

The Book of Unknown Americans Study Guide

The Book of Unknown Americans by Cristina Henríquez

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Plot Summary

NOTE: Due to the structure of this novel, the book has been divided according to chapters based on page numbers. This study guide specifically refers to the 2014 Borzoi Book/Alfred A. Knopf hardcover edition, sixth printing, January 2015. Accordingly, quotes reference the appropriate page numbers as well as paragraph numbers.

“The Book of Unknown Americans” is a contemporary American novel of Latino immigration by Cristina Henríquez. The novel primarily revolves around a romance between two Latino teenagers – Maribel Rivera from Mexico, and a Mayor Toro from Panama – and how Maribel and her family handle living in a new country. Woven throughout the novel are short vignettes in the lives of the people who live at the Redwood, revealing how they came to be in America. Among them is Micho Alvarez, who says that Latinos are the unknown Americans, because no one wants to get to know them, either because they are scared of Latinos, or need somebody to hate.

When the novel begins, Maribel and her parents, Arturo and Alma, have legally come to Wilmington, Delaware, in order to have a chance at a better life. But unlike many immigrants, Arturo and Alma do not merely have finances in mind. Indeed, back in Mexico, they own their own home and Arturo managed a construction business. Instead, the Riveras are in the United States to give their daughter access to America’s special education services. The 15-year-old Maribel previously fell off a ladder at her father’s job site, causing tremendous swelling and shaking of her brain, and leading to neuron detachment. This in turn caused Maribel to become mentally slowed. The Riveras hope specialized education can help to restore Maribel’s mind, though they know she will never be the exact same person again.

The Riveras take a unit at the Redwood Apartments, an old auto-body shop. Alma will be a homemaker while Arturo travels across the Delaware state border into Pennsylvania to work on a mushroom farm. The Riveras soon meet a host of neighbors, including the Toros, Panamanians who are full-fledged American citizens, and who love the United States deeply. Rafael and Celia Toro have two sons. The older, Enrique, is away at college in Maryland, while the younger, Mayor, is 15 and a sophomore in high school. The Toros and the Riveras become fast friends, with Mayor instantly falling for the radiantly beautiful Maribel, and being very patient with Maribel’s learning disabilities. In fact, he discovers that, although she is slow sometimes, and forgetful here and there, she is largely competent and capable of doing things. She is still much brighter than most people think. However, Maribel has also caught the eye of Garrett Miller, a bully and a troublemaker, who attempts to sexually molest Maribel, but is stopped by Alma. Alma, who blames herself for Maribel’s accident, for she was holding the ladder on which Maribel climbed, does not tell anyone about the incident, because she believes she can handle it.

Ultimately, Maribel comes to fall in love with Mayor, telling him that he is the only person who truly sees her as a person. His patience with her, and his refusal to treat her like a brainless child, earns him her respect. Maribel, through special education at school, and



through Mayor's care, begins to improve. Mayor and Maribel grow closer together, ultimately kissing passionately and letting their hands explore one another in Mayor's father's car. They are seen by a neighbor, and the Riveras forbid Mayor from seeing Maribel again. Nevertheless, Mayor sneaks Maribel out of school, and brings her to the ocean in his father's car. On the way back, they must pull over to the side of the road during a snowstorm, and both fall asleep. When they wake up, it is after one in the morning. Alma believes that Garrett is responsible, and Arturo seeks Garrett out. When Mayor and Maribel return to the apartment building, Mayor's father brings them to the hospital. Arturo, out looking for Maribel, has been shot by Garrett's father. He dies that night. A few days later, Maribel and Alma move back to Mexico.



Pages 3 – 66

Summary

Page 3, Alma – Alma Rivera, her husband, Arturo, and their daughter, Maribel, catch a ride in a red pickup truck with a cigarette-smoking driver across the border, through some developed areas, and to an old auto body shop in Delaware, converted into the Redwood apartments. There, the Riveras unload their possessions in garbage bags and boxes, including a television they picked up on the side of the road. The driver explains that people throw away everything in the United States, even if those things are still good. The Riveras moved into an old, smelly apartment in the shop, and Alma promises to clean it in the morning. Alma wonders if Maribel understands that they have come to America from Patscuaro, Mexico, in search of a better life. They have little besides hope, and Alma hopes it will be enough. They know very little English.

In the morning, the family seeks out food at a gas station. There, a boy with messy brown hair watches them. It makes Alma uncomfortable. When the family goes to pay for their food, they are surprised to see that it costs \$22. A line of impatient people forms behind them. Alma brings Maribel outside while Arturo pays. Arturo wonders how so little food could cost so much money, and wonders if he has been taken advantage of. The family then returns to their new home.

Page 12, Mayor – The Toro family, including son, Mayor, discuss the arrival of the Riveras to the Redwood apartments, and how little they have. The Toros, originally from Panama, learn from Quisqueya Solis the family's last name is Rivera. They also learn, from Fito through Nelia, the family is legal, sponsored by a mushroom farm. It is believed the Riveras will be a good addition, except their daughter. Rumors fly about the Riveras, which include that they are really working for the Department of Homeland Security to that they are traveling with the circus.

Mayor, however, stops caring and longs only to fit in at school. He is now in tenth grade, and hopes to be as popular as his older brother, Enrique, was before graduating. People don't even think they are related. Enrique attends college in Maryland. Julius Olsen and Garrett Miller like to make fun of Mayor. Garrett is thin, tall, and strong, and spent time at juvenile detention in Ferris, so Mayor doesn't want to mess with him. Mayor plays soccer at school, even though he doesn't want to. His father insists he play, because he believes that, while tennis and golf are for whites, and basketball is for blacks, soccer is for Latinos, and therefore, Mayor must play. A group of freshmen girls has been watching the practices, and it causes everyone to try harder. Mayor is always awkward on his feet, so he is usually sidelined. When he practices drills with Ethan Weisberg, he causes both of them to trip, and the girls to laugh.

Page 19, Rafael Toro – Rafael Toro is born in Los Santos in Panama in 1967. His father has a horrible temper and dies when Rafael is 12. Rafael picks up his father's temper, and his mother dies a few years later. Rafael's wife, Celia, saves his life, having met on



the beach when he was 18. She attends university to become a secretary, and inspires Rafael to get his life back on track and work, which he does. They later marry, and have two children – Enrique, and Mayor. They leave Panama three years after Noriega, the dictator, is overthrown, and move to the United States, no longer feeling safe in Panama. Rafael is a proud American, and he and his family are all legal citizens. Though they miss Panama, they view America as their real home.

Page 24, Alma – Arturo works just over the Pennsylvania border at a mushroom farm. It is hard, dirty work, and no one breaks for food or drink in order to fill quotas. Alma wants more for her husband, but Arturo is just happy to have work. Alma reflects sadly on Mexico, where Arturo would come home from work on break for a fresh, homemade lunch. Alma wants more for her family in America.

She waits to hear on Maribel's enrollment in school, and gets a call from a kind woman named Phyllis, who can speak Spanish, and acts as a go-between for Alma and the Evers School. For Maribel to attend Evers, she will need to take English Language Learners classes at the A. I. DuPont School, where she will be evaluated for special education services. The process will take from one to two months.

Maribel is not happy to be going to school. She wears her sweater backwards, and doesn't want her hair combed, because it hurts the scar on her head. Maribel's memory comes and goes, and her thoughts are sometimes clear, and other times, not. Maribel then heads to school on a school bus, and Arturo heads to work.

Alma feels lonely and quiet, so she decides to head out to find somewhere to shop for food other than the gas station. As she prepares to leave, she sees the boy from the gas station, and the landlord, Fito Angelino, comes to visit. Fito reveals the boy is a troublemaker, but nothing to worry about, and lives in Capitol Oaks down the road, often hanging around at gas stations. Fito explains the layout of the city of Wilmington: Main Street is where the university students live. Hockessin is where the gringos live. Downtown Wilmington is for the blacks. Greenville is where the rich white people live. Elsmere and Newport are for the lower classes. And where Alma lives is where all the Latinos live.

Page 37, Mayor – Mayor wonders why he has not seen Maribel in class, and asks his friend William about it in chemistry lab. William has very pale skin and floppy brown hair, and says there are many new students all the time, and thinks Mayor has a crush on Maribel already. He also stops going to soccer practice out of embarrassment.

At home, Mayor's parents argue about Mayor's mother getting a job in case his father loses his, and his father counters that it is his job to be the breadwinner. After another argument, Mayor goes with his mother to the Dollar Tree, just to get away for a while. There, they meet Alma and Maribel, and Celia introduces herself and Mayor. Mayor can't take his eyes off of Maribel, who is thin, has long black hair, and is well-curved in all the right places. She pays little attention to Mayor. Celia tells Alma about Gigante, a nearby Mexican market. Both moms talk about their lives, and Mayor learns that Maribel will soon be attending the Evers School, which everyone at school calls the "Turtle



School”, because only retards attend it. As Mayor and his mother leave, Celia tells Alma to drop by anytime.

Page 44, Benny Quinto – Benny Quinto, a former Eucharistic Minister, has been in America for eight years, originally coming from Nicaragua when he was 20. He wants to make good money and get out of Nicaragua, so he tells a shark he will pay him \$2,000 to bring him to America with a down payment of \$300, stolen from Church collection envelopes. Benny is packed into a house in Arizona with 12 other guys until he can pay off the rest of the money. He turns to drug dealing to do so after one of the other guys pays off his tab in two weeks. Benny ends up in Baltimore, and begins using drugs as well as selling them. After almost being killed in a fight, knows he has to get away and move on. He goes to Delaware.

Page 48, Alma – Maribel’s evaluation ends, and now diagnosed by American authorities with a mild traumatic brain injury, she may now attend Evers. Alma hopes that Maribel will enjoy it, and Arturo tells her to give Maribel some time to adjust. Alma helps Maribel with her homework. Arturo hopes that he can learn better English through Maribel. Alma hopes to renew the romance in her marriage with Arturo that has been lacking recently. Alma uses a prepaid cellphone to keep in touch with her parents during the day, watches television, and cleans while Arturo is at work and Maribel is at school. Within two weeks, many neighbors – including Quisqueya Solis, Nelia Zafon, and Ynez Mercado, all of whom are welcoming, come by.

