be kinder to yourself. Find a way to let out your hatred and tension, it is not healthy for a person to be as wound up as you are. I hope to hear of positive progress soon. Good luck.

p.s. Drive that damn car! Why would you buy it if you are never going to use it? Come on man, think!

-Rachel

Dear Maribel,

Hi doll, I am writing this as of February first, I hope this letter finds you by the end of the month (I am not sure how long the postal service takes from my home to Delaware). I am glad to hear you had a pleasant Christmas although the cold sounds absolutely horrid, to be surrounded by ice with no heater “The radiators didn’t kick back on until late that night” (140). I can not even imagine! But I was very excited to hear about your new friend Mayor. He sounds like a catch! You deserve a nice little boyfriend. I was so excited reading about your first kiss, it brought back so many memories of awkward high school love, awkward but adorable none the less, I am so happy that he is helping you create your own special memories. I look forward to hearing more about this Mayor! Your mother also told me you have been making significant progress at your new school, that is great! Better memory, more patience, and more emotional reactions. She told me the school wrote to them saying “Maribel could easily answer questions and follow prompts, and that her attention span had increased” (219). It sounds like America has been kind to you, this school of yours must be very fancy. But of course, I suppose that’s exactly why you guys left, those people are the best of the best, I am glad to hear the big move was worth it. Any other friends other than Mayor? Do any of the kids in your class speak Spanish? And are you learning much English? I suppose it must be very hard being surrounded by a foreign language everywhere you go, but it sounds like you and your parents are managing. If you do end up learning English that will be a great skill to have, especially there in America, but anywhere in the world. I heard somewhere that being bilingual improves your IQ, not sure if that is true but hey it sounds legitimate. Well as always we are missing you lots! Hope to hear from you all soon (try to send a picture of you and Mayor).

Xoxo, Rachel

Dear Alma,

There are so many things I have wanted to say to you. But after the death of your beloved Arturo I feel like they are all insignificant now. I am so sorry to hear of his loss, Arturo was a great man and a kind soul. His time came much too soon, but we must not grieve forever. You of course need time now but I hope in the future you will be able to stand tall and stay strong for not only Maribel but also yourself. Arturo would be proud of you for being so independent and taking care of what must be done, I know he is also grateful that he will be with you and the rest of your family in Patzcuaro. This way you can “celebrate him on Dia de Muertos” and take him “Pan de muerto and prepare calabaza en tacha for him” (270). I want to tell you how proud I am of you for the time you three spent in America, you faced many struggles and always handled them with strength and grace. You are a great role model for Maribel and all others. That being said, I know you do your best to protect Maribel, but maybe you are doing a little too much. Of course her situation is different from other kids her age, but she is still a teenager regardless. Like you said “maybe she had been there all along. Not exactly the girl she used to be before the accident... but my Maribel, brave and impetuous and kind” (282). I am sure she feels so smothered by you, like with that Mayor boy. It sounded like she had quite the crush on him and likewise he on her, so why not let them have a little innocent fun. Your first love is something so special as I am sure you know, Maribel deserves that. She has already been robbed of so many “Typical” teen milestones, you should do your best to loosen the leash a little. She is growing up and needs to find out how to be her own person. It appears Mayor only ever helped her progress with her injury, sure they might have got into a little trouble here and there but I really hope you will allow her to keep in contact with him and let her branch out in the future when faced with similar situations. If we have learned anything it must be that life is unpredictable so you should try to

live every moment to the fullest. A full life is a happy life. Best wishes to the both of you and the rest of your family, you will stay in my thoughts now and always.

Best Wishes, Rachel

Well there they are, four letters to four separate characters in the book. This assignment was different from anything I have ever had to write before, but I believe it is helpful because you are forced to gain a better understanding of each character: their background, their current life, and their emotions. Most stories focus more on actions, and while many different types of actions did take place in the novel, the reader definitely learns more about each character than what is usually typical for a reading assignment. As mentioned previously, this story keeps you captivated the entire time. I enjoyed *The Book of Unknown Americans* much more than I expected to. It is not easy writing a letter to a fictional character. As my reader may also notice I only made one letter, this first one addressed to Alma, include Arturo's death. I figured I would write the other three pre-death so that I could talk about other issues that were presented throughout the story. If I would have written them all post death then I feel like that would consume the whole letter and they would all start to sound the same. Once someone close to you has died it seems inconsiderate to really bring up anything else other than that for a while, and frankly when someone close has died you do not care about anything else for a while. I hope my letters to Celia, Rafael, Maribel, and Alma would help them if this were a real life setting and hopeful the advice I give them will be received by others as well.



Work's Cited

Henriquez, Cristina. *The Book of Unknown Americans*. Vintage, 2014.