



Catalina

by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio

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Tuesday Night Book Discussion

Tues, October 14 at 7:00PM, Aurelio's Pizza, 1466 W. Lake St.
Addison, IL

Author Bio

Karla Cornejo Villavicencio is the author of the National Book Award finalist *The Undocumented Americans*. Her work, which focuses on race, culture, and immigration, has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Vogue*, *Elle*, *n+1*, *The New Inquiry*, *Interview*, and on NPR.

Book Summary

When *Catalina* is admitted to Harvard, it feels like the fulfillment of destiny: a miracle child escapes death in Latin America, moves to Queens to be raised by her undocumented grandparents, and becomes one of the chosen. But nothing is simple for *Catalina*, least of all her own complicated, contradictory, ruthlessly probing mind. Now a senior, she faces graduation to a world that has no place for the undocumented; her sense of doom intensifies her curiosities and desires. She infiltrates the school's elite subcultures—internships and literary journals, posh parties and secret societies—which she observes with the eye of an anthropologist and an interloper's skepticism: she is both fascinated and repulsed. Craving a great romance, *Catalina* finds herself drawn to a fellow student, an actual budding anthropologist eager to teach her about the Latin American world she was born into but never knew, even as her life back in Queens begins to unravel. And every day, the clock ticks closer to the abyss of life after graduation. Can she save her family? Can she save herself? What does it mean to be saved?

Brash and daring, part campus novel, part hagiography, part pop song, *Catalina* is unlike any coming-of-age novel you've ever read—and *Catalina*, bright and tragic, circled by a nimbus of chaotic energy, driven by a wild heart, is a character you will never forget.

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/696674/catalina-by-karla-cornejo-villavicencio/>



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Book Reviews

An undocumented Harvard student faces an uncertain future in the scorching first novel from Villavicencio (*The Undocumented Americans*, a memoir). Catalina Ituralde, who was born in Ecuador and has lived in the U.S. since she was five, begins her senior year in fall 2010 with cautious hope, because the DREAM Act bill, which would offer her permanent protection from deportation, is expected to finally be taken up by Congress. Flashbacks reveal her painful life story and determination to succeed. When she's a baby, her parents die in car crash in Cotopaxi and she's eventually brought to her grandparents in Queens. As a student, she quickly becomes an overachiever, and by high school she's a published journalist. While working at Harvard's Peabody Museum, she meets legacy student Nathaniel Wheeler, who's obsessed with his anthropological research on the Incas but struggles to understand the experience of contemporary Ecuadorians. When the DREAM Act fails in November, Catalina spirals into a mental health crisis ("All my body felt was a sinking tired dread"). Villavicencio expertly illuminates Catalina's precarity and Nathaniel's tokenizing of other cultures. The result is a moving coming-of-age novel that doubles as a no-holds-barred cultural critique.

—Publishers Weekly

At first glance, khipus (or quipus) look like messy strings with raggedy knots, but they are the material vestiges of a sophisticated Inca system of communication. In her first novel, Cornejo Villavicencio (*The Undocumented Americans*, 2020) introduces brazen, smart Catalina, who is as tangled, textured, and cryptic as the khipus that thread throughout this tale. The year is 2010 when Catalina recounts her senior year at Harvard. The Dream Act has not yet passed, and her undocumented status is only one of the stressors she confronts. Another is the deportation order she discovers in the trash for her adored and contentious grandfather, the man who, along with her opinionated, feminist abuela, raised her in Queens after her parents died in Ecuador. Catalina is irreverent and often laugh-out-loud funny, but the dark strings of her khipu are never far from that bright surface (her thesis is about feminicide in Roberto Bolaño's *2666*). She invokes cultural figures from Anzaldúa to JLo, Haruki Murakami, and Henry Kissinger. And she knows her own value, which she asserts at an Inca museum exhibit as part of a mordant rundown of the Spanish conquest: "Anyway, the gold was here now, just like khipu and just like me." Catalina demands her due from friends, lovers, professors, and familia in Cornejo Villavicencio's bravura bildungsroman.

—Booklist

Book Reviews

An undocumented Harvard student approaches a crossroads in 2010. Catalina Ituralde was born in Ecuador. After her parents died in a car accident, she was raised first by her aunt and uncle in Ecuador and then by her grandparents in Queens, New York. Neither she nor her grandparents have papers to live in the United States. The story follows Catalina as she completes her final year at Harvard, a stressful time for even the most privileged young people but doubly so for a woman who must tend to her aging grandparents while trying to write her senior thesis and determine what she's going to do after graduation considering she can't work legally in the country that's her home. Her life hangs in the balance at a time when the fate of the Dreamers is being used as a political football. This is the author's first novel, following *The Undocumented Americans* (2020), a nonfiction book that combined personal narrative with sensitive reporting to capture the stories of undocumented immigrants. Cornejo Villavicencio is herself one of the first undocumented students to have graduated from Harvard. But this novel doesn't quite live up to the character of Catalina; her name is a fitting title for the book as little else holds it together. Catalina sort of has friends; sort of starts a romantic relationship; sort of cares about her classes, her work-study appointment at a museum on campus, and her thesis; sort of tries to tackle the daunting challenges she and her grandparents face. All of this is understandable: Anyone's mental health and capacity to manage day-to-day life would buckle under this tremendous existential strain. But while astute, Cornejo Villavicencio's commentary on the hypocrisy of liberalism and academia aren't enough to carry a story that relies on coincidence, meanders, and stalls. The novel doesn't live up to the overwhelming tension and high stakes of its protagonist's life.

-Kirkus Book Review



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Discussion Questions

1. What were your first impressions of Catalina as a character? How did they change over the course of the novel?
2. What does Catalina have in common with other books in the “campus novel” genre? In what ways does it stand out?
3. Catalina is full of cultural references, from “lowbrow” nods to music and pop culture to highbrow citations of the Western literary canon. How did these references influence your reading experience?
4. How does Catalina relate to—and feel separate from—her fellow Dreamers?
5. Discuss Catalina’s relationship to Ecuador. How does it compare to her relationship with America?
6. “The problem with being an object of beauty, a beautiful object, is that you exist only when you’re looked at . . . It feels like soul death when their eyes are off you,” Catalina says. How does it affect Catalina’s sense of self to be constantly objectified by those around her? How does she begin to see herself as a subject? What were the major turning points in this journey?
7. Catalina has her share of struggles, but she never doubts that she belongs in the Ivy League alongside her peers. What was it like to experience life through the eyes of a character who doesn’t struggle with impostor syndrome?
8. What does Catalina want from Nathaniel? What does he want from her?
9. What is Catalina’s relationship with her grandparents like? How do their expectations of her affect the relationship?
10. Discuss the documentary Catalina works on with Byron. Where does this go wrong? How, if at all, do you think the project could have succeeded?
11. What is the significance of the khipu in the novel?
12. What do you think happens to Catalina after the novel ends? What feelings were you left with about her future?
13. If you could ask Karla Cornejo Villavicencio anything about Catalina, what would you ask?

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