Alma also uses the time to orient herself to the new town she is in, running errands to the Laundromat and Gigante. Sometimes, she goes to Saint Thomas More Oratory, a small but beautiful church, to pray to God, asking Him to forgive her for all she has done, and to let Arturo forgive her as well. One day, Alma visits Celia, bringing over fresh-made chicharrones. Celia tells Alma how to prepare for the coming winter, from coats to heavy comforters, and tells Alma about the Community House, which offers immigrant services if needed. She also fills Alma in on all the gossip, from Nelia dating a gringo half her age to Benny Quinto, who had originally studied to be a priest, to Quisqueya being a busybody. She also tells Alma about her children, Enrique and Mayor. Alma explains that she hopes Maribel will only have to attend Evers for a year or two before she is better.

Alma decides to attend English class at the Community House with Mrs. Shields. They practice English with partners. Alma is paired up with Dulce, an older woman who was brought to the United States by her son and his wife, who just had a baby boy named Jonathon. Class runs longer than expected, and Alma rushes home in the rain on foot to be there for Maribel when she gets off the bus, but she is late. Fortunately, Mayor has been talking to Maribel, and Maribel is safe and sound.

Analysis

“The Unknown Americans” is a contemporary American novel of Latino immigration by Cristina Henríquez. The novel primarily revolves around the romance between recently-



immigrated Maribel Rivera, and Panamanian-turned-American citizen Mayor Toro. The novel also touches upon the experiences of Maribel's parents as they settle in, and tertiary accounts of Latino neighbors fill the novel to provide a broader scope of understanding of immigration. When the novel begins, the Riveras have moved to Wilmington, Delaware, and are not illegal aliens, but legal visiting residents on work visas. While many immigrants come to the United States in search of a combination of freedom and wealth, escaping poverty and tyranny, the Riveras are an unusual family (as all other characters in the novel will come to be as well). The Riveras are well-off in Mexico. They own their own home and Arturo manages a construction business. They have come to the United States to seek better special education for Maribel, who has a mild but traumatic brain injury which has impaired her intellect.

Immediately, through the stories of the Riveras and the Toros, the theme of immigration is clear. Latinos, seeking a better life in some form or another, come to the United States in order to follow that dream. The Toros are full-fledged American citizens, who have a deep and abiding love for their new country, though they miss their native Panama. Indeed, Mayor feels more like an American than anything else, and even wishes many of the kids at school would understand this. The Toros, along with the other residents of the Redwood, do their best to be welcoming of the Riveras. Everything has changed for them, as the other immigrant families know firsthand, and so they wish to help make the transition for the Riveras as easy as possible. But things are especially difficult for Alma, who blames herself for the as of yet unnamed accident that brought Maribel to her current state of being. That Maribel will be attending the Evers School reveals to Mayor that Maribel must be mentally challenged, and while he is struck by her beauty, he is unsure how to feel about her personally because of Evers.

The theme of family is also clearly on display in the first few chapters of the novel, by way of the Riveras and the Toros. The Riveras have all moved to the United States as a family, to stay together, and to get through the difficult time of Maribel's challenges. Their decision to come to the United States, to Delaware, and to send Maribel to Evers has been a family decision. Alma and Arturo are, justifiably, very protective of their daughter, who without consistent clarity of mind needs extra protection. The unconditional love of parents – moving to a new country, giving up their old life, and essentially starting all over again from nothing – is a powerful statement. Indeed, the Toros have also scraped together to get by. They have managed to send their son, Enrique, to college, and hope that Mayor will follow in Enrique's footsteps. To do this, Mayor must do well in school, and must excel at sports the way Enrique has.

Indeed, while most think of prejudice as emanating from whites toward nonwhites, in the novel, prejudice is universal among all people, a theme which will be subtle, but consistent throughout the novel. For example, Rafael Toro has classed all sports according to race: blacks play basketball, whites play golf and tennis, and browns must play soccer. As such, Rafael forces his son to play soccer, primarily because he is Latino. American students at school make fun of Mayor on a daily basis for his race, while many of among the Redwood community use the disparaging term "gringo" to refer to white people.



Discussion Question 1

For what reasons have the Riveras come to the United States? How does their family story compare to the Toro family? Why was it so important for both families to come to America legally?

Discussion Question 2

For what reason does Mayor take an instant liking to Maribel? How does he respond when he learns she is intellectually challenged? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Alma decide to take English classes? What does she hope this will help her to do?

Vocabulary

bewildered, disoriented, insufficiency, conduit, trepidation, replicate, cognitive, acclimate



Pages 67 – 126

Summary

Page 67, Mayor – The Riveras begin attending the same Mass as the Toros. Afterwards, the families have lunch together. Rafael always loves to watch soccer, talk about Enrique playing soccer, or watch football if nothing else is on. Celia encourages Mayor to talk to Maribel during these get-togethers, but Mayor doesn't see the point. Walking home from school one day, Garrett makes fun of Mayor, following on his skateboard. It is raining. Mayor tries to be polite, knowing that Garrett doesn't have any friends, his older brother was killed in the Iraq War, that his mother had broken down and left, and his father was a drunk. Garrett and Mayor both see Maribel getting off the Evers bus, and standing in the rain. Garrett makes fun of Maribel, asking her how to say "retard" in Spanish. He then takes her sunglasses, throws them on the ground, and when Maribel bends over to pick them up, Garrett pulls Maribel against him like they are having sex. Mayor tells Garrett to leave Maribel alone, and Garrett turns toward Mayor, threatening him. When Garrett leaves, he tells Maribel he is not done with her. Mayor then goes to see if Maribel is okay, and she is. He then brings her inside to await Alma. He is able to get Maribel to talk about her homework, and habanero peppers. After the incident, Mayor becomes protective of Maribel, always watching out for her.

Celia's friendship with Alma, meanwhile, grows, as her friendship with the gossipy Quisqueya fades out. Celia and Rafael are not only proud Americans, but proudly vote in all elections, even the most local. They pull for Barack Obama nationally in 2008, though Rafael believes all politicians, regardless, are corrupt. Though Mayor is Panamanian by birth, he feels more American than anything else, and wishes the other kids could accept this. He reflects on how his parents miss their homeland, and even almost returned once, but have remained in America. They do not even go back to visit Panama for various reasons. When they do decide to go back for Rafael's high school reunion, the organizer makes fun of Rafael for being an American now, and for considering him high and mighty. It hurts and angers Rafael, who cancels the trip. When they decide to go back to Panama for Celia's birthday, Islamic terrorists attack New York on 9/11. It stuns the whole apartment building, because everyone thought America was supposed to be safe. Gustavo Milhojas is especially enraged, because America is his country now. Rafael cancels the trip to Panama, and takes his family to the beach instead, but it is not the same.

Page 87, Gustavo Milhojas – Gustavo Milhojas is born in 1960 in Guatemala. When he is twenty, the people revolt against the corrupt military government. Gustavo leaves for a new life in Mexico. There, racism by Mexicans against Guatemalans is rampant. He manages to find a girl named Isabel, and marries her in 1982, and they have a boy and a girl. Seventeen years later, Isabel dies of cancer. Gustavo then travels to the United States to make more money to while his high-school-aged daughter, and college-attending son, stay with a friend. Gustavo enters the United States illegally, and now works two jobs. One is at the Newark Shopping Center movie theater in the mornings,



and at the Movies 10 Theater in Stanton in the evenings. Gustavo hopes his children will do amazing things with their lives, and give back. He even considers returning to Mexico to be near them again.

Page 91, Alma – When Arturo gets home from work, he showers until dinner is ready. He has been depressed since what Alma refers to as “the accident”. She remembers falling in love with Arturo for his seriousness, and his kindness. Alma longs for home in Mexico. In Delaware, the family scrapes by from paycheck to paycheck, saving a small amount of money for an emergency. Shopping at Gigante becomes too expensive for Alma, so she begins shopping for as much food as she can at the Dollar Tree. She tries out American oatmeal on Arturo and Maribel, and both laugh at the word. They find the oatmeal delicious. Alma and Arturo are glad to see Maribel laughing and happy. Alma recalls “the accident” that night while lying awake. Arturo had been supervising construction of a farm outbuilding, and Maribel, fourteen, always wanted to see what her father did for work. Arturo allows Maribel to come, and Alma agrees to go as well. Maribel helps out on the job site, and while she is climbing down a ladder Alma is holding, Maribel falls off and is knocked out. She is rushed to the hospital. The impact on the ground has shaken Maribel’s brain badly, and due to swelling, the doctors must remove a piece of her skull. The impact also damaged neurons in the brain, impairing Maribel. It is possible that she may come back around, but not guaranteed. The doctors suggest special education schools in the United States, the best in the world. The Riveras, spurred on by Alma, decide America is the place to go for a better life, for Maribel’s sake. Arturo blames Alma for the accident. Alma doesn’t understand what happened, and so blames herself as well.

Page 108, Mayor – Mayor and Maribel grow closer over time, having conversations alone in the kitchen while their parents visit. Maribel often loses her train of thought, but Mayor comes to mind less and less. He even learns that Maribel is always listening, even when it seems like she is not. While Mayor’s mom likes what is merging between Mayor and Maribel, Mayor’s dad wants him to find a normal girl. Mayor even begins visiting Maribel sometimes after school, just talking to her. He wants to bring her out into the world, but Alma will not let her go out. Maribel and Mayor talk about snow one day, because Maribel is looking forward to seeing snow for the first time. She writes down everything Mayor says in a notebook –an assignment from school to get her mind to work –and shows Mayor the notebook. Mayor asks about the accident, and Maribel explains she fell from a ladder. She wears sunglasses all the time to help with her headaches. She says she is tired of people always asking her how she feels, and wishes she was normal like everybody else. When Mayor gets home from school the next day, he is surprised to find his father home from work, drinking beer. His father wonders why Mayor is not in his soccer clothes, and says he borrowed soccer clothes from somebody else because his were dirty. Rafael then complains to Celia about not keeping up on the laundry.

