

# **My Beloved World Study Guide**

## **My Beloved World by Sonia Sotomayor**

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## Summary

*My Beloved World* is a memoir by Sonia Sotomayor, the first Hispanic justice on the United States Supreme Court. This memoir, related from Sotomayor's first-person perspective, describes her childhood, family, education, and career through 1992.

Sonia Sotomayor grew up in America in a poor but extended family. During her early childhood, her parents had a rocky relationship due in part to her father's alcoholism. Sotomayor's mother was handicapped by a difficult childhood and never seemed to know how to deal effectively with her husband or her family. The author's mother, Celina, was kind and caring, spending hours caring for other people, but she was often absent from her own family. Sotomayor struggled with this until she learned about her mother's childhood. Orphaned at a young age, Celina was raised by siblings who were ill-equipped to handle the job. She was beaten brutally for minor infractions and shown little true affection.

By contrast, Sotomayor's father, Juan, was raised in a loving, extended family. The author's grandmother, Abuelita Mercedes, was her refuge. The young Sonia spent many days and nights with Abuelita, choosing Abuelita's house over the chaos that reigned at her own home. When Sotomayor's father died, she felt their lives would improve but was surprised when her mother sank into a deep grief that lasted weeks.

Sonia and her brother, Juan Junior, often watched television and Sonia became intrigued by the courtroom drama of *Perry Mason*. Though she didn't know what to expect or even really how to achieve the goal, she became determined to become a lawyer with the higher goal of being a judge.

Sonia and Junior attended Catholic school for their early education. She learned how to study in order to make good grades but she lacked in analytical and critical thinking skills. She did well on the debate team and gained experience that would greatly supplement her education. When the time for college drew near, a young man who had become a mentor advised her to set her sights high. She got several offers but settled on Princeton University. Some in her school were amazed and even skeptical when the news began to spread. While Sonia's mother didn't know the significance of the prestigious acceptance, she did discover that her co-workers were excited on her behalf.

Sonia married Kevin, her high school sweetheart, as was expected in their traditional families. Sonia finished college at Princeton and went on to Yale for law school. She became an assistant District Attorney as Ken continued his education to become a doctor. Their lives were so busy that they grew apart and divorced. Sonia then joined a law firm in private practice and one of the partners there helped her apply for a position as a judge. That step eventually led to the Supreme Court.



From childhood, Sonia Sotomayor dealt with juvenile diabetes that caused occasional episodes and always made her aware that she may not have a long life ahead of her. By the time she was a judge, she felt the disease was mainly under control.

Through it all, Sotomayor dealt with her own self-doubts and the prejudices against women and Puerto Ricans. She focused on the needs of others, committing to community service even when she had her hands full with studies and work. She attributed her success to the people who supported her, from her family to the friends she made along her journey. She has always believed that her life was filled with learning, and that her role as a judge requires that she continue to learn.

This study guide is based on the Kindle version of the book, copyrighted 2013.



# Preface - Chapter 2

## Summary

The memoir opens with a quote from “To Puerto Rico I Return” by Jose Guatier Benitez. The song in its entirety appears at the end of the book. The quote reads, in part, “I return to my beloved world.”

In the Preface, Sonia Sotomayor describes the reasons she decided to write the book. People often asked her about her personal life, including living with diabetes from childhood and the loss of her father at a relatively young age. Sotomayor also makes the distinction between an autobiography and memoirs, and writes that some people may have variations of the events she describes.

In the Prologue, young Sonia's parents, Celina and Juli, were fighting early one morning. It was not an uncommon scene in the Sotomayor household. This time, their fight was because Celina was trying to make Juli learn to give Sonia her insulin shots. Her parents argued all the time, usually because Juli drank too much. In an effort to put a stop to this specific fight, Sonia declared that she would give herself the shots. Her mother, a nurse, oversaw the process as Sonia administered a shot to herself for the first time.

Sonia had fainted, which prompted the trip to Dr. Fisher and the diagnosis that she had diabetes. Her mother cried at the news but Sonia did not yet realize how serious the diagnosis was. Her extended family, including her grandmother, was very upset. In 1962, treatment was difficult and life-expectancies short. The Jacobi Medical Center in the Bronx had a program studying juvenile diabetes. Sonia spent days in the hospital, being monitored and studied. Her mother valued education and Sonia realized her disease must be serious for her mother to approve the time away from school.

In Chapter 1, Sonia Sotomayor writes that she was only seven when she was diagnosed with diabetes. She was very self-reliant because most of the adults in her world were extremely unreliable. Her brother, Juan Luis Sotomayor, Jr., was three years younger than Sonia. Though they argued, she was his staunch supporter if anyone else picked on him.

It was about the time of Junior's birth that the Sotomayor family moved to the Bronxdale Houses, a new housing project that was nicer and safer than their previous tenement. Sonia's grandmother, Abuelita Mercedes, continued to live in that previous apartment complex along with some other family members. Sonia's family was relatively isolated from other family members, partly because the move physically put some distance between them, but also because of Juli's constant drinking. Celia spent long hours at work as a means of escaping the chaos of her marriage. Sonia resented them both to varying degrees and for different reasons.



One of the few family members who spent time at Sonia's house was a maternal cousin named Alfred. Juli often avoided driving because of his drinking and Alfred would drive for them. Sonia felt her father's refusal to drive further isolated the family but realized only as an adult the reason her father drove so seldom.

Juli worked days and Celina worked evenings, so Juli cooked dinner each night. He was an incredible cook. After the meal, he went to his bedroom and stayed there until bedtime.

Juli's drinking caused rifts in the family. Abuelita knew that he was drinking too much and she was vocal as she blamed Celina for never being at home. Abuelita was fiercely loyal to her family and put her blood relatives above everyone else.

In Chapter 2, Sotomayor writes that she loved her grandmother Abuelita "totally and without reservation," and she spent time at Abuelita's apartment whenever possible (16). Another of her cousins, Nelson, was near Sonia's age and the two were close. They were "co-conspirators" in many escapades. Nelson was very smart and the two spent hours talking. Nelson's father, Tio Benny, wanted Nelson to go to medical school. Benny was devoted to his children and spoke English so that he could communicate with their teachers. He never drank. Sonia wished he were her father.

Abuelita often threw parties and family members would gather for food and games. Abuelita sometimes recited poetry. After the children were asleep, the adults would hold spiritual gatherings. Juli attended the parties while the family still lived in the same tenement as Abuelita. He would begin to drink and the family would leave "while he could still walk" (25). Sometimes, Sonia spent the night at Abuelita's and she was always thrilled to have time alone with her grandmother the next morning. Each time they parted, Abuelita hugged Sonia and offered a blessing. Sotomayor says that it seemed that the blessing was true, just because her grandmother said it.

## Analysis

In the Preface, Sotomayor notes that she will be judged for the details of her life as she reveals them in this book. She later mentions being vetted for judicial appointments and that the scrutiny became more pronounced as the positions got higher. She says she has a thick skin and that will be proven throughout the book as the reader gets a good look at some of the hardships Sotomayor faced because of her socio-economic background, her ethnicity, and her gender.

Two of the first issues the reader sees are Sotomayor's diabetes and her father's drinking. This is an indication that she saw them as the most important issues in her early life. Both parents had a serious control over Sonia, but in different ways. Her father's drinking created chaos at home and made Sonia welcome the relief of escaping to her grandmother's house. This provided her with a closer relationship with her grandmother so that she knew the love and affection she was missing at home. The diabetes forced her to become disciplined and attuned to the needs of her body, and to



face the fact that her life might be cut short. She used this discipline to push herself to reach goals and she always knew she had to reach them sooner because she might not have a long life. She faced these hardships and learned from them while other people have given in to similar circumstances and failed in life.

Sotomayor was angry at both her parents when she was young, but more of her anger was directed at her mother. Even at a young age, Sonia realized that alcoholism played a huge role in her father's life. She understood that it was a disease, which gave her father only a moderate level of control over his actions. She does point out that he was too focused on the alcohol to see the effects on his family, but she still seems to feel that he had a lesser level of responsibility than her mother. At this age, Sonia saw her mother only in terms of her current life. She did not consider that her mother's past played a role in her actions. Sonia's attitude changed as she learned more about her mother's childhood. This evolution of understanding reads very much like a novel, which makes Sonia's decision to write a memoir instead of an autobiography even clearer.

Sotomayor's 's early relationships with her family, including her parents and Abuelita, played an important role in her development. While she held onto resentment that her parents weren't stepping into their roles, she adored her grandmother, Abuelita Mercedes. Abuelita often criticized Celina, her daughter-in-law, and did not seem to care if Sonia heard that criticism. Sonia had a poor relationship with her mother and that may be the reason she did not seem angry at Abuelita for her comments. Ultimately, Sonia did not fully understand her mother's shortcomings until later in life, when she learned more about her mother's childhood. These relationships are one of the book's themes and help explain some of Sotomayor's 's actions and decisions as an adult.

## Vocabulary

beloved, isolated, predictably, adversity, resonates, candor rambunctiousness, mortifying, noxious, precocious, glean, inadvertently, ambit, embellishing, pondered, nostalgia, mayhem



## Chapters 3-7

### Summary

In Chapter 3, Sotomayor describes her best friend in elementary school as a boy named Gilbert. One day Gilbert announced that his family was moving away and Sonia accompanied him as he said his farewells to others in their apartment complex. They then went to the Blessed Sacrament where they attended school.

Celina felt education and discipline were important which is why she managed to pay for Catholic school though the cost was a strain on the family's resources. None of Sonia's cousins attended Catholic school. The nuns believed mothers shouldn't work, but Celina had to work to help pay the tuition. The nuns took their disapproval out on the children of working mothers, including Sonia.

In Chapter 4, Sotomayor recalls her childhood trips to Puerto Rico. As a very young girl, she traveled with Abuelita. Celina, who remembered only a childhood of hardship, vowed she would never return. Eventually, Celina did make the trip and was equally in awe of the things that had changed and the things that had not. Young Sonia was amazed to see the signs on storefronts that indicated Puerto Ricans who were professionals. She felt that the people she knew in Puerto Rico had better jobs than most of the Puerto Ricans she knew in New York.

In Puerto Rico, Sonia met Abuelita's mother, a woman in her 90s that seemed even older to the young Sonia. One day, Celina announced they were going to see her father in the hospital. Sonia had never even heard Celina mention her father. He was estranged from the family when Celina was very young. On the day of their visit, Celina introduced herself. Sonia's aunt, Titi Aurora, introduced Sonia. The man barely acknowledged either of them and Sonia realized that her mother had been irrevocably hurt by her father's abandonment. Sonia pledged that her own relationship with her mother would not get to this point.

