

## Not from Here: The Song of America

**Leah Lax**

Pegasus (Mar 28, 2024)

Softcover \$17.99 (391pp)

978-1-80468-017-9

*Gathering the stories of a bevy of American immigrants, the social science survey Not from Here reflects on the promises and shortcomings of the American dream.*

Immigrants and refugees from around the world share stories of desperation and hope in Leah Lax's book *Not from Here*.

As part of her research for a new opera, Lax interviewed countless American immigrants about their experiences. She asked what their lives were like in their home countries, why they left, and about the disappointments and joys of life in Texas. Her subjects included a Salvadoran woman who was forced to leave her young sons behind to escape the gang who murdered her mother and a Nigerian activist who retained hope for his country's future even after his government tried to kill him. Their collected histories are used to reflect on the promises and shortcomings of the so-called American dream.

Stories of immigrants from four continents are included. Though the details of their tales are quite different, they are harrowing, heartbreaking, and feature similar themes: families separated by force or by choice, the violence and corruption that drove them to make the often dangerous journey to a country they knew almost nothing about, and the constant tug-of-war between the pressure to assimilate and the desire to remain connected to a culture rooted thousands of miles away. Through a poignant combination of the immigrants' own words and personal emotional reactions to them, the text balances its sense of the struggles and the happiness that each found abroad. Some went into business, embraced religion, or created families and futures that they previously found unimaginable. Historical context is included to widen the stories, including regarding the United States' complicity in ongoing immigration crises. However, grammatical errors appear, as does an incorrect implication that San Miguel is the capital of El Salvador.

In the end, the book is as much Lax's story as it is her subjects'. Interspersed among the interviews are glimpses into her sheltered early life, decision to join a Hasidic Jewish community, and coming out as a lesbian. Through learning others' stories, she came to better understand both the arc of her own life and the struggles of her immigrant grandparents. Indeed, the book ends with the full text of the libretto for which Lax conducted the interviews; it weaves their different stories into a single work, honoring the diversity of their voices.

*Not from Here* is an affecting book that covers different ways of being and becoming an American.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (August 6, 2024)

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