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REVIEWS



Jeanine Cummins

The author of *American Dirt* on her urgent new novel about a Mexican migrant and her 8-year-old son
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Also in the issue:

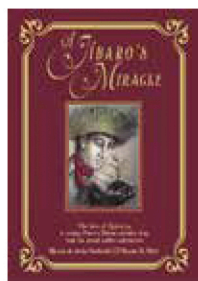
Garth Greenwell, Peggy Orenstein, Anna-Marie McLemore, and more

Paolicelli offers enough excitement—especially in the pirate action scenes—to keep the story dynamic and fresh.

A JÍBARO'S MIRACLE

As a 12-year-old, Nodarse had a sense that tensions were rising in Cuba, with exploding Molotov cocktails becoming a regular occurrence. With Havana “on the brink of open warfare,” the family spent Christmas 1958 in Mexico and on New Year’s Eve learned of Batista’s overthrow. Nodarse and her family returned to Havana, but when her father lost his job, they left Cuba for Miami, later relocating to New Jersey. The author struggled to assimilate, was marked as an outsider, and heard malicious questions such as “Did you wear shoes in Cuba?” Growing older, she attended Columbia University and, rebellious in nature, became a political activist. She also became fixated on her identity and the possibility of reconnecting with her homeland. Nodarse has a zesty narrative style, which is immediately endearing. On receiving the telegram about her brother, she notes that the “tall scrawny” delivery boy “could have punched me in the stomach. I’d seen enough World War II movies to know telegrams were bad news.” She also employs dialogue to great effect, weaving it seamlessly into the narrative. Here she recalls her first encounter with her future partner, Bernard: “‘Do I detect an accent?’ he asked as he draped his trench coat over his arm. It must have been the way I pronounced ‘Nodarse.’ ‘I’m Cuban,’ I said, with hauteur.” This passage also reflects the author’s keen eye for detail and elegant word choice. While well written, the memoir would have benefitted from more precise signposting regarding exact locations and dates—this information is communicated vaguely throughout, although this misstep does not detract greatly from the text. Nodarse’s story may not have the suspense and scope of similar works, such as *Finding Mañana* by Mirta Ojito, but it remains a valuable first-person account of a pivotal moment in Cuban history.

A stylish and eloquent examination of Cuban identity and outsiders.



A JÍBARO'S MIRACLE The Tale of Ephraim, a Young Puerto Rican Country Boy, and His Great Coffee Adventure

Paolicelli, Marisa de Jesús

Illus. by Daly, Susan E.

A Caribbean Experience Con Amor

(164 pp.)

\$24.00

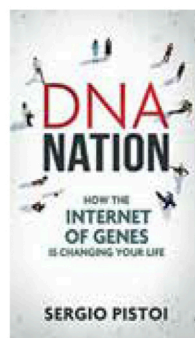
978-0-9797641-2-7

A gift of coffee beans helps a Puerto Rican boy rise from peasant to hacienda owner in this children’s book.

After his father’s death, 12-year-old Ephraim Montalvo helps support his mother by picking coffee cherries for the Hacienda Dominicki. Much hard work has enabled Ephraim to pay off his father’s debt to Mr. Dominicki, money Mr. Montalvo had hoped to use for his own plantation. Ephraim finishes repayment, but his cheerful nature is crushed when the hacienda owner contemptuously refuses to acknowledge this, and it seems he and his mother will always be trapped in poverty. Seeing her son’s despair, Mrs. Montalvo gives him an encouraging letter and a book on the

history of coffee left to him by his father. Soon after, Ephraim meets a mysterious coffee trader named Amal, who gives him some magic coffee beans that miraculously grow overnight into many mature trees. Ephraim realizes his father’s dream and starts his own hacienda that becomes so successful that he soon travels to Europe for a coffee contest. When Ephraim’s ship is attacked by pirates, he must face danger and make deals to survive. He graciously reconciles with Mr. Dominicki, who admits his sins and becomes a force for good in his community. Supplementary information includes a glossary, map, and historical photographs. In some ways, Paolicelli (*Lightkeepers to the Rescue!*, 2012, etc.) tells a classic tale of the poor boy who advances through sweat, honesty, and faith, with a supernatural twist coming from the miraculous coffee beans. It’s a touching story that emphasizes family, generosity, and other virtues, and it can get a little didactic. Ephraim is sometimes too saintly to be true, but there’s enough excitement—especially in the pirate action scenes—to keep the story dynamic and fresh. Young readers have a chance to learn about coffee and its history, the hacienda system and jíbaros (peasants), Puerto Rico, and Caribbean piracy. The book is attractively presented and thoughtful, featuring a burlap background for many of Daly’s (*Lightkeepers to the Rescue!*, 2012) expressive, lively illustrations in charcoal and pencil.

An entertaining, heartwarming coming-of-age story with a Puerto Rican flavor.



DNA NATION How the Internet of Genes Is Changing Your Life

Pisto, Sergio

Crux Publishing (262 pp.)

\$13.99 paper | \$7.99 e-book

Oct. 18, 2019

978-1-909979-90-1

A guide focuses on direct-to-consumer genetics and the genomic social network.

Pisto (*Il DNA Incontra Facebook*, 2012)

begins this edifying work with an exploration of his own DNA. He fills a test tube with spit and sends it off to 23andme.com, a company that offers direct-to-consumer genetic services. For the price of \$99, he will learn about his own genetic profile. The author admits that, as someone who has studied the genetic material of other people for years (he holds a Ph.D. in molecular biology), it feels a bit strange for him to be looking at an analysis of his own. Yet this is the state of present-day technology. Consumers who pay for such a process can join a social network of genetic relatives, discover common ancestors, and even delve into more esoteric topics like the idea of following diets based on their DNA. Of course, this all comes with a price, whether it is the complications of genetic privacy or unscrupulous businesses attempting to cash in on ideas without a lot of scientific backing. In the end, Pisto warns that, though the technology is thrilling, “genetics is not destiny and DNA is not prophecy.” The manual strikes a highly readable balance between excitement and caution. Although readers initially