In Chapter 5, Sonia and Junior were summoned into a neighbor's apartment after school. The neighbor's name was Ana and she often cared for the children until Juli arrived home from work. On this day, Juli had missed work because he was sick. When Ana met them at the door, she was upset and had been crying. Ana and her husband, Moncho, walked home with Sonia and Junior. Alfred met them at the door and there were other family members present. When Junior asked for his father, Celina said that "God took him" (41).

Sonia noted Abuelita's sadness and worried that her grandmother might die as well. At the funeral, an aunt insisted that Sonia go through the ritual of kissing her father good-bye. Sonia suddenly realized that their lives might be better without him.





The family gathered to say the rosaries for Juli each night for the next week. Sonia fell asleep one night and woke to an argument. She later learned that she apparently spoke in the voice of Abuelita's deceased sister, saying that Juli was alright and that Abuelita should accept his passing. Celina threatened to keep Sonia away from Abuelita if she promoted the mysticism. Sonia had no recollection of speaking but believes it might have been her subconscious trying to ease Abuelita's pain.

The family moved into another apartment and only later did Sonia remember that she'd had a strong feeling about Juli during recess on the day he died. She wonders if he was saying good-bye.

In Chapter 6, Celina changed her shift at work so she would be home in the evenings when the children were out of school. Sonia expected that their lives would settle into a better level of comfort but Celina never interacted with the children. She worked and took care of the basic needs of her family, but did nothing more. Junior and Sonia shared a room and Celina barely came out of her own room. Some friends were also worried and called on Father Dolan, a priest at Blessed Sacrament, to talk to Celina. He refused, saying she was not a regular parishioner. Another friend called on her pastor from a Baptist church. He visited, spoke to Celina in Spanish, and Sonia was pleased that he at least wanted to offer help. But nothing worked. Sonia knew her parents had argued constantly and she did not understand this attitude. She did understand Abuelita's grief. She no longer held parties and felt her luck had left her.

Young Sonia drew comfort from the many books available at the local library. Then one day, Sonia confronted Celina. She shouted that Celina still had a life to live and children that needed her to be present. She then ran to her room and cried.

In Chapter 7, Sonia asked her mother to talk about her own childhood. Celina was born in 1927 and she was told that her father abandoned the family because of Celina's birth. Her mother was an invalid, leaving Celina in the care of older siblings. Celina's sister, Aurora, left for a home of her own but helped the family financially. She taught Celina to sew and she had to sew 24 handkerchiefs each week. Celina then sold them and the money helped the family. Her brother Mayo was brutal with his discipline. Her mother died when Celina was nine and she went to live with Aurora.

When Celina was a teenager, she saw an advertisement for the Women's Army Corps. She lied about her age with Aurora's help and joined. Though Celina had no friends as a child, she forged a friendship with a girl named Carmin. They went to the Bronx one day to visit Carmin's friends and that's when Celina met Juli. She fell in love with him and with his mother, who took Celina into her circle of family.

When Celina's time in the corps was over, she married Juli and they settled into a happy life. Juli's father died of tuberculosis when Juli was 13, forcing Juli, as the oldest son, into the role of provider. He had very little education but supported Celina as she went to nursing school. Celina knew that Juli drank some but the drinking grew heavy when the family moved from the tenement to the Bronxdale Houses. Celina felt it was safer for the children but Juli felt isolated. He lost his job at a mannequin factory about the same



time. Through it all, Celina said that Juli always worked, despite his drinking, and he cared for Sonia and Junior.

The family physician, Dr. Fisher, saw that Juli was killing himself and he insisted that Sonia take out a life insurance policy. She resisted but he insisted. That money was vital to the family's survival in the months after Juli's death. Celina told Sonia that she was not suffering from depression after Juli's death, but from sadness and fear.

## Analysis

Sonia Sotomayor met extended family in Puerto Rico, and she became interested in the country. This became an important part of her life as a lawyer because she felt a need to help the people of Puerto Rico overcome some of the obstacles that kept them from being prosperous. Readers who are not familiar with Puerto Rico's status may be confused slightly at this point in the story but the author later reveals details about the country, including that it is an American territory so people can travel between Puerto Rico and mainland America without a passport.

The mysticism described here seems out of keeping with the religious aspects of the family's lives, but Sonia felt that it somehow meshed. Celina did not attend church regularly but Sonia attended as a child in school and later chose to attend services with one of her aunts. Celina apparently sent Sonia and Junior to the Catholic school because she really believed in their ability to educate and discipline more than her belief in the Church. Abuelita held what appears to be séances at her parties. This indicates that the family members in attendance accepted and approved of her actions. The interesting fact here is that they sent the children to bed before these events. They may have been trying to protect the children from something or keeping them from trying to dabble in something they didn't understand. Their motivations are never revealed.

Sotomayor's attitude toward the mysticism in her family is outwardly skeptical but she does not discount it entirely. To do so would be to say that Abuelita was a liar or a cheat. Sonia's devotion to Abuelita may account for some of Sonia's attitude. Sotomayor does, however, write about a connection she had with her father about the time of his death. She says that she suddenly thought about him while on the school yard, and that it wasn't the normal kind of thought a child might have during a normal day. She admits that it might have been her father's presence that she felt. Sotomayor began the book by pointing out that she would be judged by its words, which might explain why she tempers her thoughts on the subject.

Sotomayor was heartbroken when her father died. Then she began to believe that their lives might settle into a new level of happiness without her father's constant drinking and the problems it created. She was surprised when her mother hid out. Sonia knew that her parents fought constantly and she didn't consider that her mother still loved her father, despite their problems. She better understood Abuelita's grief but did not understand why Abuelita no longer had parties when Juli almost never attended. Abuelita seldom spoke to Juli and he always distanced himself from everyone. Sonia



did not immediately consider that everyone was feeling guilty about Juli's death. He had clearly killed himself with alcohol and they all saw it coming, but no one did anything constructive to help him change. What Sonia saw as grief was probably guilt and shame. When she did consider the guilt, she says it was a ridiculous self-punishment because no one could have changed Juli's course of action.

## Vocabulary

segregation, chronic, mesmerized, permanence, articulate, antiquity, grandeur, riven, aperture, promenading, prodigious, exuberance



# Chapters 8-10

## Summary

In Chapter 8, Celina did a complete turnaround the day after Sonia's outburst. The home became a welcome place though Celina was still technically in mourning. Celina began taking care of the apartment so that Sonia no longer had to clean. Sonia was carefully optimistic. Celina was always dressed immaculately and cared about her appearance. She was always disappointed that Sonia seemed to care very little about clothes and could not remain clean and pretty for more than a short period of time. Sonia felt her mother would happily trade Sonia for one of her cousins who also cared about clothes and looks.

Abuelita's mother died soon after Juli and Abuelita struggled through the next year. Her husband became bedridden and Abuelita mainly stayed at home. When he died, she moved immediately into a home for senior citizens.

In the months after Juli's death, the nuns at school were kinder to Sonia, a change that lasted to the summer vacation. The summer was awful with Celina still spending all her time hiding from life, and Sonia was happy to begin fifth grade that following fall.

Language was a barrier in many Puerto Rican households, including Sonia's. Her father spoke almost no English at all. Her mother preferred not to speak English at home, though she did at the hospital. Despite that, Celina insisted that education was vital to a good future. She bought a set of encyclopedias and began speaking English more at home. Sonia's fifth grade teacher began awarding gold stars for rewards and Sonia embraced the idea of getting as many stars as possible. These and other changes prompted Sonia to a new desire to succeed at school. Sonia had trouble studying and she asked a classmate for help. She held that habit of accepting what others could teach her throughout her life. Celina was happy with Sonia and Junior as long as they were studying.

In Chapter 9, Sotomayor describes spending time at the Jacobi Medical Center under the care of Dr. Elsa Paulson. She was intrigued by the fact that there was a female doctor. Dr. Paulson and the clinic focused on teaching children with diabetes how to manage their disease rather than just reacting to the fluctuations. Sonia grew up with her mother's fears of typical side effects of childhood diabetes, including amputations and blindness. The adults feared that she would die. Sonia took a different attitude. She was aware that she might not live as long as most and that she should make the most of her time.

Sonia received a pamphlet about her diabetes, including the professions she could expect to be open to her. Doctor, lawyer, engineer, and teacher were on that list. Police officer and pilot were among the professions not open to her because of the possibility of passing out. Sonia believed she would make a good detective and was upset that



police officer was off the table, eliminating the possibility of being a detective. At home she often watched television and became immersed in the Perry Mason series. She was enthralled by the actions of Perry Mason, a defense attorney, and by the judge who presided over the cases. Sonia began to think about a career in law but did not really know what was required or the difficulties of becoming a judge.

In Chapter 10, Sonia began to find her niche in middle school. She developed friendships and friends were often invited to spend time at Sonia's apartment and Celina would prepare food for the group. Sonia volunteered to do Bible readings at church as a means to overcome her fear of public speaking. Sonia left Blessed Sacrament at the end of eighth grade. She wrote in her yearbook that she "willed" her brains to the underclassmen so they could always be prepared for class, thus avoiding the wrath of the teacher, Sister Mary Regina. Sister Mary Regina wrote of Sonia that her goal of becoming an attorney was "odd" and she predicted challenges ahead.

## Analysis

The language barrier comes up repeatedly over the course of the memoir as one of many cultural issues that Puerto Ricans face in America. At this time in history, children who spoke no English were expected to figure out what was being taught in school. There was no special help and that contributed to Sonia's difficulties in the early years of her education. One of Sotomayor's cousins became a pioneer on this front, earning a degree in bilingual education. It is important for the reader to remember that Sonia's parents spoke Spanish at home and at least some of her extended family depended on that language for daily communication. She mentions that she was envious of a cousin because her father spoke English, meaning he could participate in parent-teacher conferences at school. Her own parents were cut off from that part of her life because of the language barrier.

Celina was greatly limited when it came to helping Sonia and Junior succeed in school, but she pushed them to do their best. She was not focused entirely on grades and claimed not to particularly care what grade they got, as long as they studied and did their best. That attitude would continue throughout their lives as seen in Celina's attitude when Sonia was accepted to Princeton.

Sonia and her brother often watched television. One evening, someone said Celina should not let them have the television on while they were studying and doing homework. Celina responded that they made good grades and she was not going to tell them how they should study. The television played an important role in their lives and prompted young Sonia's first dreams of becoming involved in the legal system as a lawyer or judge. Sotomayor notes that it also "broadened our horizons beyond the Bronx" (82). In a very closed community, Sotomayor might have had a completely different life if she had never seen the television dramas such as Perry Mason.

Sotomayor notes that the attitudes in the Catholic school she attended were based on discipline. There was little nurturing in her memories. She had, however, returned to the



school as an adult and noted that things had changed. This seems to be typical of changing attitudes in education as the role of teachers has changed from strictly disciplinarians to nurturers. Sotomayor does not express an opinion about this change, but her tone implies that she saw it as a good thing.

