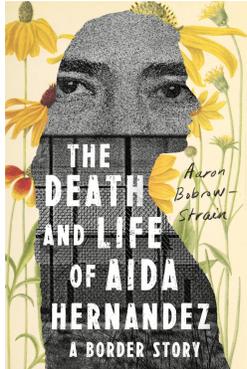


THE DEATH AND LIFE OF AIDA HERNANDEZ: A BORDER STORY

By Aaron Bobrow-Strain



"Searing ... A rich, novelistic tale of a young woman whose life spans both sides of the United States-Mexican border ... [Aida's] a radiantly optimistic character in a relentlessly bleak, unlucky world...." *The Death and Life of Aida Hernandez* is an illuminating work of literature, not an ideological tract." —**Michelle Goldberg**, *The New York Times Book Review*

[A] powerful saga ... This potent, important work ... adds much to the continuing immigration debate." —**Kirkus (Starred Review)**

"*The Death and Life of Aida Hernandez* gives a human perspective to the politics surrounding immigration ... It is a powerful story..." —**The Denver Post**

"*The Death and Life of Aida Hernandez* manages to seamlessly weave together the very personal true story of an undocumented Mexican-American woman while also providing readers a sense of how her many misfortunes are interconnected with the U.S.'s border policies over the past 30 years...A beautiful introduction to anyone interested in the subject of immigration" —**San Diego City Beat**

"Bobrow-Strain writes like a journalist and sociologist, with clear information on history and policy, along with plenty of narrative tension. Hernandez is not a perfect immigrant (she has a criminal record), but she's a real one, and her story provides insight into how the larger immigration machine actually works." —**Adriana E. Ramirez**, *Los Angeles Times*

When Aida Hernandez was born in 1987 in Agua Prieta, Mexico, the nearby U.S. border was little more than a worn-down fence. Eight years later, Aida's mother took her and her siblings to live in Douglas, Arizona. By then, the border had become one of the most heavily policed sites in America.

Undocumented, Aida fought to make her way. She learned English, watched *Friends*, and, after having a baby at sixteen, dreamed of teaching dance and moving with her son to New York City. But life had other plans. Following a misstep that led to her deportation, Aida found herself in a Mexican city marked by violence, in a country that was not hers. To get back to the United States and reunite with her son, she embarked on a harrowing journey. The daughter of a rebel hero from the mountains of Chihuahua, Aida has a genius for survival—but returning to the United States was just the beginning of her quest.

Taking us into detention centers, immigration courts, and the inner lives of Aida and other daring characters, *The Death and Life of Aida Hernandez* reveals the human consequences of militarizing what was once a more forgiving border. With emotional force and narrative suspense, Aaron Bobrow-Strain brings us into the heart of a violently unequal America. He also shows us that the heroes of our current immigration wars are less likely to be perfect paragons of virtue than complex, flawed human beings who deserve justice and empathy all the same.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

GENERAL QUESTIONS

What was your experience reading *The Death and Life of Aida Hernandez*? Were there scenes or moments that were particularly painful or joyous for you? Were you surprised at what you learned?

Why do you think the book's title reads the "death" and "life," in that order? What do you think Aida's "death" was? Was it a literal or metaphorical death? How does Aida manage to overcome death in the story?

Many people intersect with Aida's life in different ways, including Raúl, Luz, Aida's sisters, Rosie, Ema, Alvaro, Jesse, Katy, and others. Who was your favorite secondary character? What role do Raúl, Rosie, and Ema's longer backstories play in the book?

Aaron Bobrow-Strain is an academic researcher, but takes a narrative approach in this book. How did the book weave people's stories together with history, politics, and economics? How did reading about the border and immigration in narrative form affect the way you learned about these topics?

The critic Oscar Villalon, writing in *LitHub*, concluded that, "What makes *The Death and Life of Aida Hernandez* exceptional and powerful is that by getting us to care about Hernandez, and by not relying on a dishonest, feel-good ending, the book also guides us, whether intentionally or not, to ask if a story about the undocumented living along the border is also a story about the value we place on the well-being and the futures of Mexican Americans in general." What did you think about the book's ending? Do you agree with Oscar Villalon?

Are you an immigrant or the child of immigrants? How did it feel to read *The Death and Life of Aida Hernandez* from that perspective? In what ways were your, or your family's, experiences of immigration and the border similar to or different from those of Aida and other characters in the book?

If you are the descendant of people who immigrated (or were forced to come) to the United States generations ago, what do you know about how your ancestors' experiences were similar or different to those of Aida and other characters in the book? Did you think about your own past as you read the book?