Page, 115, Quisqueya Solis – Quisqueya is a native of Venezuela, the product of a one-night stand, and when she is twelve, her mother marries a man from California, and the family moves to Long Beach. The man has a son named Scott who rapes Quisqueya when she is sixteen. When she tells her mother, her mother does not believe her.



Quisqueya leaves home, stays at the shelter, stays with friends, graduates from high school, and moves with a friend to New Jersey. She falls in love with a man who loves the blueberry pie where she works at a restaurant, marries him, and has two sons with him. But Quisqueya, untrusting of men because of her teenage years, always pushes her husband away, until she pushes him too far, and he files for divorce. She raises her son to be gentlemen, lives off her divorce settlement, and volunteers at the hospital. No one knows about her past, and she believes no one has a right to know. It is her story, and hers alone.

Page 119, Alma – December is cold, and the heating bill is \$304.52, unaffordable. The Rivera family gets by on sixty-degree heat to cut costs. The family lives in winter jackets and scarves, and do their best to insulate the drafty apartment. Alma tries to focus on the positive things, such as Maribel remembering when to stand and kneel during Mass. She is speaking more and more. Nevertheless, Alma does her best to keep a close eye on Maribel, always dropping her off and picking her up at the bus. One day, Alma loses track of time, and finds the boy from the gas station holding Maribel against the wall, pulling up her shirt. Alma screams, and the boy lets go. Alma spits in his face, and the boy grabs hold of her. Alma manages to get away, and rushes after Maribel into the apartment. While Maribel is unharmed, Alma knows the boy was intending to do something and is very worried for the future. Alma remembers the past, when Maribel once cooked bunuelos for the entire family, and at that moment, Alma could see Maribel's whole life ahead of her.

Analysis

The Rivera family and the Toro family grow closer together as time passes, as do Mayor and Maribel. Mayor, who once considered Maribel little more than something worth looking at, begins to see through her façade, and her brain injury, to the person she is inside. He realizes that with patience, and by treating Maribel as something other than a brainless child, she is able to respond and improve herself over time. Rafael notices how the two grow closer together, and urges Mayor to find a “normal” girl. Garrett, too, uses the pejorative term of “retard” to describe Maribel, and makes sexual advances on her. Here, the theme of prejudice in the novel is once more on clear display, against people who are intellectually disabled or challenged, demonstrating that prejudice is universal, from race to personal characteristics. Interestingly enough, Rafael also faces prejudice from his own high school friends for having become an American –and so he refuses to go back to Panama. He deeply loves America, and will not suffer the insult to himself, or his new country.

The immigrant experience remains on clear display through this section of the novel, primarily through the eyes of Alma. Alma struggles to make do with what little she has, deciding not to shop at Gigante because it ends up being so expensive to do so. Indeed, money is scarce among the members of the Redwood Apartments, almost all of whom scrape by. Alma learns how to shop at the Dollar Tree, and to cook simple American meals, such as oatmeal, that are filling and lasting. Alma's dedication to her family is clear, as is Rafael's dedication to his. Frequently throughout the novel, Rafael



argues with his wife, refusing to allow her to work, knowing that it is his responsibility to provide for his family. His manhood, and his position as husband and father, depend upon his ability to earn enough food to support his family. However, it is not merely out of the traditional family model that Rafael bases his ideas on patriarchal exercise. Rafael works hard out of love for his family. He wants to see his family do well, and does not want them to have to scrape and scrounge as he does while at work.

The immigrant experience also broadens in the novel, as Henriquez includes the single-chapter stories, more like vignettes, of various other characters in the Redwood Apartment buildings. Here, the theme of unknown Americans also comes to the fore, as more and more stories of these unknown Americans become known. Quisqueya, for example, is not merely a busybody and a gossip, but is the product of a one-night stand, was sexually abused as a teenager, was married, had two children, and is divorced. She came to America not because of poverty or tyranny, but because her mother fell in love with a Californian. (Ironically and hypocritically, Quisqueya is intensely private about her own life, but wants to know everything that goes on with everyone else.) Her story is contrasted with the story of Gustavo Milhojas, who, a widower, has come to the United States illegally to earn more money to send his own children to college. Between his home nation of Guatemala, and the United States, Gustavo spent much time in Mexico, and was the victim of virulent racism by Mexicans, who consider Guatemalans to all be idiots. Here, the theme of prejudice appears once more through the immigration experience, and demonstrates how universal prejudice actually is.

Discussion Question 1

Why do Mayor and Maribel grow closer so quickly? What revelations does Mayor have about Maribel?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways does Alma attempt to assimilate into American society? Is this done out of necessity, is it voluntary, or is it a combination of both? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

Why does Quisqueya refuse to tell anyone about her own story?

Vocabulary

sauntered, revolted, solemn, melancholy, aloof, proximity, excruciating



Pages 127 – 180

Summary

Page 127, Mayor – Mayor has not had an encounter with Garrett since the day he challenged Garrett over Maribel. Then one day, Garrett begins talking about Maribel sexually in school, and Mayor punches him in the neck. The two fight until Mr. Baker, the driver's ed instructor, breaks them up. He orders them to the principal's office and says their parents will be called, but Garrett responds that he hasn't seen his father in three days. Rafael is enraged at Mayor for punching someone, and even more enraged because he discovers Mayor has been lying about being at soccer, and that his grades have slipped.

Christmas then rolls around, and Enrique comes home for a few days. Enrique is impressed that Mayor hit Garrett, and tells Mayor that he hates coming home anymore because it is so depressing. Mayor doesn't think home is so bad, but Enrique tells him he will one day see something better. On the way to Mass, the Toros and the Riveras are the only people on the bus. When the song "Feliz Navidad" comes on, the driver turns the volume up, saying it's a little piece of home for them. This annoys Rafael, who complains to his family that just because something is Spanish, doesn't mean it is home. Celia complains about Rafael complaining. On Christmas Day, Mayor gets no presents due to his fight at school.

The heat goes out a little while later, and Mayor encourages his mom to invite everyone over for a party, to get people together, and to generate heat. She does so. A happy party ensues, with neighbor Micho taking pictures. Even Fito the landlord shows up for a little while, to say that Delmarva Company will be fixing the heat. Dancing soon follows when the song "Feliz Navidad" comes on the radio. While dancing occurs, Mayor gives Maribel a red alpaca scarf for Christmas. Then they kiss, and laugh as they hear Rafael singing along with "Feliz Navidad".

Page 144, Adolfo "Fito" Angelino – Fito comes to the United States in 1972, determined to be a boxer. He wants to train with Sully Samuelson, a trainer who works out of Washington, D.C. When Fito gets there, he learns Sully has moved to Vermont, and on the way to Vermont, Fito runs out of money in Delaware, and stays on, going from job to job until he buys the building he now owns. He knows there is a clash of culture between Latinos and Americans, but Fito tells all Americans that Latinos just want a chance at being Americans, too.

Page 147, Alma – Alma hasn't told anyone about Maribel's encounter with the gas station boy, but after the New Year, she goes to the police. Officer Mora says there is nothing that can be done unless Maribel was assaulted, or unless Alma saw the boy pull up Maribel's shirt. Alma is angry, and goes to Capitol Oaks, a run-down neighborhood. There, she tells the boy, Garrett, to leave her daughter alone. The boy tells her to go home. At home, Alma reflects on the encounter, and reflects on how much she and



Arturo used to make love, and how it never happens anymore. She then initiates a sexual encounter with Arturo, and knows during sex that everything will be okay in America as long as they have each other.

Page 156, Mayor – Mayor's mother's sister, Gloria, gets a divorce from her rich husband, and gets \$80,000 in the settlement. Gloria wishes send some of the money to the Toros, but Rafael will have none of it. He says he will provide for the family, and no one else. It turns out that Gloria will be sending them \$10,000, for the Toros have helped her out in the past to the tune of that much.

They decide to buy a good, used car – a 15-year-old Volkswagen Rabbit, for \$2,000. The dealer, Mr. Mason, happily shows Rafael how to driver stick. On the way home, Rafael does far below the speed limit, not wanting to be pulled over for driving too fast. At the diner, he has heard that the police usually only pull over black and brown people, and rarely ever whites or Asians. Celia counters that if Rafael doesn't do the speed limit, that will give the police a reason to stop him.

A few days later, Mayor overhears Alma telling Celia that Mayor has been good for Maribel. Quisqueya comments sometime after that that relationships always begin as friendships. Mayor has come to believe that he and Maribel are destined to be together. Mayor then goes to visit Maribel, who wants to see the car. Mayor tells Alma they are going to his apartment instead. Mayor and Maribel get in the car, and Maribel asks if Mayor knows how to drive. He explains he has his permit, and has taken driver's ed. He talks about it happily, and Maribel tells him she likes to hear him talk, and that he is the only person who actually sees her. They kiss again, but passionately this time, their hands on each other.

Page 175, Nelia Zafon – When Nelia is 17 in 1964, she leaves Puerto Rico for New York City to dance on Broadway, and then star in movies. For years, Nelia tries to break into the circuit, but it never comes to pass. Instead, she saves money by working at a restaurant, and went to Delaware to begin her own theater company because new business taxes were so low. It is called the Parish Theater, and is never wildly successful, but is respected and very beneficial for people who want a chance to start somewhere. Now 53 years old, Nelia dates a white man half her age, and can't wait to see what comes next.