## Vocabulary

claustrophobia, ominously, explicitly, irked, prerogative, fluctuations, panoply, muster, fatalism, keen, intrigued, aspiration



# Chapters 11-14

## Summary

In Chapter 11, Sonia began high school in 1968 at Cardinal Spellman, about an hour from the Bronxdale Houses where the family lived. There were soon problems in Spanish class. Students who spoke Spanish at home were put in an advanced class. The teacher planned a quick refresher before advancing to literature. The students, including Sonia, knew nothing of formal Spanish and were lost from the beginning. Sonia and another student told the teacher the problem and she slowed the pace to a more realistic level.

By this time, Nelson had begun struggling with school. He was as smart as ever and some of his emotional problems were prompted by his parents' separation.

The summer after her freshman year of high school, Sonia got a job. Celina, remembering her own childhood, initially objected, but Sonia really wanted to work and Celina eventually gave her permission. Sonia went to work in a clothing store where Titi Carmen worked. On Saturday nights when the store was open late, police officers walked Sonia and Carmen home. Sotomayor makes a comparison between their lives to the boys in *The Lord of the Flies*. She saw a police officer who took bags of fruit from a vendor without paying. The vendor put it down as the cost of doing business. Sonia knew the police officer couldn't see things from the vendor's point of view, and felt that was one of several examples she'd seen of how society breaks down.

In Chapter 12, Sonia's family moved to Co-op City. She was now close enough to walk to school but Junior had an hour-long bus ride. Celina felt there was a financial advantage to the move because the cost was based on income. The Bronxdale Apartments had become overrun by gangs and drugs, and Celina hoped the family would be safer. They had the money for the move because the family physician, Dr. Fisher, left Celina \$5,000 in his will.

Sonia began work at Zara's Bakery, just across from Co-op City and Titi Aurora moved in with them, cramping their new home. Sonia and Junior believed that Celina invited Titi Aurora so there would be another adult watching Junior and Sonia. Sonia saw prejudice in many areas of her life during this time, just one of many changes in her life.

Sonia's friends continued to spend time at her apartment. One day, the neighbors complained about the noise. When the security guard showed up, Celina shouted that kids got in trouble on the streets because they were not allowed to have fun at home. She then invited the security guard in for coffee and asked Sonia's guests to keep the volume down a little.

When Sonia was a junior in high school, a new teacher named Miss Katz demanded that students think analytically, a change from memorizing and repeating information





like other teachers required. It was also during this period that Sonia met Kevin Noonan. They became close almost at once although Kevin's mother did not approve of the fact that Sonia was Puerto Rican. She eventually came to accept her. When Sonia introduced Kevin to Abuelita, everyone expected they would marry.

In Chapter 13, Sonia was friends with a boy named Ken Moy who was the student coach for the Forensics Club. Kenny taught her about debate and some of the lessons that would be vital for her career in law. Celina went back to school to advance her nursing degree. The family's finances were stretched even further and Sonia learned as her mother struggled with the courses.

In Chapter 14, Sonia saw the movie *Love Story* and was enthralled with the setting, which was supposed to be Harvard University. Ken was the first person Sonia knew who made the leap to an Ivy League education. He urged Sonia to do the same. Sonia had no idea how selective Ivy League schools were, and she set out to apply. She received a letter from Princeton calling her a "likely" candidate for acceptance.

Over the next weeks, Sonia toured campuses. She felt she didn't belong at either Radcliffe or Yale, but felt she could fit in at Princeton, where she was offered a full scholarship. As soon as the word got out that she was going to Princeton, people began to congratulate her. Celina took Sonia shopping for a new coat. She found the perfect one, but it was not in stock in her size. The saleswoman was rude until Celina said she really wanted to send her daughter to Princeton in that coat. The saleswoman then arranged to get the right size from another store. Celina told Sonia that doctors "who have never spoken to me at all" had congratulated her (125). She said she wasn't sure what Sonia had begun, but that they were going to find out together.

## Analysis

Sotomayor compares the situation on Saturday nights in her neighborhood to *The Lord of the Flies*. She says that the junkies were like the boys of that story and the police – all wearing armor – were "only a fiercer tribe" (95). She notes the police officer who helped himself to a vendor's fruit one morning and was obviously accustomed to getting the fruit for free. Sotomayor notes that the police presence was necessary to keep any semblance of order in their rough neighborhood, but she knew that fruit was a large piece of the vendor's profit. Sotomayor compares this to *The Lord of the Flies* as well, saying the boys in that story had planned to have a civilization but outside influences hammered at that plan. Sotomayor is not certain where the police loyalties even really lie and she questions where the breaking point lies.

During high school, Sonia began to see more outward displays of prejudice. It seems likely that those prejudices were there during her earlier years, but she was suddenly spending more time in public and was seeing more examples. Marguerite was Sonia's best friend for a time in high school and Marguerite's father was vocal about his prejudice toward Puerto Ricans. However, he stood up for Sonia if anyone else made a comment about her in his hearing. The customers at the bakery also sometime made





rude remarks. Instead of becoming angry, Sonia more carefully examined their lives. She found many similarities and found it curious that they were so ready to judge.

Celina always felt that education was important and she pushed Sonia and Junior to study. She had gotten a nursing certification when she and Juli first married and she went back to school after his death to earn a higher degree that would increase her earning power. Sonia learned a lot from watching her mother work through the courses. She had a high understanding of the information she was studying because she'd been a nurse for a long time, but she was seriously lacking in self-confidence. Sonia's main lesson from this period of her mother's life was that "a surplus of effort could overcome a deficit of confidence" (114). Sotomayor came back to that lesson years later whenever she was afraid she wasn't smart enough to accomplish a specific goal.

When Sonia got a letter from Princeton calling her a "likely" candidate for acceptance, the school nurse asked her about it. She said two "top-ranking girls" in the school were told they were "possible" candidates (118). Her tone was accusatory and it was the first time Sonia faced the anger of someone because she had succeeded. It happened repeatedly in the years to come and people obviously thought she had been given special treatment because of Affirmative Action. Sotomayor says it was only later that she thought she should have told the nurse that she was also in the top ten of her class, and that she'd been active in student government and debate, and had held a job. She already knew that grades were not the only consideration for admission to the top colleges.

Ken Moy attended Princeton and he was the one who met Sonia to give her a tour of the campus. She had felt uneasy with the other students she met and it can be argued that Ken's presence helped sway her decision. Sotomayor never says anything along this line, but she may not have recognized it at the time. Considering her lack of self-confidence, it seems a viable argument.

## Vocabulary

flummoxed, prodigy, cajoling, stricken, arbitrarily, miscegenation, circumscribed, acrimony, emergence, extemporaneous, inexorable, rhetorical



# Chapters 15-17

## Summary

In Chapter 15, Sotomayor arrived at Princeton. Her roommate was Dolores Chavez from New Mexico. They had nothing in common but eventually found common ground. She went to the Firestone Library whenever she felt homesick. Without a formal pre-law curriculum, Sonia had to figure out what courses would be beneficial. She soon found that her classmates had been prepared for advanced classes through their high school courses. Once more, she was insecure with her decisions.

As part of her scholarship, Sotomayor worked in the computer lab as a data entry clerk. It was 1972 and computers were very new. She soon discovered she was greatly lacking in language skills. She began devoting time to studying each day.

Sotomayor soon discovered that she'd led a sheltered life with few experiences. Her classmates had been taught by teachers and parents who created plans to help their children reach goals. Sotomayor had to set those plans for herself. She was also exposed to wealth for the first time. Her mother's total income for the year had been about \$5,000. That made Sonia starkly aware of her financial status as compared to her classmates.

In Chapter 16, Abuelita sent Sonia an envelope each week with a dollar bill inside. It was usually wrapped in a napkin, sometimes with a note. Sonia welcomed the dollar and knew it was a lot of money for Abuelita. Kevin was in college at SUNY at Stony Brook and visited Sonia every weekend. He stopped in at Celina's apartment each week to pick up a care package. Sonia's roommate spent weekends in another room and Kevin stayed with Sonia. They spent their weekends studying.

Sonia visited her mother during midterms that first year. Celina was panicked over her own schooling. Sonia pushed her mother to finish. She "passed all five of her qualifying exams on the first try," which was rare (139). During her sophomore year, Abuelita was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. When Sonia went home for Christmas, it was clear Abuelita was very near death. She demanded a cigarette and Sonia gave in to the request. Abuelita took one puff, coughed, then died. Nelson was stoned when he arrived at the funeral, which made Sonia furious. He had done poorly at school. Though he was very smart, he never went to class or studied. Sonia struggled with her grief.

In Chapter 17, Sonia became friends with Margarita Rosa who convinced Sonia to join Accion Puertorriquena, a Latino student group. At this time, there were some who hated the students who were attending Princeton because of Affirmative Action. Everyone involved in Accion Puertorriquena felt they had to be careful not to give critics more ammunition. There were also student groups for blacks and Asians, and each focused on recruiting qualified students and pushing the administration to conform to Affirmative Action. Their work was vital because most young minority students had no idea they



could be admitted to Princeton. They filed a formal complaint about hiring and a Latino administrator was soon in place.

Sotomayor became more interested in the history of Puerto Rico and the challenges faced by the people who lived there. She initiated a course in Puerto Rican history and joined in heated debates on related topics, including whether the Puerto Rican people had ever really stood up for themselves. Sotomayor made trips to Puerto Rico as an adult and came to realize that the Puerto Ricans who lived on the island and those who lived on the mainland could accomplish more if they worked together.

As a final project for the class, students gathered oral histories. Sotomayor listened to her recordings again as an adult and heard herself inject comments every time she heard her subjects voicing racist biases. She recognizes, as an adult, that she had learned a lot from her time at Princeton, and could easily be pushed into becoming vocal.

Sotomayor discovered there were Spanish patients at the Trenton Psychiatric Hospital, and that they had only occasional access to Spanish-speaking staff. She set up a group of volunteer students who filled that gap. She calls this her first effort at community service.

## Analysis

Sotomayor realized soon after her arrival at Princeton that she had a very different life from most of her classmates. The average student was from a wealthy family with advantages that Sonia could not even imagine. She was not jealous of their backgrounds but did know she had to make up some of those deficiencies for herself. And more importantly, she knew that she had experienced some things other students had not. Sotomayor worked during high school, sometimes opening a bakery in the early morning hours, all while attending school. This created a work ethic that stood her in good stead throughout her adult life and career.

Sotomayor describes the work she did with the Accion Puertorriquena and the important role that work played in getting more minority students accepted and minority workers hired. However, she offered advice to minority students, warning against the temptation to align with minority students to the exclusion of everything else. This is yet another important aspect of Sotomayor's character. While she felt the sting of prejudice often in her everyday life, she did not believe that attacking whites was a profitable response.

Sotomayor believed there was a great deal of responsibility riding on minority students. They had reached Princeton and then had to live up to the challenge. Part of that was living down stereotypes. She cites the case of two Native Americans who became drunk and caused property damage. The stereotypical "drunken Indians" was fodder for those who protested Affirmative Action.

