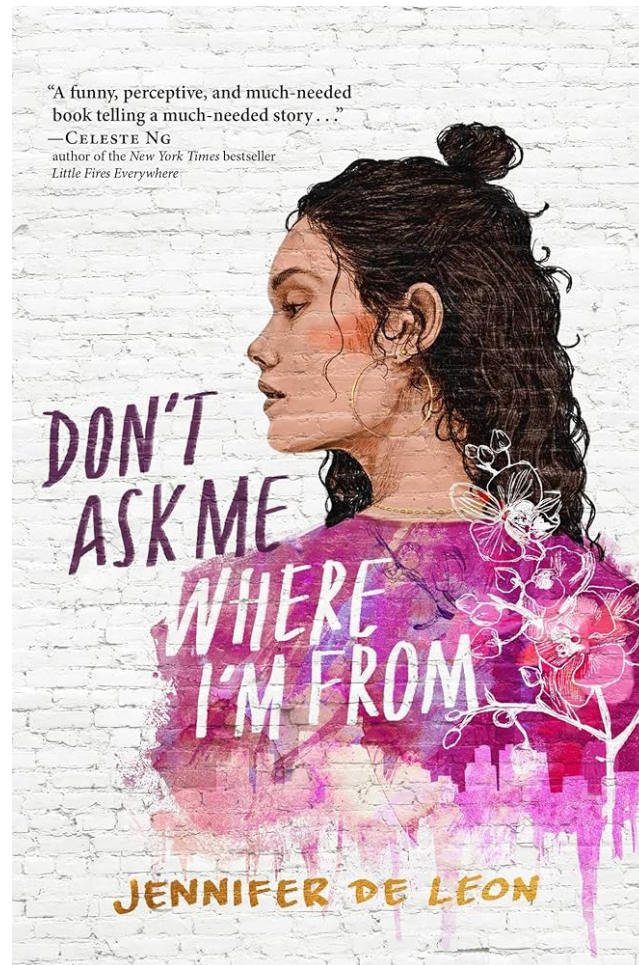


Evelyn Garcia  
Dr. Warner  
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# *Don't Ask Me Where I'm From*

By Jennifer De Leon



### About the Author



<https://jenniferdeleonauthor.com/>

[Photo Credit: Matthew Guillory](#)

Jennifer De Leon was born in the Boston area to Guatemalan parents, and she is the award-winning author of YA novels *Borderless*, *Don't Ask Me Where I'm From*, and is also the author of *White Space: Essays on Culture, Race, & Writing*. De Leon graduated with a double major in International Relations and French from Connecticut College, went on to earn a Master of Arts in Teaching from the University of San Francisco, and later received a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from UMASS-Boston. She's currently a wife and a mother to two sons, and is working on two children's picture books: *So Many Gifts*, and a biography of Rigoberta Menchú. De Leon works as the editor of an International Latino Book Award-winning anthology called "Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education," an Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Framingham State University, and a faculty member in the Creative Writing & Literature Master Program at Harvard University. She also founded Story Bridge, LLC, which strives to bring different kinds of people together to learn from each other and their experiences.

### Summary

*Don't Ask Me Where I'm From* follows Liliana Cruz, a high school student in Boston, as she deals with an entirely new academic and social environment, and navigates the challenges of being one of the only Latinas in her school. When an assignment forces her to examine her heritage, Liliana begins to grapple with questions of cultural identity and the complexities of her family's immigration history. The novel delves into issues of race, privilege, and the search for self-identity in a society that often demands labels, and has relatable features that young adult audiences can connect with.

### Quote #1

"I'd never heard someone like me--Latina, I mean--talk like that, like she was white. But not completely. It's hard to explain. I was barely following what she was saying. It was as if she was talking in English but in an alternate version" (52).

This quote is representative of Liliana's psychology before the character development she experiences throughout the novel. She begins as a Latina student who attends a predominantly POC school and is accustomed to boisterously disruptive peers. She has never been exposed to an environment where minority students follow their ethnic culture but can adapt to a new culture that allows them to thrive, especially academically. This quote symbolizes Lilliana's realization that it is possible for both her Latina culture and her American culture to coexist, and it's a transition from a sheltered Liliana at the beginning of the book, to a more aware Liliana.

### Quote #2

"Hard? I was used to hard. Like two weeks' worth of laundry in one day because Mom never left the couch anymore. Like standing over Christopher and Benjamin until they brushed their teeth

and flossed. But explaining my perspective on immigration to a bunch of white kids in a richie-rich school? That wasn't hard. Nah. That was just annoying" (97).

This is amid the novel when Liliana has already been attending her school for a few months, and she becomes aware of the discrepancies between the perception that both Latino and White students have of the world. In this quote, Liliana doesn't respond to a question about immigration in her class, and one of her White peers tells her it's not hard to answer the question. With her newfound realization from the previous quote, Liliana calls attention to the difficulties she endures as a Latina with immigrant parents as compared to a White person who's native to the country. Her use of the adjective, "annoying," indicates that at this point of the novel, Liliana has transitioned to a point of anger and resentment toward the perceptive discrepancies of both cultures.