Analysis

Mayor's burgeoning feelings for Maribel are easily seen in this section of the novel, as he physically assaults Garrett over sexual comments Garret makes about Maribel. This earns Mayor the respect of Enrique, who provides an interesting aspect to the theme of immigration in these chapters. Enrique hates coming home from college to be with his parents and the Redwood community. Through college, Enrique has experienced a new and better world, made possible by the United States. While Rafael and Celia consider themselves proud Americans, Enrique considers them too Panamanian. He wants better things out of life than a cramped apartment and a minimum-wage job. He wants



his own shot at the American Dream. He has become even more American than his parents. If there is one way in which Mayor will follow his brother's footsteps, it will be in pursuit of the American dream, and in wanting to be an American in every way possible. However, because of this, Enrique becomes prejudiced against his own family. He has been raised with the potential to achieve things above him, but now considers his family, and his past, to be beneath him. Prejudice is also on display during the bus ride to Church. The well-meaning - though misguided - attempt by the bus driver to make the Riveras and Toros feel at home by playing "Feliz Navidad" loudly, earns the scorn of Rafael and the amusement of Celia.

Divisions then appear in both the Rivera and Toro families, but are ultimately healed. Gloria, sister of Celia, has divorced her husband, and has gained an \$80,000 settlement. As such, she wants to send money to Celia, but Rafael will not hear of it. He is very proud, and very unwilling to accept anything from anyone. He imagines that Celia will send them a few hundred dollars at most, and even this is unacceptable to Rafael. However, when he learns that Gloria wishes to send \$10,000, to repay Rafael and Celia for all they have done for her in the past, he changes his mind and accepts the money. He knows it will be very beneficial to the family, and decides that at least some of it will be spent on a new car – out of which comes the \$2,000 Volkswagen. In an amusing and saddening episode, Rafael drives his family home in their new, used car, going far under the speed limit, afraid that he will be pulled over for being brown, having heard that the police always pull over people who are not white or Asian. Celia insists that if Rafael is going to be pulled over, it will be because he is not doing the speed limit, rather than being brown while doing the speed limit. In the Rivera family, Alma laments how far apart she and Arturo have grown, especially sexually, and she reminisces about how often they used to have sex. She blames much of the distance on the accident with Maribel, and then initiates a sexual encounter with Arturo, which awakens a renewed sexual desire within them both.

The theme of immigration also reappears in the stories of Nelia Zafon, and Fito, both of whom come to the United States to pursue not only wealth, but unusual dreams. Again, unlike many other immigrants, Nelia and Fito come to America not because they are fleeing a horrible life, but because they want a better life, and the chance to do what they dream of doing. Fito moves to the United States because he wants to become a famous boxer, but ends up settling for owning an apartment building. Nelia dreams of dancing on Broadway and breaking into acting in movies, but ultimately settles for owning her own theater company, and helping to give other dreamers a place to begin. While Nelia and Fito may not have done exactly what they'd hoped to do, they can still be considered American success stories. Both ended up with more than they had, and their lives are far from over. In America, it is never too late to achieve something new. Indeed, Zelia always looks forward to what may happen next.

Discussion Question 1

Thought Rafael is dead set against accepting money from Gloria, he eventually comes around. Why?



Discussion Question 2

In what ways is Enrique prejudiced? Why? Do you believe this is intentional? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Can Zelia and Fito be considered success stories, American or otherwise? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

legendary, bereft, pinnacle, frigid, tarnished



Pages 181 – 247

Summary

Page 181, Alma – Arturo is fired from his job for the day he switches shifts to stay home for Maribel's first day of school. They know that he has truly been fired because immigration regulations have been loosened, and companies are now looking to hire workers without papers. Arturo now has thirty days to find a new job or his family's visas will expire. The family begins living off their emergency money to get by. Fito will not allow them to skip on rent. Work is hard to come by because the economy is so bad. Still, he keeps looking for work, feeling as if all the employers think he is an idiot. Arturo brings his family to a pizza place on the corner for waters to celebrate nineteen years of being married to Alma. Seven more days pass, and so does the thirty-day window. Arturo has prided himself on being a legal non-citizen in America, but now he says he is just like all the other illegals. At the end of February, there is an ice storm. The Riveras and the Toros pile into the Toros' car to go ice skating at Clay Creek Park. A hundred other kids are at the park. Maribel is amazed walking on the ice, and Mayor helps her along. Alma thinks she sees Garrett out of the corner of her eye, but when she looks again, doesn't see him. Arturo knows something is bothering Alma, but cannot get her to tell him. Quisqueya later tells Arturo and Alma that she saw Maribel and Mayor kissing in the Toros's car, but couldn't see what their hands were doing. When Mayor got out of the car, Quisqueya reveals, Mayor's pants were wet. Alma and Arturo do not know whether or not to believe Maribel.

Page 203, Mayor – Mayor's father loses his job as the diner he works at goes out of business. He has been working there for 15 years. Rafael does not sit around and complain. He goes at it hard, seeking a new job, but the economy is horrible. Mayor's friendship with William has also deteriorated because of Mayor having been grounded, and because he is spending so much time with Maribel. William feels put off, but they make up and, and Mayor agrees to go and see a movie with William that afternoon. However, at home Mayor's parents confront him with the car story. They tell him the Riveras no longer want him to see their daughter, and they will respect the wishes of the Riveras. Mayor has defied his grounding and compromised the trust of the Riveras, and his parents. Mayor is no longer allowed to see Maribel.

Page 214, Jose Mercado – Jose is born in Puerto Rico in 1950, and his wife, Ynez, in 1955. Jose serves in the U.S. Navy for much of his life, balancing war with beauty by studying things like poetry and painting. He especially loves American poetry, including the work of Marvin Bell, who wrote about life and how it all comes undone in the end.

Page 218, Alma – Maribel grows sad, despondent, and unresponsive now that she is no longer able to see Mayor. Alma wonders if they have done the right thing. Arturo argues that they have, because they have an especially strong duty to protect Maribel since the accident. Alma insists Maribel is getting better, but Arturo says that she will never be the exact same person again, that they will never get her again.



Page 223, Mayor – In March, Rafael gets a job as a newspaper carrier for the News-Journal. He is so happy to have a new job that he un-grounds Mayor, though Mayor is still not allowed to see Maribel. It begins snowing at school, and Mayor and William cut school so William can teach Mayor to drive stick to head to Evers School near Delaware Park. He finds Maribel's classroom by looking in through the windows, and beckons her to come outside. Maribel sneaks out, and gets in the car. She is thrilled that it is snowing. They go for a road trip in the snow, and Mayor gets McDonald's fries for Maribel. He brings Maribel to the ocean. She is amazed, and she thanks him for bringing her to the shore. They kiss passionately, and share Mayor's coat. Mayor wishes the moment could last forever.

Page 237, Micho Alvarez – Originally from Mexico, Micho is a photographer, and makes a decent living. He doesn't like how everyone looks down on him like he is poor. He says he is one of the unknown Americans, who nobody wants to get to know or they would have nobody to hate. He doesn't think enough people talk about why so many are crossing into the United States, leaving behind terrors of an old life. Much of the crime that spills across the border is due to the United States feeding into it, by way of drugs or sensationalism, Micho contends. He uses his photography to help a lobbying group push for immigration reform.

Page 239, Alma – Alma is panicked when Maribel's bus does not come that day. Alma asks Celia if she has seen Maribel, or if Mayor has, but Celia has not, and Celia says Mayor knows the rules, and is at a movie with William. Alma panics, and Celia tells her to come inside and have coffee, and they will both wait together. Celia tries to call Mayor, who does not pick up, and thinks he has turned it off for the movie. Alma calls Arturo to come home, and then calls the school, but no one answers. When Arturo arrives, Alma breaks down and tells him about Garrett. Arturo is stunned, and Alma thinks she has let down Maribel again like she did the day at the construction site. Arturo says he was not thinking that day, and it was not Alma's fault. She has nothing to be sorry for. Arturo reveals he has always blamed himself for allowing Maribel onto the job site. Arturo tells Alma she must forgive herself, and together, they must find their daughter. Arturo leaves, and says he will be back soon.

Analysis

The trials and tribulations of immigration continue to affect Alma and Arturo, even months after they have come to the United States. In the past, tighter immigration regulations meant that employers had to be able to provide documentation for their immigrant or migrant workers. Under the Obama administration, looser regulations mean they no longer having to show papers for workers, which leads to companies being able to exploit cheaper labor – and as a result, fire people like Arturo, who can prove his legal residency. This is especially heartbreaking for Arturo, who did everything he was supposed to do, legally, in order to come to the United States. The heartbreaking aspect of illegal immigration is that it undermines and hurts legal immigrants and legal immigration; and even more heartbreakingly, hurts illegal



immigrants by making them vulnerable to exploitation and poor wages. Indeed, Arturo later sadly comments that he is just like the illegal aliens, now.

Arturo is not the only one to lose his job. Rafael is fired from his job as a cook at the diner where he has worked for 15 years, because the diner is going out of business due to the bad economy. His decision to have accepted the money from Gloria now seems infinitely smarter than refusal would have been. Rafael is seeking a new job, but thanks to the money from Gloria, the family will not go hungry. Rafael, however, still refuses to allow Celia to go out and seek a job, especially now that he himself is unemployed. His love of his family has yielded to pride by way of his unemployment. The reader might well imagine himself continually asking himself, If he cannot provide for his family, what kind of a man, what kind of a head of family, is he?

In the midst of the tragedy of being fired, and in the midst of the terror of Maribel going missing, Alma and Arturo finally come to an understanding. Arturo never truly blamed Alma for Maribel's injury, and Alma has long blamed herself for something she should never have blamed herself for from the start. As a result, husband and wife are reconciled, and together, they will approach the future. Indeed, Alma knows that all she needs in order to survive in the future is her husband. At last, Alma also breaks down about the situation with Garrett. This stuns Arturo, but is in keeping with Alma's heartache. Having long blamed herself for Maribel's accident, Alma refused to tell her husband about something else that happened on her watch, because she wanted to prove she could be as protective as possible of Maribel – and succeed at it this time.

