

## BOOK REVIEW

### Diane Guerrero: A Citizen Child Warrior

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*My Family Divided: One Girl's Journey of Home, Loss, and Hope* By Diane Guerrero with Erica Moroz. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2018. Pp. 251. \$18.99 (hardcover).

The Spanish word *guerrero* translates to warrior in English—a warrior that is in the trenches of fighting a war. Diane Guerrero, author of her memoir, *My Family Divided: One Girl's Journey of Home, Loss, and Hope*, exemplifies her last name as she stands in the midst of the frontlines of life as a “citizen child” with undocumented immigrant parents from Colombia. Living life in the margins in the U.S. as the American citizen of the family, Guerrero writes a memoir that captures the extreme situations of living with and without parents who are immigrants who experience deportation. The book is aimed at children 10 to 14 years of age and recommended grade levels of fifth through ninth grade. A great pairing novel would be Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us* (Washington Square Press, 2013).

Diane Guerrero and her family are examples of how conservative immigration policies can destroy families by separating family members from one another. With over eleven million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. who have citizen children, there commonly emerge trials, tribulations, stresses, and confusion in navigating the U.S. system to citizenship. As she recounts in her memoir, Guerrero's mother gets deported not once or twice, but three times throughout her account.

A very heartbreaking moment in the memoir occurs when the hard-earned savings Guerrero's parents set aside each month to pay an immigration attorney help them establish citizenship are stolen, as the attorney vanished from his law office along with the thousands of dollars the Guerreros sent to him. The family is left hopeless, in tears, angry, depressed, and despondent. Shortly after this deceitful incident comes the final tragic event: Diane comes home to an empty house and later finds out through a family friend that both of her parents and her brother had been deported by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). At the tender age of fourteen, she is taken in by her mother's friend, Amelia, and a year later goes to live with her other friend, Sabrina. For Guerrero, kinship and familial structures are reconfigured for survival purposes. As the story progresses, Amelia takes Diane to visit her parents in prison. These are shattering, heart-breaking, and devastating moments retold in the book, leaving the reader in tears.

There are several similarly poignant incidents that are game changers in Guerrero's life, including being accepted to the Boston Academy of the Arts. While the Boston Academy of the Arts provided her with a safe and creative environment where she flourished, the experience of detainment and deportation of her parents back to Colombia squelched her childhood innocence and propelled her into adulthood. When visiting her parents in prison immediately after they were taken, Diane remembers her mother apologizing for their circumstances: "I'm really sorry about this whole thing,' my mom said. 'I'm so sorry Diane.' She didn't mean for her words to sting, but they did. She was sorry. My dad was sorry. The whole world was sorry. But none of it changed my situation. None of it altered the fact that, by dusk, my childhood would be over" (121).

In addition to all of the challenges and struggles of being left parentless,

Guerrero's parents divorced due to the hardships imposed upon them. The stress, blame, and shame became so overwhelming, exhausting, and tiring that their marriage failed. With her parents separated, Guerrero went through "Seven. Whole. Years" with her mother (198) during which she blamed her mother for being deported, for the failed marriage, for her outspoken social demeanor in public, and even for her own bouts of depression. To address the anger she directed at her mother, Guerrero sought the help of a Latina mental health counselor. Guerrero slowly re-learned to love her mother and engage in self-love. In October 2012, she reunited with her mother who lives in Spain, offering the reader yet another heart-wrenching moment.

Guerrero's memoir also highlights moments of her life that parallel and mirror her acting career. While she had experienced visiting her family in prison on more than one occasion, her big acting break brought her back to prison when she was cast in the Netflix series, *Orange is the New Black*. Another connection with her acting career is seen when Guerrero received the opportunity to join the cast of *Jane the Virgin*, which some critics called the new *Ugly Betty*—a show that has its grounding in *Betty La Fea*. *Betty La Fea* was first televised as a telenovela in Colombia, where Guerrero's family is from. In her memoir, Guerrero takes us through her acting journey of both *Orange is the New Black* and *Jane the Virgin*, which gave her a huge break in the television industry and brought her into prominence in Hollywood.

Guerrero effectively uses imagery, symbolism, and literary contrasts throughout the book to convey the enormity of her experience. As an example, Diane's mother recalls a dream that ended with her falling "into a pond of dead fish" (98). This dream foreshadows the looming family separation and can be read as alluding to the broken immigration system as well as the prison

in which Guerrero's parents and brother are placed. The most compelling symbolic images Guerrero provides are the childhood pictures on the back cover of the book and the front cover sketching of her as an adolescent. These images capture the contrasts and binaries she uses in her memoir of childhood versus adulthood; of fantasy versus reality; of illusions versus disillusion; of optimism versus hopelessness; of stability versus chaos; of possibilities versus impossibilities; and of love versus hatred. Images and photos are used throughout the book to capture Guerrero's childhood, adolescent, and adulthood years, and are engaging enough to hold a young reader's imagination.

In the last chapter titled, "Into Daylight," Guerrero is at her most persuasive in advocating for immigrant rights and children. Guerrero reminds us as she states, "Our immigration system is especially hurtful to children...some slip into homelessness, or they have to beg friends to take them in, as I did. All are susceptible to sex traffickers, drug dealers, and gang leaders...The lack of due diligence by our government repeatedly leaves our youngest citizens hanging without a safety net" (242). Guerrero concludes her book with strong advocacy—a call to action for undocumented immigrants, children, and voter participation, offering the young reader with resources, facts, and data on immigration.

Diane Guerrero's memoir is both political and profusely full of emotions. It is also well-timed. On August 7, 2019, ICE swept across Mississippi, raiding and detaining 680 workers at six poultry and other food-processing plants. In the largest-ever immigration raid in a single state, hundreds of children were left abandoned or in the hands of school districts, child protective services, or left in the hands of guardians, neighbors, and relatives. This and many more stories echo similar action by the Trump administration, such as

separating children from their parents, and leaving children in unhealthy and unsanitary conditions in detention facilities, causing deaths and trauma for thousands of children. As an Ambassador for Citizenship and Naturalization appointed by the Obama administration, Guerrero writes her memoir with humor and extraordinary compassion. A gifted storyteller, Guerrero writes a contemporary American coming-of-age memoir for young readers. Guerrero is a true warrior, as she encourages the young reader to step up to the frontlines to fight for immigrant rights and children.