Prejudices remain a very real problem but the Puerto Ricans faced even deeper issues during the years when Sotomayor was a child and young adult. These issues ranged



from a lack of help with communication to outright hatred. Sotomayor began to learn more about these issues as she met people from other walks of life, and she felt those meetings were a vital part of her journey. She describes the oral histories she recorded, and how some of her relatives said things that set her off. While Sotomayor was supposed to be recording the stories of others, she freely inserted herself into those conversations. This is a part of her inherent desire for fairness, which had already begun to show itself by the time she arrived at Princeton.

Sotomayor heard about the lack of Spanish-speaking staff at the psychiatric hospital and set out to do something to help the Spanish-speaking residents there. The Accion Puertorriquena had no authority there and thus no basis for lobbying for more Spanish-speaking staff, so Sotomayor and other volunteers made themselves available. This took time and energy for a group of students who were already stretched with studies and other activities. This shows a level of dedication that is paramount to Sotomayor's ultimate success as a lawyer and then as a judge.

## Vocabulary

semantic, chagrin, incorrigibly, devastation, perilously, harangue, inertia, indigenous, transition, beckoned, bilingual, abate, cringe



# Chapters 18-19

## Summary

In Chapter 18, Sotomayor's friend Felice Shea found a letter Sotomayor had thrown in the trash. Sotomayor felt it was a scam until Felice explained that being invited to join Phi Beta Kappa was an honor not to be discarded. This wasn't the only time Sotomayor earned an award that she did not understand. She called on Felice to explain again when she earned the Moses Taylor Payne Honor Prize. Sotomayor graduated and prepared to make the move to Yale for law school.

She and Kevin married that summer. Sonia wanted a small wedding but Celina insisted on a large affair and Sonia accepted her mother's need for this event. Sonia was upset that some of Kevin's friends gave him illegal drugs as a gift and she forced him to throw them away.

In Chapter 19, Kevin was applying to medical schools but had not firmly set a plan for his future. Sonia launched herself into a relatively small class of students at Yale while she and Kevin shared an apartment and settled into their lives. The students at Yale were highly competitive and there emerged a "pass-fail system" instead of the typical grading system. Though they were competing, they also bonded, which helped Sonia feel less isolated. The women became especially close as they sought support from each other. She created a circle of close friends from those with harsh backgrounds, such as Felix Lopez, a Puerto Rican orphan, and Drew Ryce, a member of the Mohawk nation who spoke Spanish, and a Chicano named Rudy Aragon. Sotomayor had limited time for a social life because of studies and her work at a bar.

A friend who was working on his thesis introduced Sotomayor to Jose Cabranes, a man who had been an adviser to the governor of Puerto Rico and now served as general counselor for Yale. He was also the founder of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, promoting Hispanic civil rights. Jose offered Sotomayor a job doing research for a book he was writing. She accepted and soon became immersed again in the history of Puerto Rico while Jose became her first real mentor. Sotomayor used her research as a starting point for an article that was published in *The Yale Law Review*.

Sotomayor worked as a summer associate at a prestigious law firm in Manhattan. She discovered that she was seriously lacking in writing skills and was upset when they did not make a job offer. However, she made good money and she and Kevin went on a belated honeymoon to the West Coast, visiting friends along the way.

Sotomayor joined some other students for a recruiting dinner hosted by a small but well-respected Washington law firm. The partner present immediately confronted Sotomayor, asking her opinion of Affirmative Action. He made it clear he thought Affirmative Action was a "disservice" to minorities who were ultimately unqualified and wound up fired after a short time. He then asked if she was "culturally deprived." In private, the man's



attitude was different, saying she'd handled the scrutiny well. Sotomayor was furious, as were some of her friends. They filed a complaint and elicited a formal apology.

## Analysis

Sotomayor says that she had several people she looked up to over the years, but Jose Cabranes was the first person she met who fit the criteria of mentor. This was very important to her because she had grown up without people who embodied what she wanted to become. She was not talking about Jose's role as Yale's general counsel, but looked up to him because of other traits. He was active in the Puerto Rican community and remained a strong advocate for civil rights for that demographic. He was a professional who had reached goals and made a success of his life. Sotomayor admired all these qualities and she strove to learn from him, but an important part of this is Sotomayor's self-awareness that she could never be like Jose. She wanted to learn how to take his knowledge and apply that to her own life. She writes that Jose looked upon her as an "unusual protégé" because she often asked for his advice but then did what she felt was right, meaning she didn't always do what he said she should. This self-awareness and her desire to learn from Jose rather than emulate him were important parts of Sotomayor's character.

After Sotomayor filed a formal complaint about the law partner who grilled her about Affirmative Action, similar stories began pouring in from across the country. There were many other young people who said they were ridiculed because of their ethnicity. Sotomayor points out that minority students were sometimes given a chance because of Affirmative Action, but those students were not handed a free pass for the hard work it took to actually succeed. She cites the case of Junior, who had been given a chance to study pre-med, but it took hard work and dedication for him to finish that degree. An interesting aspect of this is that Sotomayor realized the danger of becoming someone associated strictly with seeking rights for minorities. While she felt this was a worthy cause, she did not want it to be her only cause or the reason people knew her.

## Vocabulary

echelons, jurisprudence, maniacs, mastery, circumstantial, jurisprudence, subsequent, dominate, proximate, aspire, cogent, pondered



# Chapters 20-26

## Summary

In Chapter 20, Sotomayor left her studies in the library one evening to go to the restroom. On the way, she found a gathering in which “public interest lawyers were pitching alternatives to private practice” (193). A New York District Attorney was speaking and Sotomayor decided to stick around because there were refreshments available. He talked about the advantages of joining a district attorney’s office, including that there would be opportunities for trial experience much sooner than in large private practice law firms. Bob Morgenthau interviewed Sotomayor the following day and invited her to visit his office. Her friends were aghast, pointing out that she would earn much less than in the private sector. Sotomayor knew that, but felt this was the right course for her long-range plans.

In Chapter 21, Sotomayor joined the New York District Attorney’s Office where she and the other young lawyers were called “ducklings.” They were taught how to get through the procedural requirements of the office first, and then assigned minor offenses before being moved up to felonies and trials. By this time, Sonia and Kevin had moved to New Haven for Kevin to work in a biochemistry degree at Princeton, so Sonia had a lengthy commute each day. They each had their own lives and own friends, and each was doing well.

Sotomayor was the first of the “ducklings” to go to trial. She was ill-prepared and lost. The next was a domestic abuse case and Sotomayor learned about the human elements of the cases she saw. The defense attorney, Dawn Cardi, pleaded against jail time, saying the man’s presence was necessary to financially care for his family. Sotomayor agreed with Dawn and the judge approved the request. Sotomayor and Dawn became friends and Dawn helped Sotomayor remember that the cases involved real people with real lives. Sotomayor soon began handling low-level felonies. When she lost one case, she had a lengthy meeting with her boss, Warren Murray, who told her she had to remember that the jurors were not lawyers, and that she was allowed to use emotion as part of her persuasive arguments.

Sotomayor writes that she learned some things without help. Some lawyers eliminated minority jurors based only on ethnicity because of their idea that minorities most often identify with defendants. Sotomayor disagreed with that logic. She knew that most members of her own family were law-abiding people who were more likely to become victims than to commit a crime. With this revelation, she fully understood that her background was not always a liability to be overcome, but could sometimes be a benefit to her.

In Chapter 22, Sotomayor joined the board of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, which later became Latino Justice. One of the first big cases for this organization was the requirement to help students who spoke little or no English.





Sotomayor felt it was a worthy cause and set to work there. Sotomayor continued to serve there until she became a judge. She especially loved the opportunities to work on issues that would positively affect the lives of many.

In Chapter 23, Sonia and Kevin grew so far apart that they decided to divorce. Celina and Kevin's mother were devastated. They talked about it rationally and agreed that Sonia should move out. Kevin eventually admitted that he knew he could never keep up with Sonia, and Sonia knew that was difficult for him. She moved in with her mother. Sotomayor says that she remained optimistic that she might someday have a successful relationship, but that she had found happiness in being single.

In Chapter 24, Sotomayor's friends kept her busy during her time off work. Her friend Nancy Gold, who later became Nancy Gray, offered a place for Sonia to escape when things became tense with her mother. She moved to her own apartment and began to feel a sense of accomplishment at being able to decorate as she chose. Sotomayor developed relationships with the families of her close friends and loved children. Her special relationship was with Kiley, Junior's daughter who was born prematurely and weighed less than two pounds. She and Sonia soon become very close. Junior and his wife, Tracey, later adopted twins Conner and Corey.

Women were relatively newcomers in the legal profession at this time. Sometimes, her male counterparts failed to recognize Sotomayor as an attorney, let alone a capable one. She continued to win cases but never celebrated those wins because she thought about the lives that had been changed when a family saw a loved one – even a guilty one – jailed.

In Chapter 25, Kevin made Sonia see that her job contributed to their breakup but she had to make herself see what it was doing to the rest of her life. She was surrounded by people in law enforcement who constantly saw the darkest side of humanity. When Sotomayor saw her own attitudes mimicking the hardened attitudes of colleagues, she began to examine her life. A repeat offender made her doubt that she was actually making a difference in the world. She told the bureau chief, Bob Morgenthau, that she planned to make the transition to the private sector. He handed her several high-profile cases, including civil rights and child pornography. The child pornography case made her certain she could not head up the prosecutors' juvenile department though the position was offered.

Sotomayor reconnected with Nelson. He was married and expecting his first child, but had discovered he had AIDS. One day, he asked Sotomayor to drive him to the home of a friend. When he returned, he admitted he'd bought heroin and begged Sonia's forgiveness. She was furious but felt sympathy and a level of survivor's guilt of her own.

In Chapter 26, Sotomayor looks further into the challenges she and Nelson faced, and why he failed while she succeeded. She felt that part of it was because he was a boy and that more was expected of him at an earlier age. She felt a greater part of that was her sheer determination, which Nelson lacked. But she felt that she had also been singled out for opportunities and put that down to Abuelita's blessing. She says she had





been protected from things that might have devastated her, such as the effects of diabetes, and had been lined up perfectly for opportunities that were long shots for someone of her background. Her grandmother had taught her that gifts were to be shared and Sonia felt a strong need to do the best she could to serve others. She recounts her early idea that being a lawyer meant performing a service for others, and that she had never really put a lot of thought into the financial side of the career.

## Analysis

Sotomayor writes about the irony that her first job as a district attorney was set in motion because she stayed for the presentation in order to get the cheese cubes and other refreshments that were served. There was no doubt she struggled through her years of law school and the lure of “cheap wine” and cheese cubes were enough to hold her interest for the moment.