Ultimately, the themes of immigration and prejudice play out in the story of Micho Alvarez, the photographer from the Redwood Apartments. While Micho faces prejudice, he is just as prejudiced in return. He considers himself, like all Latinos, to be unknown Americans – the people other Americans do not want to get to know, either out of fear of them, or out of fear of no longer having someone to hate. True enough, prejudice is fueled by fear and hatred – but also works both ways. Never once, for example, does Micho explain that he has tried to truly get to know naturally-born Americans, automatically assuming they are all prejudiced, fearful, and hateful. Hypocritically, he condemns Americans for assuming things about him, but assumes quite a bit about them as well. Only by seeking to move past prejudice can it be overcome. Understanding is a two-way street.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Alma keep the incident with Garrett from her husband? Do you believe she is justified in doing so? Why or why not? Do you believe she is right in doing so? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

Is Micho's statement about unknown Americans being people that other Americans do not want to get to know, out of fear or hatred, prejudiced in and of itself? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

What effects do loosened immigration regulations have on legal immigrants? What unintended consequences occur for Arturo? How does he respond to this? Why?

Vocabulary

quizzical, legitimate, fury, eternity, esoteric, aesthete



Pages 248 – 285

Summary

Page 248, Mayor – Mayor travels back home as the snowstorm increases in intensity, causing him to pull over and wait out the worst of it on the side of the road. Mayor and Maribel fall asleep and wake up after the snow ends. When Mayor tries to start the car, it won't start. It is 1:14 in the morning. Mayor knows he will be in absolutely serious trouble. Out of nowhere, Maribel explains that Garrett pushed her up against the wall and started to take her shirt off, and that her mom stopped him. Eventually, the car starts, and Mayor drives home. His father is waiting for him. Maribel has fallen asleep again.

Rafael orders his son into the back seat, and drives the three of them to Christiana Hospital. Arturo is in surgery. No one will explain what has happened. At last, Celia explains that, while out looking for Maribel in Capitol Oaks, Arturo was shot with a shotgun. Mayor can only imagine the shooter to be Garrett or his addict father. Arturo dies that night, and Rafael drives Alma and Maribel back home.

The next morning, Celia and Mayor go to visit Maribel and Alma. Mayor tells Maribel that what happened is not her fault. In so doing, he tries to figure out if it was his own fault. Maribel wants to blame herself for being the reason for leaving Mexico in the first place. The next day, Maribel tells Mayor that she and her mother will be going back to Mexico. Maribel no longer wants her notebook, and gives it to Mayor. Mayor tells her that they can find one another again, but Maribel is not convinced. Alma and Maribel leave the next morning.

Page 265, Alma – Alma is devastated by the news of the death of her husband. It is even more difficult for her to tell Maribel. Alma feels lost and alone without Arturo. She recalls how she learned about his being shot. When Maribel was reported missing to the police, Officer Mora responded, and went over to see if Garrett Miller knew anything about the disappearance. When he arrived, Garret's father, Leon, was standing with a shotgun in his hands, and Arturo was on the ground. Ambulances were called, and Leon was arrested. Mora promises justice.

Alma decides to have Arturo buried in Mexico but cannot afford it, and so she will move back into their old house in Mexico instead. Her parents have been keeping it up for them. The neighbors all pay their respects. Alma packs to leave, and can still smell her husband in his clothing. He is buried at All Saints Cemetery on Thursday morning. Alma shatters her china on the floor before leaving, for release. Celia brings over a collection of money for Alma she has started, totaling \$5,132, for the trip back to Mexico. Rafael has secretly paid a driver to bring Alma and Maribel back to Mexico, though he claims he is simply doing it as a favor for Rafael. As they travel south, Alma wonders if, by telling Arturo sooner about Garrett, Arturo might still be alive. Maribel announces she



wants to cut her hair and dye it purple. Alma smiles, knowing her daughter is coming back, even though she might not still be the exact same person.

Page 284, Arturo Rivera – Arturo is a native of Patzcuaro, Michoacan, Mexico. Life in Mexico with Alma and Maribel is beautiful for him, but he moves to the United States so Maribel will have a chance at a better life. He wonders if God has a greater plan in store for them, if bringing them to America has to do with God's vision for the family. Arturo is thrilled that his daughter improves in the United States, and he decides when he returns to Mexico one day, he will tell all his old friends about how much he loves America.

Analysis

The final chapters of the novel lead to a heartbreaking conclusion, as Arturo – ever the vigilant and protective father – is shot by Leon – ever the absent father. While the exact details of the shooting are unclear by the end of the novel, Leon is arrested for having shot Arturo. This is heartbreaking in two ways. First, the death of Arturo has fractured the Rivera family to the point that they believe they have nothing left in America, and so Alma and Maribel return to Mexico. Their American dream has not been fully realized, though Maribel's improvement has been a blessing. Second, Micho's assessment of unknown Americans does not only apply to Latinos, but to all races, regardless. As despicable as the actions of Garrett may have been throughout the novel toward Maribel, he is one of the unknown Americans Micho speaks of, that nobody bothers to try to get to know.

Garrett is a horrible person, but his upbringing has been unstable at best. Only Mayor knows anything about Garrett's life, and only then through others, not through Garrett. Garrett's brother – arguably the only upright member of the family – is killed while serving in the U.S. Army in Iraq. Garrett's mother has a nervous breakdown, and leaves, never to be seen again. Garrett's father is a drug-addled alcoholic, who is rarely ever home. As such, Garrett has no moral guidance of any kind, has no family to depend on, and raises himself, which turns out very badly for him, as he chooses the wrong paths in life. Garrett's father only belatedly comes into the novel, and then, at the worst possible moment for all those involved. Garrett lives in the trashy neighborhood of Capitol Oaks, and like many in the immigrant community, might not well exist.

The novel ends with Maribel and Alma returning to live in Mexico. There is nothing left for them in the United States now that Arturo is dead. This is a somber conclusion to the theme of the American Dream that Alma and Arturo sought to find. All three sought to move forward as a family by getting Maribel help in the United States, but now, only two are returning to Mexico without having fully achieved their goal. Arguably, they are returning to Mexico poorer than they left, and in some ways, rather than granting them their dream, the experiences of the Riveras in America seems to have robbed them of their dream.

Fittingly, the final chapter of the novel is Arturo's own personal remonstrance of his time in the United States, and he has nothing bad to say about it at all. He is thrilled Maribel



has improved in the United States, and intends to tell all of his friends and family back home just how much he loves America.

Discussion Question 1

Can Garrett Miller be considered an unknown American? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why do Alma and Maribel return to Mexico? Would you have done the same thing? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Mayor attempt to figure out who is to blame for Arturo's death? What does he conclude? Why?

Vocabulary

preoccupied, striking, infinitely, exert, oblivious



Characters

Alma Rivera

Alma Rivera is one of the two main characters in the novel “The Book of Unknown Americans” by Cristina Henríquez. Though Alma’s age is never given, it appears as if she is in her late thirties or early forties, and is quite beautiful. She has been married to Arturo Rivera for 19 years, and is the mother of Maribel Rivera. Alma and her family are native to Mexico, where Alma is a homemaker, and Arturo owns a construction business. Alma revels in her role as a homemaker, taking great passion in caring for the home and her family. She especially loves preparing fresh meals for her husband to come home to. When Maribel asks to see Arturo’s latest construction site, Alma agrees to go with her. While Maribel is climbing down a ladder, she falls off, hits her head on the ground, and becomes intellectually disabled. Alma desperate seeks a way to bring her daughter back to normal as much as possible, and decides that special education in the United States, as recommended by doctors, will be the best thing. Alma is the driving force behind getting Arturo to agree to move to the United States, for she blames herself for Maribel’s accident.

Alma and her family obtain visas to become legal American residents in Delaware, to be near the Evers School for Maribel. There, Alma continues on as a homemaker, though it is not the same as in Mexico. She must adjust to the new place, new faces, new weather conditions, and new language. She becomes good friends with Celia Toro. Alma is very protective of Maribel, putting her on and retrieving her from the school bus each day.

Alma also decides to enjoy America as much as she can, and to get the most out of it that she can, she decides to learn English, comes to acquire a taste for certain American foods, and learns to shop smartly and cheaply.

To Alma’s horror one day, she discovers Garrett attempting to sexually abuse Maribel, stops the assault, and spits in Garrett’s face. She later tells Garrett to leave them alone. Alma keeps the incident to herself, believing she has handled the situation, and wanting to make up for the ladder fall. When Alma discovers that Maribel is becoming romantically involved with Mayor, she and Arturo forbid him from seeing Maribel again. Both parents are equally overprotective of Maribel, but with good reason. They do not want her to be taken advantage of, or have anything else bad happen to her.

When Maribel goes missing, Alma confesses the Garrett incident to Arturo, as well as how she blames herself for what happened to Maribel. Arturo tells her he does not blame her, and she should not, either. Arturo then attempts to track down Maribel by going to Garrett’s house, only to be shot by Garrett’s father, Leon. Without her husband, Alma is heartbroken and no longer wants to remain in the United States. At the end of the novel, Celia takes up a collection for Alma and Maribel, and Rafael hires a driver to bring Alma and Maribel back to their home in Mexico.



Mayor Toro

Mayor Toro is one of the two main characters in the novel “The Book of Unknown Americans” by Cristina Henríquez. At 15 years old, Mayor Toro is Panamanian by birth, but along with his family, now legal, full American citizens. Indeed, Mayor considers himself to be more American than Panamanian. He has an older brother named Enrique, and is the youngest child and son of Rafael and Celia Toro. Mayor does not quite fit in at school, and is made fun of by many, including Garrett Miller. His father forces him to play soccer, and wants him to follow in Enrique’s footsteps to college, but Mayor is no good at soccer, and thinks little about his future.

When Mayor first meets the Riveras, she is floored by Maribel’s beauty. However, he is not thrilled at first with the fact that she is intellectually disabled, and pays little attention to her until his mother encourages him to spend more time with Maribel. Mayor comes to realize that Maribel is not a brainless child, but merely a little slow and forgetful. She is competent and capable, and thanks Mayor for seeing her as a person, rather than as a mindless individual. She tells Mayor he sees the real her.