IMMIGRATION AND THE BORDER

Were you surprised by the book's depiction of communities on the U.S.-Mexico border? How was it similar or different to the way the border is talked about in national media? What did you learn about how the border came to be the way it is today?

On page 45, Aaron Bobrow-Strain writes that "The 'illegal immigrant' was thus invented in Washington D.C., conjured out of contradiction." Did the book change the way you think about undocumented immigrants? If so, how? After reading this book, how would you respond to arguments that undocumented immigrants deserve punishment because they are "criminals"?

The author calls Aida and others in her position, “citizens without citizenship.” What do you think this means? How have we created an immigration system that results in people being citizens without citizenship? How do you think the existence of citizens without citizenship affects your own local community? Do you have personal experiences with this?

Rosie Mendoza often says, “Humans make mistakes, immigrants can’t.” Aida is far from perfect, and has made many mistakes. She’s doesn’t fit the flawless, high-achieving “model” immigrant type that often gets held up to make the case for immigration reform. Aaron Bobrow-Strain writes that the good immigrant / bad immigrant narrative is an “impossible binary.” Why? Do you agree? How do you think that the immigration system should treat immigrants who have made mistakes, or otherwise don’t fit into the “model” category?

The book describes a twenty-five-year bi-partisan effort to secure the U.S.-Mexico border by making it more difficult and dangerous to cross. What would you say those efforts have achieved or not achieved? What would a truly secure border look like, in your opinion?

If you could change the immigration system, how would you change it?

RACE AND IDENTITY

The geopolitical line between the United States and Mexico is the most obvious example of a border in this story. What other borders appear in the book? What role do these divides play in Aida’s story? What about the other stories in the book?

The category of “Latino” is often presented as a single, homogenous unit. What kinds of differences and divides within this category did the book depict?

Aaron Bobrow-Strain reflects on his social position and the many differences between Aida and him in the chapter “About This Book.” What kinds of ethical and political dilemmas do you see in researching and writing a story like this?

DOUGLAS, ARIZONA

Many reviewers have said that the town of Douglas, Arizona is a character in this book. Do you agree with that assessment? If so, what kind of character is Douglas? What did you learn about the town? In what ways does the history of Douglas parallel (or not parallel) Aida’s life?

Were you surprised by the attention this “border story” paid to the larger economic history of Douglas and the United States? How do you see the history of deindustrialization and poverty relating to the story of immigration and the border? Do you see parallels between Douglas and your own community?

VIOLENCE AND SURVIVAL

On page 343, Aaron Bobrow-Strain tells readers that, before meeting Aida Hernandez, “I had not considered writing about trauma and violence against women. Aida’s account made it instantly clear that

the large forces at work in Douglas couldn't be understood apart from those subjects." What do Aida and others' stories reveal about the ways that border and immigration policies make women more vulnerable to violence, or even encourage violence against women? How does the current immigration system produce trauma? Can this be avoided?

Aida is a survivor. What gives her the strength to survive? What lessons can we draw from Aida's story about resilience and survival? Do you find hope in Aida's story?

WHAT NEXT?

Aaron Bobrow-Strain has said in interviews that one of his goals in writing this book was to expand the boundaries of empathy to include people whose messy, human lives don't necessarily fit into narrow "model immigrant" or "deserving poor" categories. Did you feel an empathetic connection to Aida and others while reading the book? Why or why not?

Do you think that increasing empathy is an important starting point for creating social change? Is empathy enough? How do you move from feeling empathy to taking action? Can you think of examples of times in your life when feeling empathetic connection helped you take action for social change?

On page 350, Aaron Bobrow-Strain writes, "For U.S. readers—particularly those who observe border and immigration debates from a comfortable remove—this book should be a look in the mirror as much as it is a portrait of Aida. After all, the forms of institutional violence against immigrants and border communities described here are carried out *in our name*—purportedly to keep us safe." Did you feel that the book was a "a look in the mirror"? What role do people who observe the border and immigration from a relatively privileged position play in making those systems what they are today? How could this change?

The news coming from the U.S-Mexico border can be overwhelming sometimes, even paralyzing. Are there particular actions, however small, that you feel motivated to take after reading this book? Are there particular smaller issues within the larger sweep of border and immigration policies that you feel motivated to try to change?

Are you already part of a group or community that could take action around the border and immigration together? What other resources, skills, and connections do you have that might contribute to this work?

What would you like to learn more about after reading this book? Explore the sources for news and analysis listed under "Learn More & Take Action" on www.aidahernandezbook.com.

Be sure to also take a look at the list of organizations working on the border listed under "Learn More & Take Action" on www.aidahernandezbook.com. Did you see an organization whose work looked interesting to you?