Sotomayor always seemed to balance lofty ideals with practical needs. One example of this is seen as she talks about her work with the Latino Fund. She says it was admirable to be a proponent of “the little guy” but that could not be considered at the exclusion of the corporation. She gives the example of making requirements of a company that led to that company's failure. At that point, this “little guy” who just needed to make a living for his family would be without a job at all. She compares this to a hospital where Celina worked. The facility closed with no notice and the employees were immediately out of work.

Sotomayor addresses the question of having children herself, beginning with her mother's concerns. The fact of her diabetes meant that there was a greater risk for complications. Sotomayor herself may not have had such concern on this topic, but she had another worry. She knew that there was a likelihood that her life would be cut short because of the long-term effects of juvenile diabetes, and she thought it would be unfair to bring a child into the world when she might not be around to see that child grown.

Sotomayor also addresses the “myth” that a woman has to choose between a career and a family, or that the woman who does choose one over the other is “deficient.” She does, however, say that she sometimes felt that there was something missing in her life because she did not have children.

In Chapter 25, Sotomayor only briefly talks about her reunion with Nelson and his situation at that time, but she does give a hint about her feelings of “survivor's guilt.” She refers to Nelson as her “soul's twin,” referring back to how close they were as children and that they were both extremely intelligent (251). She wonders why she succeeded while Nelson gave in to the lure of drugs. In Chapter 26, she goes into more detail about her feelings. Splitting this topic seems to be a literary move, urging the reader to continue into the next chapter.

Sotomayor discusses the opportunity to serve that came with being a lawyer, but points out that there are other professions that are service oriented. The medical profession is



one of those and Sotomayor could likely have aspired to become a doctor, just as Junior had achieved that degree. However, she saw something bigger in the legal field – the opportunity to change entire structures under which society operated. However, she goes on to say that she does not begrudge anyone who chooses to go into the profitable sides of law, especially those who came from poor backgrounds.

## Vocabulary

treatise, intuitively, innate, valid, persuasion, implausibly, excruciatingly, creche, serendipity, longevity, pernicious, palpable



# Chapters 27-Epilogue

## Summary

In Chapter 27, Sotomayor accepted a job at Pavia and Harcourt. She describes it as a “tiny firm by New York standards” (259). She sought out a place where she would not be relegated to doing research for senior partners for years to come. George Pavia related to the headhunter who brought them together that he feared Sotomayor would become bored with the work in a short time. She met with him again and put his fears aside. She had much to learn about civil law, meaning she would not become bored. David Botwinik became her mentor and he gave Sotomayor advice on many things, include that there was a big difference between being a prosecutor and being in the private sector, such as the ability to accept gifts from the high-end clients she now represented. It was through his leadership that she became able to represent foreign commodities dealers who bought grain in the United States.

Another of the partners, Fran Bernstein, advised Sotomayor to go into politics. It was Fran who put Sotomayor on a case involving fraudulent handbags. The case took Sotomayor into intellectual property law. She was so adept at preparing witnesses that she took over as lead for the case, calling the office each evening with a list of papers she needed prepared for the next day. She was one of few young associates who had that kind of responsibility. Theresa Bartenope became Sotomayor’s secretary though it took some time for her to get over her initial fear of Sotomayor’s brusque attitude

After four years, Sotomayor made partner but the victory was tempered by Fran's latest recurrence of breast cancer. Through the coming years, Sotomayor met many famous people and became friends with the Fe family who owned the Fendi handbags. She vacationed with them and saw the true extent of their wealth. Their son, Alessandro, became as close to Sotomayor as a brother and she happily invited them to her mother's for a holiday meal.

In Chapter 28, Dave Botwinik and George Pavia made the partnership official but George made it clear they knew Sotomayor would move on to a judgeship. Sotomayor had a serious issue with her diabetes during her 37th birthday party. It was not the first time she had problems but someone was always there who knew about her disease and knew what to do. Sotomayor learned that she had to be open about her diabetes so that those around her could read the signs when she was in trouble.

As Sotomayor settled into a stable lifestyle, she began to look more closely at her attitudes. She forced herself to consider her mother's childhood and to work on their relationship. Celina became more open as Sonia showed her the way, and Sotomayor realizes that her mother might have been a different person if she had been subjected to positive role models during her childhood.



One of Sotomayor's friends was a client, Elaine Litwer, who began to show Sotomayor how to buy clothes that complimented her figure and made her feel comfortable. Over the coming years, Sotomayor had love affairs that ended, bringing heartache. She threw herself into activities, including dancing and swimming. She managed to quit smoking when she saw Kiley pretending to smoke. Though she never slid back into the habit, she considered that she might light one last cigarette on her deathbed, just as Abuelita did.

One day, Sotomayor had the opportunity to test drive a Testarossas Ferrari. Ferrari was one of her clients and the car was worth about \$250,000. While she was driving, she thought about her past. She imagined all the kids piling into an old car for a picnic and Kevin working on his old car the summer they were in high school. She thought about the smile on Abuelita's face as she called out for a midnight joyride.

In Chapter 29, Sotomayor arrived at the office after a holiday with Alessandro Fe and his parents. Her desk was cleared of cases and she wondered for a moment if she'd been fired. Dave Botwinik had left her an application for a federal district court judgeship. He said she was shortlisted for the position and offered help from the staff to fill it out.

A short time later, she met with a selection committee then was called to meet with Senator Patrick Moynihan who said he was prepared to submit her name for consideration. He said it would be a lengthy, complex process, but pledged to fight until she was appointed.

When Sonia told Celina about her pending appointment, Celina was again confused. Sonia told her mother that the appointment would not mean more money, more travel, or that she would meet interesting people. But Celina's boyfriend, Omar, pointed out that Celina had made good decisions throughout her life and Sonia remembered Celina's reaction when Sonia was admitted to Princeton.

It took a year and a half for Sotomayor's appointment to be made final. She was deeply moved by the inauguration ceremony – which lasted only a few minutes. Celina and Omar quickly made the decision to move to Florida. A few days later, Titi Aurora died. They went to Puerto Rico to attend the burial and Sonia took care of the few bits of her estate.

Theresa joined Sotomayor when she made the move to the courthouse as a judge. In the first days, Sotomayor scheduled every hearing in her chambers, dreading the first time she would take the bench. That day finally came and she feared everyone could hear her knees bumping together as her nerves took over, but she quickly became caught up in the case at hand and her nervousness ended.

In the Epilogue, Sotomayor writes about the changes that have occurred since that first appointment. She was named to the Second Circuit Court of Appeals and, 12 years later, to the Supreme Court. She performed the wedding ceremony for Celina and Omar as her first official act on the Second Circuit Court of Appeals. She said each time she



took a new position, the vetting process was tougher. During her final swearing-in ceremony, she describes seeing her mother, crying proudly. She caught the eye of the United States President. Then Sotomayor describes a memory from her childhood in which she was running toward Abuelita's house, glad to simply be alive. She concludes the section with the statement that she is "truly blessed."

e is "truly blessed."

## Analysis

Sotomayor worked with people from incredibly wealthy backgrounds during her time in practice in the private sector. The firm had many important clients, including the makers of the Fendis handbags and Ferrari cars. This gave Sotomayor opportunities that she would not otherwise have encountered, enhanced by the fact that she became friends with some of the clients. She went on expensive vacations with the Fe family. She does not address the expenses or whether she paid all or part of the cost. Even if she always paid her own way, those opportunities would not have existed without her interaction with these families.

There is an incredibly literary scene at the end of Chapter 28. In this scene, Sotomayor was driving the Ferrari that costs some \$250,000 while she thought about the cars of her childhood. The images are a stark contrast to the car she was driving while she had these memories. And most importantly, she remembered Abuelita calling out for the family to join on a midnight joyride. This scene is filled with imagery and contrasts, and is one of the few scenes in the book that are not details of events in Sotomayor's life, but of nostalgic feelings for her past.

Sotomayor continued to be insecure despite all the years of her successes, especially in her personal life. A main example of this is seen when she learned that Celina and Omar were moving to Florida. Sonia admitted to feeling that Celina was abandoning her, just as she had basically abandoned her as a child. Though Celina was physically present when Sonia was young, she was emotionally distant. Sotomayor had worked at rectifying that throughout her adult life and they were probably now closer than they had been years earlier. By the time of Celina's move, Sonia had been appointed to a judgeship. She was a grown woman, but said she felt that Celina had once more left her. Sotomayor does not go into details about her feelings or how she came to terms with the situation, but it seems likely that she simply accepted that her mother had a right to live her own life. She also did not talk about their relationship after the move but it seems that they should have been closer than ever, even if they were not physically together often.

## Vocabulary

paradigm, knack, inaccessible, surge, adversity, dignity, inflexibly, finality, vital, bestowed, token, metaphysical, reconciliation, rift



# Important People

## Sonia Sotomayor

Sonia Sotomayor was born in America to a Puerto Rican family. She grew up in a poor neighborhood with her mother, Celina, and her father, Juli. Her mother was a nurse and her father was a factory worker. Her home life was chaotic because of her father's drinking. Her mother often sought refuge in her work and was seldom home in the evenings until Juli's death. Sonia knew that her father's drinking caused a lot of the strife at home and expected a better life once he died. She often missed him and was surprised to find that her mother fell into a deep depression that lasted until Sonia virtually forced her to snap out of it.

Sotomayor was diagnosed with diabetes as a youngster. She spent days in the hospital while the doctors worked to help her stabilize and manage her disease. Initially, the adults in the family were horrified, fearing that she would die at an early age. She also found herself feeling the need to rush into her adult life with the understanding that she might not have many years to accomplish her goals.

As a child, Sonia watched Perry Mason on television and soon realized that he was actually doing a lot of good. She picked up on this as a means of serving her fellow man though she really had no idea how to become a lawyer or a judge. She plunged into college at Princeton and law school at Yale, always spending years trying to figure out how to fit in. She identified herself as a life-long learner, saying that was vital for a lawyer and a judge who had to become well-versed in many subjects during trials. Sotomayor's story ends when she was appointed to the Supreme Court.

## Celina

Celina is Sonia Sotomayor's mother. She was a caring woman who worked as a nurse and often put the needs of others before her own. She was, however, dealing with a difficult childhood and did not have the tools to forge the bond her daughter desired.

Celina's mother died when she was young, leaving her in the care of older siblings who were ill-equipped to take on the duties. Her brother was ruthless and his punishments were brutal. Her sister tried to help provide for the family's financial needs. As a very young girl, Celina had to sew handkerchiefs each week as her contribution. When she had the opportunity to leave Puerto Rico for the United States, she took it and that's where she met Juli. Celina was accepted into Juli's family though there were some who blamed her when alcoholism claimed his life.

Celina fought constantly with Juli, unable to constructively manage their stormy and chaotic relationship. She seemed unable to be emotionally close to Sonia, but she was Sonia's strong advocate and ally. When Sonia and Junior were young, she always welcomed their friends into her home. When neighbors complained about the noise,



Celina loudly fought back, saying that attitude was why teenagers felt the need to hang out on the streets, getting into trouble.