Mayor becomes protective of Maribel, defending her honor against Garrett, and stopping Garrett from sexually molesting Maribel. The two begin a relationship that is found out and reported by Quisqueya. As a result, Mayor is forbidden from seeing Maribel, but this does not stop him. He sneaks her out of the Evers School to go with him on a joyride to the ocean. While driving home, Mayor pulls over in a snowstorm to let it pass, and accidentally falls asleep. When he arrives home, it is well after 1 in the morning, and his father is furious, and brings Mayor to the hospital, where Arturo is fighting for his life after being shot.

Mayor is shocked to learn that Arturo later dies, and is heartbroken to learn that Alma and Maribel will be moving back to Mexico. He offers to find a way for him and Maribel to be together again one day, but Maribel is noncommittal. Maribel leaves Mayor her notebook when she leaves, though there is no goodbye message or anything like that in it. Mayor struggles to figure out how everything came to pass, but cannot know for certain.

Maribel Rivera

Maribel Rivera is the daughter of Alma and Arturo Rivera, and is an important character in the novel, “The Book of Unknown Americans” by Cristina Henríquez. Maribel is a beautiful girl, both inside and out, and loves her parents deeply. She is a native of Mexico, is content with life between school and home. She enjoys going to see her father’s construction projects, and during one such visit with Alma, Maribel falls from a ladder. She hits her head on the ground, causing her brain to shake and swell, and neurons to disconnect. She has a piece of her skull removed to accommodate the swelling, and becomes intellectually challenged. She is forgetful, slow to understand things sometimes, and very quiet, but always pays attention and observes things going on around her. She hates how people treat her like a brainless child. She moves with



her family to the United States so that she may attend the Evers School, with the goal of helping Maribel to return to her former mental state prior to the accident.

There, she keeps a notebook where she writes down everything she can in order to get her brain to work. This includes the things people tell her. Maribel is thrilled to meet Mayor, for Mayor doesn't treat her like she is incompetent, but actually a person. She tells Mayor this, and falls head-over-heels for him. Mayor becomes very protective of her, and even goes so far as to buy a red alpaca scarf for her for Christmas. Maribel's time with Mayor excites her, and makes her feel truly loved in a way her parents cannot, and so her improvement is meteoric during the time she is with Mayor. When Maribel is forbidden from seeing Mayor following revelation of their relationship, Maribel becomes depressed and despondent, and later runs away with Mayor to the beach, during which time her father is shot while seeking her out. Maribel is deeply upset by this, and even more so by her mother's decision to move them back to Mexico. She leaves her notebook behind with Mayor, not out of sentimental reasons, but because she doesn't want it anymore, and doesn't want to be reminded of her time in America.

Arturo Rivera

Arturo Rivera is the father of Maribel, and the husband of Alma. He is a native of Mexico, and owns a construction business there. He delights in his wife and daughter, and loves being able to provide for them. He also enjoys it when they visit his construction sites, but at one job, Maribel falls from a ladder and is severely injured. He agrees to move his family to the United States so that Maribel may attend a special education school. There, he takes work as a mere mushroom harvester in Pennsylvania, and nevertheless, falls in love with America. It is a beautiful land to him, full of good people and good opportunities and freedom. He is thrilled to see Maribel improving. He later loses his job when immigrations restrictions are loosened and employers can now hire cheaper, undocumented labor. He continues looking for a job, even after his work visa expires. He is ultimately killed by Leon Miller while looking for Maribel when Maribel goes missing.

Celia Toro

Celia Toro is the wife of Rafael Toro, and the mother of Enrique and Mayor. Panamanian by birth, she is a proud American citizen and homemaker who always offers to work to bring in extra income, but is refused by her husband. Celia befriends the Riveras almost immediately, and encourages Mayor to spend more time with Maribel. When Arturo is killed, Celia begins the task of taking up a collection among friends, neighbors, and others, ultimately collecting more than \$5,000 dollars so that Alma and Maribel may return to Mexico.



Enrique Toro

Enrique Toro is the oldest child and son of Celia and Rafael Toro, and is the older brother of Mayor. Enrique considers himself American through and through though he is Panamanian by birth. He wants nothing to do with his past at all, for he is exceedingly popular in high school and later in college in Maryland. He comes home rarely to visit, coming to look down on his parents and their home, having seen what else is possible.

Rafael Toro

Rafael Toro is the husband of Celia Toro, and the father of Enrique and Mayor. He is a very proud American citizen, originally being from Panama. He even takes offense for himself and on behalf of his adoptive country when friends back home in Panama ridicule him for being an American. Rafael loves his family deeply, and works as a cook in a diner to provide for them. He does not want his wife to have to work, as a matter of tradition, manhood, and simply wanting her not to have to work out of love. He is thrilled Enrique is in college, and wants Mayor to follow suit. After Arturo is killed, and Alma and Maribel decide to return to Mexico, Rafael arranges for them to be driven back, secretly paying the driver to do so, and to tell Alma it is merely the repayment of a favor so Alma will not feel bad about the cost for Rafael.

William

William is one of Mayor's few real friends at school. William shows Mayor how to drive a stick so that Mayor can use his father's car to bring Maribel to the beach.

Garrett Miller

Garrett Miller is a teenager who is known as a troublemaker in Wilmington, living in the rundown neighborhood of Capitol Oaks. He makes sexual advances on Maribel, only to be stopped by Alma and Mayor on different occasions. He is even punched by Mayor on another occasion for making crude sexual comments about Maribel. While he appears to be a villain in the novel, he becomes something of a tragic villain when it is discovered much of his life is beyond his control. His older brother is killed while serving in Iraq; his mother has a breakdown and leaves home, never to be seen again; and his father is a drunkard and drug-addict who is rarely ever home. As such, Garrett must rely on himself, and without proper role models, often does the wrong thing.

Leon Miller

Leon Miller is the drug-addict, drunkard father of Garrett Miller. He is rarely ever around in the novel, and only makes an appearance toward the end of the novel, following his shooting of Arturo with a shotgun. Leon is arrested, and his fate remains uncertain.



Symbols and Symbolism

Visas

Visas are documents which legally allow non-citizens to have residency for any period of time within the United States. They are contingent upon the visa holder having work. Visas are issued to Arturo, Alma, and Maribel so that they may live in Delaware while Maribel attends school and Arturo works at a mushroom farm in Pennsylvania. Arturo is proud of his visa, and proud to be in America, having done it the legal and right way. When he loses his job to an undocumented worker, he is heartbroken and devastated, and cannot find a new job because of the bad economy. His visa is ultimately revoked, and he and his family stay on in the country illegally.

Volkswagen

Rafael and his family purchase a used Volkswagen for \$2,000 with the \$10,000 repayment from Gloria. The Volkswagen is a manual, and Rafael learns to drive courtesy of the used car dealership owner. The car at once becomes a symbol of the family's freedom, allowing them to get around with ease, and is a major rite of passage for all Americans in life. Mayor later uses the car without permission to bring Maribel to the beach, during which time Arturo is killed while looking for Maribel. As such, the car also comes to symbolize the end of freedom for Mayor and Maribel, as Maribel and Alma move back to Mexico.

\$10,000

\$10,000 is given to the Toros by Celia's sister, Gloria, as repayment for their past kindnesses and lending to her. The Toros family decides to save most of the money, but also to use \$2,000 to buy a good, used car in order to get around. When Alma and Maribel move back to Mexico, it is figured that some of the money goes to helping them on their return by way not only of the collection, but by way of Rafael's paying a friend to bring them back.

Notebook

A notebook is kept by Maribel throughout her time at the Evers School in the United States. The goal is for Maribel to write down anything she wants to, in order to stimulate brain activity. As a result, she records everything she hears, from instructions on where her classroom is to the things Mayor says to her. When Maribel returns to Mexico, she gives the notebook to Mayor because she no longer wants anything that will remind her of her time in the United States. It is a symbolic parting gift that clearly means things are over between her and Mayor.



Red scarf

Mayor gives Maribel a red alpaca scarf for Christmas. Maribel is thrilled with the gift, and wears it constantly. The color red symbolizes passion and life, and the scarf becomes symbolic therein of Mayor's feelings for Maribel, and these feelings, in turn, bring passion and life back into Maribel. She is thrilled to be loved by someone other than her parents, and this causes her to do better in school and improve dramatically in her recovery.

Snow

Snow is something the Riveras have never experienced before moving to Delaware. When it snows, Mayor sneaks Maribel out of the Evers School to bring her to the beach. She is thrilled to be out in the snow, which is white and pure – and symbolic of innocence. But as snow falls, so does innocence. The trip Mayor and Maribel take leads to the death of Arturo, and the end of innocence for them both as they must confront death and Maribel's return to Mexico.

Sunglasses

Sunglasses are worn by Maribel throughout much of the novel in order to help block out the light and ease Maribel's regular headaches. The glasses become symbolic of Maribel's childlike exterior, which obscures the fact that she is still a real person inside, just as she has real eyes behind the sunglasses. Only Mayor sees the real Maribel, without symbolic sunglasses, in the novel.

Fries

Fries are one of Maribel's favorite American foods. She prefers to get them from the cafeteria at school, but is amazed when Mayor buys her fries from McDonald's, coming to hate cafeteria fries as a result.

Shotgun

A shotgun is a weapon wielded by Leon Miller when Arturo comes to the Miller household. Though the exact details of what transpires are not revealed, Leon ultimately shoots Arturo with a shotgun, mortally wounding him. Leon is later arrested for the incident.

\$5,132

\$5,132 is the sum of money gathered in a collection begun by Celia for Alma and Maribel to travel back to Mexico. It is given to Alma by Celia at the end of the novel.

Though the Latino community has very little, and scrapes by, it still comes together to offer what it can to Alma and Maribel in their time of tragedy.



Settings

Redwood Apartments

The Redwood Apartments are a series of apartments at a converted auto-body shop in Wilmington, Delaware, owned and operated by landlord Fito. They are small, grungy apartments, and leave much to be desired. Nevertheless, they are cheap enough to afford, and clean enough to make do. They are pale and colorless, and considered lifeless by Alma, though she endeavors to clean as best she can, and bring as much life into her apartment as possible. The Redwood Apartments serve as a home to nearly all the characters in the novel, from the Riveras and the Toros to Quisqueya and Micho. Alma and her family take an apartment at Redwood because it is close enough both to Evers School for Maribel, and close enough to Arturo's work in Pennsylvania to make a commute possible.

