
Book Review: *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erika L. Sánchez

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From a cultural standpoint, there are many roles that one is expected to portray based on their norms and social groups. Minorities and people of color often have difficulty when integrating into American society, facing cultural barriers and the struggle to find their own identity outside of cultural and societal norms. These struggles are often a heavier burden for second-generation immigrants (children born to two immigrant parents) due to the lack of mentorship from their parents on how social interactions work in a new culture. Often, children of immigrants must learn to rely on themselves to help their parents navigate a new country as well, becoming translators to their parents as a way to minimize language, cultural, and societal barriers. Due to the challenges of learning a new culture and trying to comprehend one's personal identity, second-generation immigrants often find themselves having a cultural identity crisis.

Author Erika L. Sánchez is the daughter of immigrants who, in the search for representation of Mexicans in media, decided to write her own story about the struggles of growing up Mexican in the United States. In addition to her bestseller, *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, Sánchez wrote two more books on her view of the Mexican American, second-generation immigrant experience: *Lessons of Expulsion* (2017), a series of poems that discuss the difference across the Mexican/U.S. border, and *Crying in the Bathroom* (2022), which is a collection of essays portraying her personal thoughts, views, and experiences. In *Lessons of Expulsion*, Sánchez explores how every aspect of her life felt like there was a border dividing her life. She talks about this by highlighting a border in her countries, languages, and the living and the dead, through her collection of poems. While *Crying in the Bathroom* is a personal ode to her life and the experiences that have gotten her to become a bestselling novelist, primarily focusing on how she felt like a rebellious disappointment as she grew up with expectations from her

immigrant parents. In these stories, Sánchez continues to elaborate on the struggles of second-generation immigrants by providing her own stories.

In the novel *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, Julia Reyes is a Mexican teenager coping with the death of her older sister Olga, a “perfect Mexican daughter.” Across the book, the story follows a Mexican teen struggling with her cultural identity as she observes her sister and family embracing traditional norms easily and rejecting her for not doing so. She is overcome with feelings of confusion and the challenge of her sense of self with pressing societal expectations. Through a sociological approach, we can see Sánchez express the second-generation experience through the looking-glass-self theory, which describes how people base their sense of self solely on how they believe others see them or expect them to be. Sánchez uses her personality, struggles, and opinions to formulate this protagonist, which authenticates the thoughts and makes the story a lot more relatable.

While this is a work of fiction brought to life using her personal experiences, Sánchez almost makes it feel like a collection of qualitative data, collecting stories and emotions regarding immigration, violence in Mexico, first-generation students, and motherhood, all with varying opinions and different experiences. Sánchez also goes on to talk about relationships, social perceptions of young Latin American women, and many religious aspects that tie into expectations and demands of this demographic. In the book, Julia learns that many immigrant mothers worry about raising children in an unfamiliar society, especially since they believe the new country will ‘ruin’ their children. One example of this is the conversation Julia’s mother has with her before she leaves to college where, for the first time in their relationship, she warns Julia about sex due to her fear of Julia getting pregnant or contracting STIs. This is important because Julia seems to have a cultural disconnect from her mother and disagrees that sex is that big of a deal, a very common and large disagreement in American and Mexican cultures.

The main strength of this story is author Sánchez’ personal connection to the character, the implementation of her own hopes and dreams, as well as her personality, makes the

readers feel seen when reading the book. Sánchez expresses this consistently, often emphasizing the feeling of guilt, shame, ambition, and desperation that second-generation immigrants have from feeling misunderstood by their parents, their family, the culture they feel a need to fit into, and this new country they must learn to navigate on their own. This goes back to the looking-glass-self, which exemplifies this feeling. Julia experiences guilt, from feeling like she is a disappointment, because she bases her sense of self on her home environment and the expectations coming from that. There are a lot of references to the Mexican culture in her story as well, which allows for the reader to identify some names, sayings, and beliefs, which is another strength throughout the book. It can also be argued that the fictional aspect of the storyline would detach the author from the story and make the book relatable. However, Sánchez speaks about not having that ‘perfect older sister’ in her life or the same traumas that Julie has, which could make readers feel like it would be Julia Reyes that understands them and not Sánchez.

The book itself is easy to read, the story is captivating and, while it draws on many relatable and complex themes, it isn’t overwhelming or overbearing. The author uses Julia Reyes as an example of the second-generation immigrant experience, primarily making the argument that this specific demographic feels overlooked and misunderstood, especially since they are stuck between two cultural identities and often made to feel that they must choose. In this, we also get an unbiased overview of the immigrant experience, since Sánchez also critiques second-generation immigrants for often overlooking that their parents don’t have any experience with their lifestyle and have their own hardships as well. Looking at the authors goals, I believe first-generation students and second-generation immigrants would benefit a lot from a book like this, since it would allow them to find similarities with their own life. Additionally, researchers who study these cultural disparities would benefit from reading, since this book would provide a new perspective to the immigrant experience.

REFERENCES

Sánchez, Erika L. 2017. *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*. New York: Random House Children’s Books.