She paid for Catholic school, seeing that as the best education available to Sonia and Junior. When she began to see the reactions on Sonia's acceptance to Princeton, Celina realized that there was more importance to this college than she'd originally thought. She told Sonia that she wasn't sure what was ahead, but again pledged to be there for her.

Celina was a nurse and cared greatly for other people. After her husband's death, she took courses to earn a registered nurse's degree in order to make more money. She feared failure but Sonia pushed her to finish. Even then, she never earned much and was always poor.

## **Nelson**

Nelson was Sonia Sotomayor's cousin, near to Sonia in age and very intelligent. Nelson's father tried to push him into making something of his life but Nelson rebelled and wound up addicted to drugs. He had been very close to Mercedes, his grandmother, and Sonia was furious when he was stoned at Mercedes's funeral. Nelson flunked out of multiple college programs before his father gave up on his education, but Nelson eventually got his life together and recovered. He married and was happy in his new life until he was diagnosed with AIDS. He died a short time after his first child was born.

Nelson's life and death greatly affected Sonia Sotomayor. She knew that they'd had similar backgrounds and Nelson's choices made her more closely examine her own motivations and to evaluate those things that drove her.

## **Juan Luis “Juli” Sotomayor**

Juli was Sonia Sotomayor's father. He was devoted to his children but could never overcome his addiction to alcohol. He was at home in the evening with young Sonia and Junior, and prepared their evening meals and spent time with them. However, as his addiction became worse, he distanced himself from other family members. He seldom attended any of his mother's frequent parties. When he was there, he often got drunk enough to break up the event. He died of complications from the alcoholism.

## **Juan Luis Sotomayor, Junior**

Juan Sotomayor, Junior, is Sonia Sotomayor's younger brother. Their relationship was rocky as children with them often fighting each other, but Sonia always came to his defense when others picked on him. Junior did not really have specific goals when he went to college but found himself recruited as a doctor. He married and had three children, and remains close to Sonia.





## Kevin Noonan

Kevin was Sonia Sotomayor's high school sweetheart. In both their cultures, it was generally accepted that they would marry. He supported her effort to become a lawyer and they shared a life along with the hardships of Sonia trying to complete her degree. Once she was an attorney, Kevin's education became their focus and he returned to school. While they'd talked about many things during their early years of courtship, they found themselves immersed in different lives with nothing really binding them. Kevin said he had always known he would never keep up with Sonia's intelligence and drive, and touted that as one reason for their breakup. They divorced and Sotomayor gives no more information about Kevin's life after that in her memoir.

## Abuelita Mercedes

Abuelita Mercedes was Sonia Sotomayor's paternal grandmother. Abuelita is the Spanish term for grandmother. Abuelita's home provided a safe haven for Sonia during her early years when her parents were often fighting and her father's alcoholism was taking a toll on the marriage. Young Sonia spent a lot of time with Abuelita and she learned lessons there, including the importance of family and of putting others' needs first. Abuelita never got over the death of her oldest son, Juli. Her life changed after his death and she never hosted parties after that point.

## Ken Moy

Ken was the student coach for the debate team when Sonia Sotomayor was in high school. He was extremely intelligent and taught her a great deal about public speaking. More importantly, he planted the idea that she could attend an Ivy League school and made her feel at home when she visited Princeton, making that her choice.

## Jose Cabranes

Jose was Yale's general counsel while Sonia Sotomayor was a student there. He was Puerto Rican and was working on a book about his ancestral country when Sotomayor met him. He hired her to do research for his book and it was through this work that she learned a great deal about the issues that face Puerto Ricans, mainly because of their status as a United States territory with the rights of citizenship but without the rights of statehood. Jose became Sotomayor's first true mentor but her self-awareness made her realize that she had to learn from Jose without trying to mimic him.

## Dave Botwinik

Dave Botwinik was a partner at the private law firm Sotomayor joined after her stint with the District Attorney's office. He cleared her desk of everything except an application for



a judge's position and pushed her into applying. He then granted her the use of the staff to fill out the application fully and Sotomayor was selected for the position, her first as a judge.



# Objects/Places

## Hispanic New York City

Sonia Sotomayor was born into what she called a “microcosm” of Hispanic New York City. The area was tightly populated with Hispanics of various backgrounds. In many cases, such as is seen with Sonia's father's family, extended families lived near each other so they could provide friendship and support. Poverty was a constant issue as was drug abuse and crime. Sonia knew nothing other than this life as a child but she later realized it was an important part of making her into a successful adult. It is important for the reader to realize that this is as much a cultural community as a physical one. Sonia's family moved several times but she remained a part of this community, regardless of where her home was.

## Diabetes

Sonia Sotomayor was diagnosed with diabetes at age seven in the early 1960s. In those days, the diagnosis was very serious because many children died or survived only to early adulthood. Sotomayor learned to manage her disease and began giving herself the daily insulin shots rather than depending on any of the adults in her life. She was extremely disciplined and learned very early to pay attention to the signs that her sugar levels were unstable.

## Abuelita's Apartment

Sonia's home life was unstable and chaotic, especially before her father's death, and she sought the warmth and love of Abuelita's home whenever she could. Abuelita often threw parties, gathering friends and family at her apartment. She lived in a tenement during Sonia's early childhood. Sotomayor describes dark stairwells to Abuelita's third-story apartment.

## Perry Mason

Perry Mason was a television series about a lawyer named Perry Mason. Young Sonia was enthralled by the courtroom drama and this show prompted her first thoughts of becoming a lawyer or a judge. The lawyer and judge on the show were symbolic of people who did the right thing, and Sotomayor was desperately in need of someone who symbolized that attitude.



## Princeton

This was the first college Sonia Sotomayor attended for her undergraduate degree. She felt more at home on this campus than Yale and Radcliffe and gained a great deal of social information, as well as her education. Here she met students from wealthy families and was amazed at the differences. She also learned about being involved in her community and the responsibility she had to succeed.

## Yale Law School

This was where Sonia Sotomayor earned her law degree. Her admission to Yale represented her success at Princeton, and she felt the same drive here to learn as much as she could from her classes and her classmates. She talked about the intense competition here but also about the friendships that were formed as students supported each other. Sotomayor felt especially close to the other minority groups, including women and students from minority ethnic backgrounds such as Native Americans and Hispanics.

## The District Attorney's Office

Sonia Sotomayor stumbled onto a presentation by the District Attorney's office, which is how she was recruited into that field. The office fast-tracked her to the courtroom and she was trying cases much more quickly than she would have been if she'd joined a private firm. This experience may have led to her appointment as a judge at an early age.

## Trenton Psychiatric Hospital

Sotomayor learned that there were Spanish-speaking patients at this facility but that they had limited access to Spanish-speaking staff. She organized a group of volunteers to serve as interpreters and to talk to patients who were otherwise cut off from regular communication. Sotomayor said this was her first "direct" effort at community service.

## Puerto Rico

This is a United States territory but the people of Puerto Rico do not have the full rights of statehood. Sonia Sotomayor's family was from Puerto Rico and she traveled back there several times. She discovered a deep interest in the history of Puerto Rico and the challenges faced by the people who chose to remain on the island.

## Gold Stars

When Sonia Sotomayor was in the fifth grade, a teacher began awarding gold stars for work well done. Sonia craved those gold stars and it prompted her to apply herself more diligently than ever. Over the years, her desire to succeed continued so that she was awarded entrance to Ivy League schools and racked up wins in the courtroom. These gold stars represented the first opportunity to earn awards.



# Themes

## The Effects of Alcoholism

Alcoholism is one of two issues Sotomayor mentions in the Prologue, which indicates it impacted her life on an important level. Alcoholism is a very real problem for many families and Sotomayor describes a very typical set of events. Sonia's father was an alcoholic who put his family through a great deal of misery with his constant drinking. There is no doubt the family faced serious hardships caused by the language barrier and their financial situation. While Juli may have been looking at alcohol as an escape from his daily cares, it created an intolerable situation for the family, especially for Sonia.

A prime example of this is seen in the reactions of other people to Juli and his drinking.

When Juli passed out, Sonia's uncles came to help transport him to the hospital. They were talking about the state of the house within Sonia's hearing. She was horrified that they judged the family because of the dirty dishes in the sink and the lack of toilet paper. Sonia never again went to bed without ensuring the house was in order and she made sure they bought ample toilet paper when she went grocery shopping with her father. This was a burden for anyone, and Sonia was just a child. Her father's drinking put her in this position but it is also an important look at Sonia's character and this determination would be a factor in her future success.

Sonia often visited Abuelita and other family and friends in order to escape the chaos at home, which was caused by Juli's alcoholism. But she never had friends visit her until after her father's death. She talks about the isolation this created, and that there was only one cousin who came to their home, regardless of Juli's condition.

The family seldom operated as a unit because of Juli's drinking. Sonia's grandmother, Juli's mother, threw parties on a regular basis with extended family and friends present. For years, Juli seldom showed up at one of these events. If he was there, other family members watched closely for signs he was drinking too much, which might mean he was about to cause a problem.

Another effect of the alcoholism is seen in Juli's death. He left the family with a single income, which made their financial situation even worse. The family doctor had insisted that Celina take out a life insurance policy on Juli, which lessened the immediate blow, but this did not make up for the long-term loss of income. The family's reactions to his death also changed all of them. Celina fell into a depression that lasted months. Abuelita blamed Celina for Juli's death, even though everyone had seen him fading and no one did anything about it. Abuelita also stopped having the parties that had been a mainstay of the family's social life. It was clear that she never recovered from the loss of her oldest son.



## Family Relationships

Sonia's complex relationships with the members of her family were typical of most families and shape the rest of her life. She had a poor relationship with her mother and father, though she loved them both. She saw their own failures as weaknesses and she hated how they affected the family's lives. Sonia was fully aware that her father's alcoholism was responsible for much of the family's isolation. Her parents argued constantly and Sonia put a lot of that down to the effects of alcoholism. She never had friends or cousins over to spend the night because of the volatile situation at home. She knew that her father loved her but she also knew that he would rather drink than to be a good father.

By contrast, she never understood her mother's actions until she learned about her mother's childhood. Sonia and her mother shared a bed while Junior and Juli slept on twin beds in the other bedroom. Celina slept with her back turned to Sonia and showed no affection. Sonia compared their sleeping arrangements to sleeping beside a log. While Celina was not outwardly affectionate, she did stand up for Sonia whenever the need arose and Sonia knew she could depend on her mother's support, even when neither of them really knew what they were doing. This is seen when Sonia was admitted to Princeton. Celina received congratulations from her co-workers long before she knew the significance of Sonia's acceptance.