Wilmington

Wilmington is the largest city in Delaware, and is where the Rivera family moves into the Redwood Apartment building after leaving Mexico. It is a bustling American city with many places to eat, shop, and enjoy life. Fito explains the layout of the city of Wilmington to Alma early on in the novel. Main Street is where the university students live. Hockessin is where the gringos live. Downtown Wilmington is where the blacks live. Greenville is where the rich white people live. Elsmere and Newport are for the lower classes. And Capitol Oaks is a run-down neighborhood for troublemakers.

Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania is a state that borders Delaware, and is the location of a mushroom farm. It is approximately 20 minutes from Wilmington, and Arturo commutes to the mushroom farm every day for work.

Mexico

Mexico is the country that lies directly south of the United States of America. It is the homeland of millions of immigrants to America, both legal and illegal. It is also the homeland of the Rivera family, and where they live before legally moving to the United States. There, Arturo has a construction business and his own home, which his kept by Alma. It is in Mexico that Maribel is injured at one of Arturo's job sites, leading to their decision to move to the United States to better Maribel's life.

Panama

Panama is a country in Central America, and is the homeland of the Toro family. When the United States overthrows Panamanian dictator Noriega, the Toro family moves to the United States and becomes full-fledged citizens. By the time of the novel, all members of the Toro family feel more American than Panamanian. Even Rafael and Celia, who miss parts of Panama, would now rather be in America than in Panama.

Themes and Motifs

The American Dream

The American dream is an important theme in the novel “The Book of Unknown Americans” by Cristina Henríquez. The American dream is most often considered, in general, to have two aspects: freedom and security (by way of the safety of the United States and the ability to make a good living). That freedom and security, taken together, lead to what becomes specific American dreams – that which the individual seeks to do with his or her life. Specific American dreams differ according to the individual, but none are any less important than the others.

For many of the immigrants who move to the United States, a better life in terms of safety is the American dream. For the Toros, this is clearly the case. They want to leave the instability of Panama behind them for the safety of American shores. They are especially shocked to have the peace of America shattered by Muslim terrorists on 9/11, and it causes many in the Latino community to want to join the American military to defend the United States. The Toros also seek to participate in the American economy for financial solubility, and to be able to afford to send their children to college. Rafael and Celia are thrilled that Enrique is in college, and hope Mayor will follow suit, and that both children will be more successful than they ever could hope to be.

For the Riveras, the United States special education system, the best in the world, provides the basis for their American dream –to help Maribel recover herself following her injury. The Riveras dream of Maribel improving, and then one day returning to Mexico to finish out their lives. They do not know how long they will be in the United States, but are determined to live as happily as they can while they are in the United States. Unfortunately, the Riveras do not fully realize their American dream, as Maribel is not as far recovered as they’d hoped when Arturo is killed and Alma decides to return to Mexico. Indeed, here, there is irony as America is not the place where Alma’s dreams come true, but die.

For others, the American Dream is achieved in various ways, or to various degrees. For example, Nelia travels to the United States in hopes of becoming a Broadway dancer and movie star at the age of 17, but this never comes to pass. Instead, she forms her own theater company in Wilmington, and helps others to start out to achieve their dreams. While Nelia may not have been successful like she’d hoped, she is still successful to a large degree. She has had the freedom to begin a company, and to largely determine her own path in life. Indeed, she is dating a man half her age and looks forward to the future in America. Also consider the example of Fito, who moved to the United States to become a famous boxer. His dream specifically is never realized, but his general American dream – of stability and income – are realized through his working to save money to purchase an apartment building. In so doing, Fito has become a self-made man in typical American fashion. In this sense, he has indeed achieved the American dream.



Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “The Book of Unknown Americans” by Cristina Henríquez. Family, thematically, includes the mutual love, compassion, loyalty towards, and emotional and physical support of those who may or may not be blood-related, but who still behave in the way of the traditional nuclear family. Family is a very positive thing in the novel, and is on clear display throughout the course of the plot. It can be seen through the Rivera and the Toro families, primarily.

The Rivera family is very close, having decided to come to the United States in order to help seek educational treatment for Maribel’s brain condition. Both Alma and Arturo are very protective of their daughter, Maribel, and understandably so. They do their best to make sure she is happy and comfortable, though they forget that she is a teenager and not a child, despite her injury. Alma, for example, not only watches Maribel get on the bus every day, but meets her when she gets off the bus every day as well. Everything they do, they do for her. Arturo has given up his construction business to work on a mushroom farm to support his family in America so that Maribel may attend the Evers School. When Arturo is killed, it is while he is out looking for Maribel, worried that something has happened to her. Indeed, family is so important to Arturo that he ultimately literally gives his life for his family.

The Toro family is also very close, having moved as a unit from Panama to the United States years before. They very much fit the mold of a traditional family, almost to a fault. Rafael is the head of the house, and will not allow his wife to work, believing it is his duty as a man, a husband, and a father, to provide for his family and to enable them to live their lives as they see fit. Rafael works long hours at a diner to do this, and goes to great lengths to ensure that his sons will both attend college and better their own lives. He ultimately also has the final say in family matters, such as when he decides the family will buy a car with the \$10,000 from Gloria. Indeed, Rafael at first opposes the idea that Gloria will give the family any money in repayment, considering it an insult to his ability to care for his family. Rafael may be hard on his family when it comes to his wife working, and wanting Mayor to play soccer and attend college, but he does it out of love for them, not cruelty. Family matters more to him than anything else, and his sense of self is tied into his ability to provide for his family.

Prejudice

Prejudice is an important theme in the novel “The Book of Unknown Americans” by Cristina Henríquez. Prejudice – harboring biased views about other people based on things like race, nationality, or personal characteristics – is most commonly associated in literature as emanating from whites toward non-whites. While this kind of prejudice does appear in the novel, the author makes the point to demonstrate that prejudice occurs everywhere, among non-whites toward whites, and among non-whites toward other non-whites. The author also points out the prejudice exists even along non-racial lines, as evidenced by attitudes toward Maribel throughout the novel.



The Latino community as a whole faces prejudice from whites, exemplified through the character of Mayor, who is made fun of at school for being from Panama, and is made fun of for his name. Non-whites in general face prejudice in the novel as well, as is explained to Rafael at the diner by coworkers. Rafael drives his car slowly, not wanting to draw attention to himself, and be pulled over for being black or brown as his coworkers say often happens. Indeed, certain American employers view Latinos as nothing more than sources of cheap labor, and exploit undocumented Latinos for sub-minimum wages, choosing to fire legal immigrants in favor of illegals.

Prejudice also exists between non-whites in the novel. For example, Gustavo Milhojas notes the vial racism from Mexicans he was a victim of for being a Guatemalan. Mexicans hate Guatemalans, considering them to all be idiots. The Toros, who have raised their sons with aspirations of college and a better life than their current station, ultimately create prejudice in Enrique for them. Enrique hates coming home to the Latino community from college, now considering his old home, dingy apartment, and parents to be beneath him. He considers himself an American, and no longer wants any ties to his past in Panama.

Prejudice towards whites and Americans also exists in the novel. Rafael, a proud transplanted American, is deeply offended personally, and for his country, when his friends back home in Panama insult him for becoming an American citizen. He cancels a trip to Panama as a result of this exchange. Micho, a photographer from Mexico, calls Latinos “unknown Americans” because whites and other Americans do not want to get to know them, either because they are afraid of Latinos, or need someone to hate. Yet Micho’s statement is full of prejudicial irony and hypocrisy. Micho never bothers to try to get to know whites or Americans, and assumptively dismisses them as all the same – as being fearful and hateful – while condemning them for making assumptions about him. Indeed, many of the Latino characters in the novel refer to whites as “gringos”, a prejudicial and pejorative term for whites.

Prejudice in the novel also exists along nonracial lines as well, based on the personal characteristics of people. This is clearly demonstrated through the character of Maribel, who is intellectually disabled. Many people look down on her for her condition, which is no fault of hers. For example, Rafael considers her to not be normal, and urges his son to date a normal girl. Garrett, in turn, refers to Maribel with the pejorative term “retard”, and tries to use Maribel’s intellectual difficulties as a way to sexually take advantage of her.

Unknown Americans

The idea of “unknown Americans” is an important theme in the novel “The Book of Unknown Americans” by Cristina Enriquez. Unknown Americans are those that fall between the cracks, and form a population of people that Americans, white and otherwise, do not want to get to know. They are rarely seen, and more rarely ever heard. According to Micho, unknown Americans are unknown either out of fear, or because Americans need somebody to hate. Apart from the hypocrisy of Micho’s



assertion (see the theme “Prejudice”), there is some truth to his statement, that there are people who are not known because people do not seek to truly know them.

To many Americans – and indeed, to many immigrants themselves as they regard one another – immigrants seem to fill in a standard mold: immigrants arrive in the United States seeking a better life in general, and seeking their own extent of the American Dream. But beyond that, little else is known. The personal stories of these people, of these human beings, are never fully known. For some, like Quisqueya, the stories are not known because people like Quisqueya do not want to tell them. For others, like Arturo, the chance to tell their stories is taken away, such as when Arturo loses his life. Likewise, many Americans, such as the mushroom farmer, do not care what the personal stories of the unknown Americans are. They are simply interested in cheap labor, and nothing more.

However, what Micho fails to see – and what the author points out – is that there are other unknown Americans besides immigrants. Indeed, Garrett Miller provides such an unknown American. While he appears to be a quasi-villain, his own story is only ever spoken about, but never revealed by him, himself. Garrett lives in Capitol Oaks, a rundown neighborhood that is ignored and avoided. His brother is dead; his mother has left; and his father is a drunkard and drug-addict who is rarely around. As a result, Garrett must fend for himself, and has no positive role models, or real love, in his life. While it is quick to dismiss Garrett as nothing more than a villain, the truth is much more complex once his unknown American story is revealed.

