



Book Discussion Questions

American Dirt by Jeanine Cummins

1. Were you aware of the controversy surrounding *American Dirt* prior to reading it? If yes, did it impact the story for you in any way?
2. This book is positioned as the [*Grapes of Wrath*](#) as our time. Why do you think there was such a huge push to proclaim this as the next great literary novel? Do you think it was warranted?
3. Let's talk about the story. It starts off right away with violence as cartel members murder Lydia's entire family (16 in total). What did you think about this beginning?
4. We learn that Lydia owns a bookstore in Acapulco and she becomes friends with a charming man named Javier who we learn is actually the head of a cartel. What did you think about this storyline of them becoming friends? Did Javier actually fall in love with Lydia? Why do you think the author thought it was important for Lydia to have a personal connection with the cartel leader that will eventually kill her family?
5. Lydia's husband is a journalist and he eventually writes about Javier's "kingpin" role. Let's discuss Lydia's concern about her husband's job prior to the tragic events.
6. What did you think about the descriptions of Acapulco?
7. Lydia and Luca are on the run from Javier and the cartel. They eventually go to Mexico City where they stay with a friend of her husband. But his religious wife is not comfortable with them staying there. Let's talk about that section.
8. What would you have done if you were Lydia?
9. The journey is harrowing and terrifying. Along the way they meet two sisters Rebeca and Soledad who left Honduras to run away from violence. What did you think about the two sisters and their relationship with Luca and Lydia?

10. Luca is very hyper-intelligent and obsessed with geography and maps. He's eight but seems so much older. Let's talk how Luca and his knowledge about maps.
11. We eventually learn that after the article about Javier was published, his daughter became so horrified that she committed suicide. This is why Javier murdered Lydia's family. But it's unclear if he truly wanted Lydia dead or not. What are your thoughts on that?
12. This horrifying journey is non-stop and the violence is told in extreme detail with some even calling the story "torture porn." What are your thoughts on this? Do you think the descriptions were too much or did it fit with the story?
13. In the end, Lydia, Luca, Rebeca and Soledad make it to the U.S. Let's talk about the ending. How do you think life will be like for them in the U.S.?
14. Let's take a closer look at Oprah's original quote for this story: "*American Dirt* just gutted me, and I didn't just read this book—I inhabited it... Everything about this book was so extraordinary. It's suspenseful, the language is beautiful, and the story really opened my heart. I highly recommend it, and you will not want to put it down. It is just a magnificent novel." Do you agree with what she said here? Why or why not?
15. Now let's all talk about our thoughts on the controversy and the criticisms that this book relies on racist stereotypes.
16. In the author's note, Cummins writes: "I was worried that, as a nonimmigrant and non-Mexican, I had no business writing a book set almost entirely in Mexico, set entirely among immigrants. I wished someone slightly browner than me would write it." She now says she used "clumsy" wording. What do you feel that the author should have done differently?

Source: <https://bookclubchat.com/books/book-club-questions-for-american-dirt-by-jeanine-cummins/>

Summary

Lydia Quixano Pérez lives in the Mexican city of Acapulco. She runs a bookstore. She has a son, Luca, the love of her life, and a wonderful husband who is a journalist. And while there are cracks beginning to show in Acapulco because of the drug cartels, her life is, by and large, fairly comfortable.

Even though she knows they'll never sell, Lydia stocks some of her all-time favorite books in her store. And then one day a man enters the shop to browse and comes up to the register with a few books he would like to buy—two of them her favorites. Javier is erudite. He is charming. And, unbeknownst to Lydia, he is the *jefe* of the newest drug cartel that has gruesomely taken over the city. When Lydia's husbands' tell-all profile of Javier is published, none of their lives will ever be the same.

Forced to flee, Lydia and eight-year-old Luca soon find themselves miles and worlds away from their comfortable middle-class existence. Instantly transformed into migrants, Lydia and Luca ride *la bestia*—trains that make their way north toward the United States, which is the only place Javier's reach doesn't extend. As they join the countless people trying to reach *el norte*, Lydia soon sees that everyone is running from something. But what exactly are they running to?

About the Author



Jeanine Cummins is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *AMERICAN DIRT*, as well as the novels *THE OUTSIDE BOY* and *THE CROOKED BRANCH* and the bestselling memoir *A RIP IN HEAVEN*. She lives in New York with her husband and two children.