An important aspect of their relationship was that Celina was always fastidious in her appearance. She dressed carefully and made certain she looked her best. She was always critical of Sonia's appearance. Sonia always felt that she was unable to meet her mother's expectations and this disappointed both of them. Throughout her early adulthood, Sotomayor often felt she was dressed poorly but didn't know what to do about it. When Sotomayor was an adult with an established career, a friend helped her begin to understand how to choose clothes that fit her figure and her life.

Her relationship with Abuelita was far different. Sonia loved Abuelita unconditionally and that love was returned. Sonia saw Abuelita's apartment as a safe, warm place, especially when compared to Sonia's home. An important aspect of their relationship is seen when Abuelita criticized Celina. It might seem natural that Sonia would stand up for her mother and would resent that criticism, but she did not. She apparently agreed with Abuelita's assessment and Abuelita's words may even have shaped some of Sonia's attitudes about her mother.

Sonia's relationship with her brother, Junior, seemed typical of siblings. They argued often but Sonia rushed to his defense when anyone outside the family threatened him. They grew apart as adults but each tended to reach out to the other when they were in need of comfort. This tendency may have been stronger because they couldn't depend on the adults in their lives when they were very young.

While Sonia had several cousins, Nelson was very near her own age and they were close. She described Nelson as a genius and it seemed that everyone expected great things from him. However, Nelson became a drug addict and it took years for him to get



his life together. As a young adult, Sonia compared their lives and saw that she could have had a very different life if not for her inner determination to succeed.

## The Effects of an Ivy League Education

Sotomayor had limited information about what to expect when Ken Moy urged her to apply to Ivy League schools, but she was accepted into Princeton and then Yale Law School, and she learned a great deal from the moment of acceptance until graduation.

Sonia and her mother went shopping for a new coat just before Sonia left for Princeton. Sonia found the coat she wanted but the store didn't have it in her size. Celina asked the saleswoman if the coat was available at another store. The woman was initially rude but Celina insisted that she wanted Sonia to begin her educational career at Princeton in that coat. The moment she said "Princeton," the saleswoman's demeanor changed and she located the coat for Celina. When Sonia and her mother discussed the attitude, Celina admitted that people she barely knew at work were congratulating her on Sonia's acceptance. The important part of this is that neither Sonia nor Celina really knew what the acceptance meant for Sonia at this point.

Sonia Sotomayor's understanding of life at these Ivy League schools changed dramatically over the course of her time there. When she was invited to Phi Beta Kappa, she dismissed it as a scam. When she was awarded a prestigious prize, she had to pretend she knew all about it and then called a friend to help her understand what it really meant. Her growth in education was clear, but she also came to learn about organizations and that working hard helped her reach goals. She took a job with a District Attorney's office rather than a private law firm right out of college so she could gain trial experience more quickly. She gave up the money she might have earned with a big firm in order to get more time in the courtroom. That decision helped fast-track her to a judgeship.

Once she was at Princeton, Sotomayor's life changed. She met people who were truly wealthy for the first time and saw what money could do. This made Sotomayor understand the poverty her family had always faced. While she knew that her mother's earning power was very limited before her time at Princeton, she now fully realized what that meant.

By the time she was finished at Yale, Sotomayor had begun to move in different circles. Some of the wealthy people she encountered became true friends, which made her more comfortable when she became a lawyer and then a judge. She also became comfortable with intermingling the two worlds and said she invited close friends who were wealthy for a holiday dinner at Celina's apartment without qualms.

Sotomayor also began to gain the confidence to make a success of her life. When a lawyer from a prestigious law firm outright accused her of being a product of Affirmative Action, Sotomayor called him on it and then filed a formal complaint. She would not



have had the nerve to take that stand as a younger woman without the experience she gained at Princeton and Yale.

Not all of Sotomayor's experiences with the Ivy League schools were positive. When she got a letter from Princeton calling her a "likely" candidate for admission, a school nurse asked her about it. The nurse's tone was accusatory and her question was why Sonia should have been tagged as "likely" when other students were tagged as "possible." Sotomayor wasn't secure enough at that point to answer the woman's accusation, but time in those Ivy League schools increased her confidence over time.

## Prejudice and Background

Sotomayor's background was filled with experiences that made her into the person capable of securing an Ivy League education to become a Supreme Court judge. Sotomayor felt that there was a high level of similarities between races though some races had more in common than others. One example of that was seen in her attitude about the Jewish people in her neighborhood when the family moved to Co-op City. Sonia noticed that they had a strong sense of family, just like the Puerto Ricans. They focused on the stories of their ancestry, their traditions, and their food, just like the Puerto Ricans. She also noted that the Jewish people were vocal in their prejudices, and that the Puerto Ricans would have been called prejudiced if they had voiced similar thoughts about their Jewish neighbors. This early experiences helped Sonia come to a deeper understanding about prejudice, though she continued to have strong feelings that she often voiced.

When she was accepted to Princeton, a nurse at her school made a remark that was obviously an accusation that Sonia had somehow cheated. When she was interviewed for a job at a prestigious law firm, the interviewer openly accused her of being a product of Affirmative Action who had not achieved her education by her own work.

Sotomayor's life was filled with instances of prejudice but she focused on learning from those rather than giving in to hatred in return. She focused on changing the things she could so that more minorities had a chance. She was not interested in participating in the traditional protests staged on campus, partly because she did not feel that they were productive and partly because she did not agree with some of the protests, especially those that put white people down as oppressors.

Sotomayor's background was far different from most people in her classes at Yale and Princeton, mainly because of her socio-economic background. While most of the prejudice she talked about was based on ethnicity, her poor upbringing was also an issue because she was not prepared for life in an Ivy League situation. She did not know what Beta Kappa Phi was and threw away her invitation as junk mail. She had not encountered people who were truly wealthy until her time at Princeton. Her limited experience with money did not include saving or any real plan of money management. She was already well established as an attorney before a colleague began to teach her about creating a budget and planning for her future.





In some cases, Sotomayor's limited background was a blessing. She did not realize that the Ivy League schools were highly selective in their approval process. She might not have applied if she had realized her chances of being selected were low. That same attitude applies to her desire to become a judge. She had seen the judge on the Perry Mason television series and thought that would be a good profession, but she had very little knowledge about how to achieve that goal. If she had known how limited her chances were of being approved for a judgeship, she might have changed her career path and taken some other route.

## The Will to Succeed

For some people, including Sotomayor, the will to succeed outweighed the obstacles. For others, the will to provide drove them to do whatever it took to care for their families. In Sonia's case, she did not describe lacking for basic necessities as a child living with her parents. She describes family parties, grocery shopping with her father and then with her mother, and of having nice clothes to wear because her mother saw that as a necessity. She could easily have slipped into a similar life with a husband who was willing to remain in the neighborhood and work as Sonia's parents had done. But she felt the need to do more than was required, even as a young age. Though her parents provided for her basic needs – food and shelter – she felt the majority of adults in her life were unreliable. This prompted her to do more for herself than some youngsters might take on. One of the first examples of this is seen in her decision to give herself insulin shots. She heard her parents fighting about the shots with her father hating the idea of being the one to take on that duty. Her mother was a nurse but was often at work. Sonia stepped in and demanded that she would give herself the shots. She took responsibility for managing her diabetes at a very young age and held that responsibility throughout her life.

That tendency to take responsibility drove her to do well in school but she credited other factors with helping her cement her drive. The teacher who began handing out gold stars was one of the first who offered Sonia a tangible reward for work well done. Sonia latched onto what she saw as a challenge and put her best effort into accumulating those stars.

Sotomayor had help when it came time to apply for college, but not in the form of counselors or formal support. A friend, Kevin Moy, told her she should apply to Ivy League schools and she took his advice, settling on Princeton and then Yale. Her studies at both colleges were demanding but she pushed herself to do well, and graduated Princeton with high honors.

Sotomayor not only felt the need to succeed in her own life, but she took the time to ensure that the path was blazed for others. She worked with other minority students to recruit qualified applicants to Princeton, ensuring that the school had plenty of opportunities to fulfill Affirmative Action requirements. She knew it would be an entire generation before any of the current students had children who could attend as the child of an alumnus, and sought ways to garner interest among minorities in the meantime.



Sonia was not the only person in her story to exhibit this theme. Her mother pushed herself to earn enough money to keep Sonia and Junior in Catholic school because she felt that was important for their future success. She also went to school to advance her own nursing degree so she could increase her earning power.

Sotomayor also describes the people in her life who worked hard because it was a necessary part of their lives. Celina sewed as a very young child to help support her family. Titi Aurora helped support her extended family long before she had a chance to have a family of her own. She also worked illegally in a brutal sewing factory though she was, by nature, a law-abiding person.

As a stark contrast, Nelson faltered and his will to succeed was not enough to overcome the pull of drugs. He was never able to finish a college program though his father pushed him to try. By the time he had his life under control, Nelson had contracted AIDS and died a short time later.



# Styles

## Structure

The memoir is divided into 29 chapters along with a preface, prologue, and epilogue. In the preface, Sonia Sotomayor explains that people have asked her about her personal life, which prompted her decision to write this book. People have asked about specific situations in her life, including living with juvenile diabetes and the loss of her father at an early age. She also says that she may disappoint some readers because she will not be talking about her personal views on issues she deals with from the bench. In the prologue, Sotomayor addresses the issues that were most important to her as a young child, including her parents' constant fighting and her diabetes.

The basic storyline of the book is presented in chronological order, beginning with Sotomayor's memories of early childhood and going to her appointment as a Supreme Court Judge. There are some exceptions, but these are woven into the basic storyline. The main example is seen in the chapter devoted to Sonia's mother, Celina, specifically to Celina's childhood. The reader is learning about the relationship between Sonia and her mother when Sonia launches into Celina's background. It is necessary to understand her mother's childhood in order to better understand what motivated her actions as an adult.

The Kindle version of this book also includes a section about the author, a glossary of Spanish words seen in the book, and a photo section with pictures from Sonia's life. The photos add an additional layer of reality to Sotomayor's story but some readers may find it difficult to reconcile the seemingly happy photo of Sonia with her parents to the chaotic life they were actually living because of her father's drinking.

## Perspective

Sonia Sotomayor's book, *My Beloved World*, is sometimes identified as an autobiography but Sotomayor makes the distinction, writing that it is her memoirs. The difference is that an autobiography usually focuses on accomplishments while memoirs are generally more personal in nature. Sotomayor admits during the preface that others might remember some of the events differently, but she seems to focus on presenting her story as exactly as she can.

The story is presented in first person exclusively from Sotomayor's perspective. This means that the details are limited to only what the author knows. However, the fact that she writes from later in life and merely recounts events gives her the improved perspective of hindsight. An example is seen when she discusses her early years as a prosecuting attorney. She worked long hours and the caseload was brutal, and she wrote that she never saw that her choices were taking a toll on her marriage. The fact



that she is looking back means she can give the reader that bit of foreshadowing even though she didn't know what was happening at that point in time.