Immigration

Immigration is an important theme in the novel “The Book of Unknown Americans” by Cristina Enriquez. Immigration involves individuals, or groups of individuals, moving from one place to another for various reasons. In the novel, Latino immigration to the United States forms the theme of immigration. Immigration is explored in two major ways: the act of immigration itself (including legality); and the impact of immigration on the immigrants themselves (including their experiences).

Each of the immigrants in the novel (with the possible exception of Micho), regardless as to where they have come from or why, are proud to be immigrants in America. Indeed, the Toro family has become a family of full-fledged American citizens who vote in elections and deeply love being Americans. They have done things legally, and are proud of having become Americans according to the law. The Riveras, temporary residents in the United States on work visas, are likewise extraordinarily proud to be in the country legally. Indeed, they take great pride in being legal as opposed to illegal aliens. Arturo, especially, comes to fall in love with the United States to the point that he wants to shout from the rooftops in Mexico just how much he loves America.

Interestingly, the novel also explores the unintended consequences of illegal immigration – something that is often missed or ignored in the national discussion on the subject. The Obama administration loosens immigration regulations during the



course of the novel, and as such, American companies have greater leniency in hiring, and begin to hire undocumented workers. The result is that legal immigrants, such as Arturo, are undermined and fired, and the entire legal immigration system is undermined and corrupted. Likewise, the illegal immigrants in the United States become victims of their own condition. They are hired for sub-minimum wages and exploited for their labor at the expense of unscrupulous employers.

The experience of immigration is also treated in the novel, through tertiary accounts of people like Quisqueya and Fito, but primarily through the eyes of Alma Rivera. She struggles to balance her life in America with her memories of the past in Mexico. In Mexico, her family owns their own home; in America, they rent a dingy apartment. Alma struggles to learn English to better navigate America, and learns to shop for American food that is both good and cheap while she longs to prepare traditional Mexican meals – which are unaffordable for her family in America. She, and other immigrants, must deal with racism and prejudice (see the theme “Prejudice”), while they struggle as unknown Americans (see the theme “Unknown Americans”) and seek to achieve the American dream (see the theme “The American Dream”).

Likewise, the personal stories of the immigrants serve as catalysts for their new lives in America. The Toros are seeking safety, security, and a sound future. The Riveras are seeking special education relief for their daughter, Maribel. Fito first comes to the United States to be a famous boxer, while Nelia travels to the United States to become a famous Broadway dancer and movie star. Quisqueya is in the United States as an unwanted child, having been brought there years before by her mother in marriage. Gustavo’s wife has died of cancer, and Gustavo travels to the United States illegally to earn money to put his two children through college. The stories of the immigrants in the novel are as varied as the places they come from. Gustavo is from Guatemala, while the Riveras are from Mexico. The Toros are from Panama, while Micho also comes from Mexico.

Styles

Point of View

Cristina Henríquez tells her novel “The Book of Unknown Americans” from the first-person perspective, from the point of view of no less than 11 different individuals. Most of the chapters are narrated by Mayor and Alma, weaving back and forth between the two, and interrupted periodically for the stories of various members who live in the apartment complex, from building manager Fito to photographer Micho. This is done to give a voice not only to “unknown Americans”, but what merely would have been tertiary characters (and thus, “unknown characters”) in the novel if they would not have had their own chapters to themselves to describe their own life stories. Because the experience of immigration is a deeply personal, and sometimes deeply internal thing, Henríquez allows their characters to personally narrate their own stories, rather than acting as an intermediary.

Language and Meaning

Cristina Henríquez tells her novel “The Book of Unknown Americans” in language that is simple and straightforward, as well as consistent. This is done for different reasons. First, most of the characters in the novel do not have a college education, and some do not even have a high school education – so the language must reflect their educational extent. Second, this adds a level of believability to the characters, and makes the plot easier to follow as it weaves back and forth between so many different people. The language, therein, is consistent so that it allows a sense of continuity as the reader must continually shift gears not only between main characters, but secondary and tertiary characters as well. While written in English, Spanish words and phrases are casually thrown in to demonstrate the shared Latino consciousness of the multitude of characters in the novel.

Structure

Cristina Henríquez divides her novel “The Book of Unknown Americans” into 28 unnumbered chapters. Each chapter is titled by a character who will serve as the narrator for that chapter. Most of the chapters are told from the point of view of either Alma or Mayor, while the others are told by secondary or tertiary characters. The chapters themselves are sometimes non-chronological, especially when secondary and tertiary characters speak about their own experiences. For example, Benny’s chapter occurs years before the events of the novel, while Arturo’s chapter concludes the book – after he dies, but apparently, his story is told before he is dead. This weaving together of various stories, times, and places, all feeds into the idea of immigration and America being a melting pot of various peoples.



Quotes

People throw away everything in the United States. Even things that are still perfectly good.

-- Driver (Alma, 3 paragraph 14)

Importance: Early on in the novel, Alma learns just how truly wealthy even the poorest Americans are. They throw away perfectly good things, like a television set, in favor of newer and more expensive models. This speaks volumes about the potential America holds for many immigrants in terms of hopes for achieving financial stability.

My wife, Celia, saved my life. Who knows what would have become of me if I hadn't met her?

-- Rafael (Rafael Toro, 19 paragraph 3)

Importance: Rafael explains that his life was going nowhere until he met Celia. Because of her, he went back to work and got his life in order to marry her. Because she saved his life, Rafael goes above and beyond in order to provide for her and give her the life she wants so she doesn't have to work, and so their children can go to college.

I nearly wept with joy when I heard the news. Now, I thought – finally! – we would move forward.

-- Alma (Alma, 48 paragraph 3)

Importance: Here, Alma expresses her relief at Maribel being accepted into the Evers School. This is the beginning of everything the Riveras have come to America for – to give Maribel a chance at a more normal, and better, life. From here on in, Alma hopes that things will continue to move forward and get better.

I mean, maybe it would have been nice for Maribel, but otherwise, what was the point? Looking at her, sure. I could have looked at her all day. But actually having conversations with her? That was a different story.

-- Mayor (Mayor, 67 paragraph 5)

Importance: Mayor describes his first reaction to Maribel's condition. He finds her incredibly attractive, but due to her intellectual disability, doesn't see her as being anything more than just something worth looking at. This is important because his opinion of Maribel will quickly change.

They were torn between wanting to look back and wanting to exist absolutely in the new life they'd created.

-- Mayor (Mayor, 67 paragraph 125)

Importance: Mayor describes the struggle of his parents in the early years of their time in America. This statement, however, aptly describes the plight of all immigrants to America, no matter where they are from. They want a new life, to start over again, but



the past is important, because it helps to make them who they are. It is something that cannot be escaped or done away with.

I thought she deserved it, you know, getting out in to the world.
-- Mayor (Mayor, 108 paragraph 9)

Importance: Mayor's opinion of Maribel quickly changes as he realizes that there is much more to Maribel than what merely meets the eye. In fact, not only does he become protective of her, but becomes romantically interested in her as well. He wants her to be able to get out and experience the world, rather than being cooped up in an apartment.

I lost myself. In between.
-- Maribel (Mayor, 108 paragraph 53)

Importance: Here, Maribel sadly comments on how she is not the same person as she was before the fall from the ladder. In between the fall and coming back, she knows she lost the person who she was – and is seeking to become that person again. Emotionally and personally, she is still the same person, but physically, she is changed. This also demonstrates that Maribel has the ability to understand things far more deeply than anyone else gives her credit for.

It was all just bullsh---. Quisqueya and Garrett and my dad and every other person on earth could say what they wanted, but Maribel and I were meant for each other. I knew it.
-- Mayor (Mayor, 156 paragraph 190)

Importance: In a Romeo and Juliet-like twist, forces begin working against Mayor and Maribel, from Quisqueya outing their relationship to Rafael disapproving of the relationship. Mayor, however, believes he is destined to be with Maribel, and no one is going to stop him. Ironically, in the end, it will be Mayor and Maribel themselves who prevent the relationship from continuing once Maribel leaves.

You don't think I have a right to treat her differently now than I would have before the accident? You don't think we have the responsibility to do that? She's not the same person, Alma.
-- Arturo (Alma, 218 paragraph 45)

Importance: Here, Arturo stresses why he is so protective of Maribel, now. The accident nearly killed Maribel, and Arturo is scared to imagine anything else happening to her, especially because Maribel is much less capable of caring for herself anymore. He almost lost Maribel once, and he will do anything to prevent that from happening again.

We're the unknown Americans, the ones that no one even wants to know, because they've been told they're supposed to be scared of us and because maybe if they did take the time to get to know us, they might realize that we're not that bad, maybe even



that we're a lot like them. And who would they hate then?

-- Micho Alvarez (Micho Alvarez, 236 paragraph 1)

Importance: Here, Micho explains the plight of Latinos – that they are unknown Americans – and that they are unknown because nobody wants to get to know them. As such, their stories are not known, and are revealed in the novel. Micho contends that Americans should get to know the unknowns, and that they shouldn't generalize – but fails to see that he generalizes about Americans by writing them off as hateful and fearful.

Who can say whose fault it is? Who can say who set this whole thing in motion?

-- Mayor (Mayor, 248 paragraph 45)

Importance: Mayor attempts to figure out who is responsible for Arturo's death, but the truth is, life is full of variables, and anything could have led to Arturo's death. In some ways, Mayor is correct, and in other ways, he seeks to avoid blame himself. It was his bringing Maribel to the beach – a reckless action – which ultimately caused Arturo to seek out Mirabel, and get killed in the process.

People do what they have to in this life. We try to get from one end of it to the other with dignity and with honor. We do the best we can.

-- Arturo (Arturo Rivera, 285 paragraph 5)

Importance: Here, Arturo reflects on how life is full of challenges, and people do the best they can to get through life. This is true of Arturo and Alma, who do their best in life so that their daughter can have a better life. No one is perfect, but everybody does the best that they can to live with dignity and to do honorable things.