### **Quote #3**

"Suddenly a great big map of Latin America-Central America, South America, and the Caribbean-popped into my head, the one on the wall in Mr. Phelps's class. It was weird, almost like the two histories-what I learned in school and what I learned about my family-were converging. But why did it all have to be so divided? Like the cafeteria at lunch, for instance. Like Westburg kids and METCO kids. Like chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs" (169).

Here, Liliana's realization of her identity and her culture comes full-circle. She's more educated about Latino/as and how they function in different environments, and the character development is the most obvious here because she goes from a confused and reserved Latina in her predominantly White school, to a well-informed Latina advocate. What she says is true:

minority and non-minority communities should be able to coexist comfortably on both sides, and this spreads a message about how social structures tend to divide.

### **Classroom Use**

The novel discusses multiple pressing issues relating to American culture, Latino/a culture, and their interrelation in an academic environment. This premise is especially relatable to teenagers because it has to do with other teenage students, and it sets an example for readers about how both cultures may react to different matters. The different perspectives characterized would be useful in a classroom because it's inclusive, meaning that more than just a few students can learn something from the book and apply it to their own lives. One idea for presenting the book is to have the students make a short presentation about the quote(s) they related to the most and why. This creates an opportunity for them to openly talk about their views and promotes comfortability with openly sharing these views, but also promotes a discussion where students can consider the differing perspectives of real people.

### **How It Fits Best in Chapters 4-8 of *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning***

#### Chapter 4: *Books about Real-Life Experiences*

Liliana faces the real-life experiences that an American Latino/a can face if they have undocumented parents. This is a real struggle inside and outside the book, and hearing how Liliana tackles the racial issues she combats and her thought process throughout it can be useful for students who have struggled or are currently struggling with similar problems. De Leon writes honestly and doesn't refrain from the degree of discrimination that is very plausible for

students of color today. For non-minority students, the candidness of the book encourages inclusivity and exposes the realities to students who are oblivious of the prejudice that exists around them.

#### Chapter 5: Books about Facing Death and Loss

Liliana deals with the loss of her father through deportation and the confusing process to discover that her parents are actually undocumented. Not having her dad is difficult for Liliana, and the loss of a person is something that students deal with, through deportation or not. Liliana's experience speaks directly to adolescents dealing with the same situation, but it also speaks to students who aren't in contact with a parent or somebody important to them. The knowledge that loss is a common obstacle for a young person informs young readers that they're not alone, and that's important at their age because of the rise in mental health issues, especially in teenagers. Liliana's narrative unveils the reality of loss for young people and has the ability to help them get through a rough time in their adolescence.

#### Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions

*Don't Ask Me Where I'm From* especially sheds light on identity, discrimination, and struggles with decisions. Liliana grapples with her identity as a Latina and as an American, and her process to reach this realization of her identity is telling of how a person of color's environment influences their own identity and the variety in Latina/o identities. There are also various examples of racial discrimination toward Liliana and other students of color at her new school. De Leon's honesty about how vile racial discrimination can get for a student is revealing of the world we live in, but it exposes non-POC students to what it's really like to be a person of color in America. The descriptions from Liliana's narrations shed light on how people of color think about things, and this is important for all students to be exposed to and informed about.

Liliana also struggles with a few decisions like moving to the new school in the first place, or having to weigh out the pros and cons of being open about her life as a Latina and the battles that come with it. Once again, this is a cultural reality that all students should be exposed to because if they can't identify the issue and learn about the different perspectives within these issues, how can they address the problem?

### Chapter 7: *Books about Courage and Survival*

Liliana's character conveys both courage and survival because for most of the book, she survives different things and then finds the courage to thrive as an empowered Latina. She struggles through the transition to her new school, and she's exposed to the differences between the minority students at her old school, and the White students at her new one. She must also survive the deportation of her father, an entirely new struggle of its own. However, her growth as a character gives her the courage to stand up to the oppressors at her school and share the truth about her father's legal status. The character Liliana is at the beginning of the book would not have shared something as critical as that to anybody, but with survival comes courage.

### **Quantitative**

Lexile: Age Range: 14-18, HL590L

ATOS: 4.2, AR Points: 11.0

Dale-Chall: 7.0-9.9

Flesch-Kincaid: 1.98-5.34

## Qualitative

### 1. Structure

- First-Person POV
- Nonlinear plot. Liliana tells her story as it happens to her, but there are various flashbacks to moments with her parents or with her best friend.

### 2. Language Conventions and Clarity

- Uses simple understandable language for the 14 to 18-year-old age range, but occasionally uses some challenging words that Liliana acknowledges as vocabulary words she is given in school.

### 3. Knowledge Demands

- Knowledge about American culture would be useful to better understand the text and the experiences Liliana describes, but it's not mandatory.

### 4. Levels of Meaning

- The different issues the novel confronts makes for a few levels of meaning: the conflicts that come with having undocumented parents, the existential hostilities among different races/ethnicities, and finding one's identity as an ethnic person despite contemporary racial politics.