On the surface, Sotomayor seems to present a reliable perspective. She doesn't seem to gloss over events and situations, even when it sometimes puts her in a less-than-perfect life. She admits to feeling out of her element sometimes and that she sometimes didn't know what to say. But on a closer look, she seldom made a serious mistake other than working too hard and devoting herself too much to the needs of others. This may be a sign that she did not offer all the information or that she avoided talking about events that put her in a poor light. It is left to the reader to decide.

## Tone

The overall tone of the book is one of hope and Sotomayor seems to gloss over the struggles and hardships endured by her family during the early years of her life. For example, she does not focus on how difficult it must have been to hold down a job during her high school years or to stretch the family's meager financial budget to meet the necessities of life. It may also have been that Sonia, knowing no other lifestyle, never saw these things as hardships. The fact that this is a true story and that Sotomayor ultimately succeeded in reaching her goal of a judgeship and wound up in the Supreme Court has a lot to do with the hopeful tone.

The story is written in modern-day English though the author's family history and Puerto Rican ancestry are seen throughout. Sonia Sotomayor was raised in a traditional Latino home with all the perks and issues associated with that. Some of the early issues she faced in school were related to the fact that the family spoke Spanish at home. That would later become an issue that interested Sonia and one of her cousins because they could identify with the problems this creates for the children who are expected to step into school classes. In the time of Sonia's childhood, those children were given no help and she admits that she struggled with language for many years.

In the book, Sotomayor occasionally uses Spanish words, usually because they set a scene or because they are the names she used as a child or young adult. For example, she called her grandmother Abuelita, which literally translates to "grandmother." She called her aunts Titi, which is an "endearing" version of Tia, or aunt. Her uncles were called tío, which translates to uncle. She chose the traditional Spanish word for the market and she Abuelita visited where they selected the chicken for a special meal. While the word "market" would have sufficed, the reader is more likely to understand the kind of market based on Sotomayor's use of the traditional word. Many of the foods are referred to by their traditional Spanish names, again in an obvious effort to keep the dialogue and narrative authentic.

The book is divided between narrative and dialogue. The fact that the story is told from Sotomayor's memories means the dialogue is not usually exact. The use of dialogue is meant to make the storyline flow more easily and to help the readers better understand

the various people involved in Sotomayor's life. It also provides a better look at Sotomayor.



## Quotes

But experience has taught me that you cannot value dreams according to the odds of their coming true.”

-- Sonia Sotomayor (Preface paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Sonia writes about her early dream of becoming involved in the legal system with the goal of eventually being a judge. She agrees that there are a limited number of seats on the Supreme Court and that those seats don't often come often, but she points out that she is living proof that a person can reach goals, even when the odds are against them.

May God bless you, favor you, and deliver you from all evil and danger. Just her saying it made it so.”

-- Abuelita Mercedes (Chapter 2 paragraph 55)

**Importance:** This is the blessing that Abuelita bestowed on Sonia each time Sonia left her grandmother's house. Sonia's relationship with her grandmother was very close and it seems that Sonia felt her grandmother's love was strong enough to make this blessing real.

From here, Mami, Junior, and I would be going along without him. Maybe it would be easier this way.”

-- Sonia Sotomayor (chapter 5 paragraph 14)

**Importance:** Sonia was at her father's funeral and had just considered that he would no longer be able to bring chaos to their lives with his drinking. She was surprised in later months when her mother and Abuelita settled into a deep gloom and their lives were a new kind of awful.

She didn't get paid of course, That work was her contribution to the household.”

-- Sonia Sotomayor (chapter 7 paragraph 8)

**Importance:** Celina's mother was an invalid and her father left the family, leaving the older siblings to provide for them. Celina, though just a child, had to sew handkerchiefs each week which earned her older sister a little money that was used toward the family's needs. This was one of many pieces of information about Celina's past that made Sonia better understand her mother's shortcomings.

The way they shore themselves up with stories; the way siblings can feud bitterly but still come through for each other, how an untimely death, a child gone before a parent, shakes the very foundations; how the weaker ones, the ones with invisible wounds, are sheltered; how a constant din is medicine against loneliness; and how celebrating the same occasions year after year steels us to the changes they herald.”

-- Sonia Sotomayor (chapter 12 paragraph 20)



**Importance:** Sonia had begun to learn that there were many things that made various ethnic groups the same, though their traditions and backgrounds differed. She used this lesson as she studied equality and began to see people without giving weight to ethnicity or gender.

Well, can you explain to me how you got a 'likely' and the two top-ranking girls in the school only got a 'possible'?

-- School Nurse (chapter 14 paragraph 14)

**Importance:** The nurse had learned that Sonia was “likely” to be accepted at Princeton and her tone was frankly accusatory. Sonia did not answer her but later realized that she should have said colleges look at more than grades, including the fact that Sonia had held jobs throughout high school and participated in extra-curricular activities.

Every week, like clockwork, a small square envelope arrived in the mail, addressed in a familiar, scratchy hand. Inside the envelope was a paper napkin and inside that a dollar bill.”

-- Sonia Sotomayor (chapter 16 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Sonia was at Princeton when her grandmother began sending a dollar each week. Modern-day readers may not understand the significance, but a dollar was a lot of money to Sonia and to Abuelita. This weekly gift was Abuelita's way of showing her continued support for Sonia.

If history involved more than memorizing names and dates, the practice of law was even more removed from merely learning a body of rules and statutes, as I had naively assumed it would be. Instead, becoming a lawyer required mastery of a new way of thinking, and not one that followed obviously from other disciplines.”

-- Sonia Sotomayor (chapter 19 paragraph 8)

**Importance:** Sonia had just realized that the laws she memorized and legal issues she learned about were only a tip of what she had to know to become an effective lawyer. She came to understand how to put issues before juries in order to make them see the truth of the matter and how to express herself on paper.

Until the ASPIRA case, Puerto Rican kids coming from the island, where Spanish was used in public schools, or from families like mine that spoke little English entered the New York City public school system with no help at all making the language transition.

-- Sonia Sotomayor (chapter 22 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** The language barrier was one of several issues related to the book's theme of prejudice. The ASPIRA case is one of several major cases related to bilingual education, which was a major issue for Sonia during her early years. Her language skills remained a problem for many years and she had to apply herself outside school to overcome the problem.



It was Kevin who had made me see what was happening between us, but eventually, when the divorce was behind me, I would have to discover for myself what my job was doing to me.

-- Sonia Sotomayor (chapter 25 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Sonia had been at the District Attorney's office for some time when she realized she was becoming as jaded and hardened as others in law enforcement. It was that realization that prompted her to make the move to private practice.

Why did I endure, even thrive, where he failed, consumed by the same dangers that had surrounded me?

-- Sonia Sotomayor (chapter 26 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Sonia was talking about Nelson, who was extremely intelligent but had become a drug addict and failed to finish his education. She admitted to "survivor's guilt," but knew that it was ultimately a pure level of determination that drove her to success.

Sometimes, no matter how long we've carried a dream or prepared its way, we met the prospect of its fulfillment with disbelief, startled to see it in daylight. In part that may be because, refusing to tempt fate, we have never actually allowed ourselves to expect it.

-- Sonia Sotomayor (chapter 29 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Sonia had been appointed as a judge and was talking about her reaction to the highest appointment available – the Supreme Court. She had talked several times about her desire to be a judge but had learned to keep that to herself because it seemed like an impossible dream.





## Topics for Discussion

**Discuss Sonia's comparison of her neighborhood to the novel, *The Lord of the Flies*. What does she mean when she says that the boys had every intention of establishing and keeping order? Have you seen other situations that could compare to this novel?**

The student can use this to consider ways society breaks down and the reasons people fail to obey the laws. Order is vital to keeping people safe and this question can also prompt the student to think of situations that put people in danger simply because of a group's refusal to obey the rules.

**Describe some of the biases Sonia faced as a Puerto Rican. Compare those to problems you've faced or seen as an outsider in some situation.**

The student should be able to identify with Sonia, whether they are white, Puerto Rican, or some other nationality. If they have never encountered biases based on race or gender, they have probably been in situations in which they were the outsiders, which will give them a first-hand understanding of prejudice.

**How did Sonia first come to consider that she might want to become a lawyer or judge? What did she mean when she said television broadened her horizons? What other things broadened her outlook?**

This question provides an opportunity to think about the ways outside influences change a person's life. In her case, television provided that first glimpse of how courtrooms work. This is only one of many ways a person's views are influenced.

**How did Celina's childhood affect her actions as an adult? How did Sonia's opinion of her mother change after she learned about Celina's childhood?**

The student can recite some of the events of Celina's childhood, such as being forced to work to help support the family and being raised by her ill-equipped siblings. They



should then be able to talk about Celina's deeper empathy with her mother and her realization that her mother had no real role models to help her understand healthy relationships.

### **How did Sonia expect her life to change after her father's death? What really happened and why was she surprised?**

Sonia thought their lives would almost immediately be better without her father's presence creating arguments and chaos. The student should be able to talk about Celina's reaction and how that compared to Abuelita's reaction, and to consider why they reacted with such deep levels of emotion.

### **Compare Sonia and Nelson. Why do you believe Sonia succeeded while Nelson failed?**

The student should be able to recall details of Sonia's early descriptions, including that Nelson was brilliant and that his father was determined that he should attend college. There are no clear-cut reasons for the different paths their lives took but home life, personal strengths, and drug use could play into the reasons.

### **Why were Sonia and Celina surprised at the reactions when Sonia was accepted to Princeton? What does this say about the restricted lives they'd lived? Compare their lack of understanding to instances in which you were unaware of the depth of a situation at the moment it happened.**

The student should consider that Sonia and Celina barely knew what an Ivy League education was or what it represented for Sonia's future. Students should be able to relate with events in their own lives that had deep repercussions that they didn't understand because they'd never encountered that specific situation.

### **What was the significance of Abuelita sending Sonia a dollar in the mail each week? Why did Sonia say it was important to both of them?**

The reader should consider the value of a dollar during this time and that both Sonia and Abuelita were living on limited budgets. The more important aspect of this is that is



shows Abuelita's support, which should prompt discussions of the relationship between Sonia and her grandmother.

**Why is Sonia so pleased when she finds Puerto Ricans and women who are in positions of power or authority? Do you think anything at all when you see minorities in positions of power today?**

The student should focus on the biases against minorities at this time in history and how Sonia was facing a double bias. The conversation should then move to changes that have occurred on this front over the decades.

**Why did Sonia believe the Affirmative Action students had a high level of responsibility? What did she mean about the stereotypical “drunken Indian?” Do you think Affirmative Action is necessary in modern society?**

The student should talk about Sonia's belief that Affirmative Action was ultimately fair but that those affected should take full advantage of their opportunities. The “drunken Indian” situation gave naysayers more reason to speak against Affirmative Action. The conversation should then turn to the changes in attitudes today along with a student's personal opinions on this subject.