Dear America, Notes of an Undocumented Citizen by Jose Antonio Vargas

Finished 3/13/2021

After finishing Lost Stars, I was eager to pick another unread book off of my shelf. This one was Dear America, a book chosen by the LSU Honors College for the 2019-2020 school year. It is a collection of vignettes about a Filipino who came to the U.S. illegally as a child, lived his life in hiding, and grew up to become a prominent journalist tackling the issue.

Admittingly enough, I came into the book with an entirely different viewpoint than the one I left it with--a viewpoint I was embarrassed to speak about in public out of fear of being yelled at and shunned, which is another problem entirely. Nonetheless, I loved my political beliefs being challenged at its heart by poking at my empathy and giving me a glimpse into the perspective of those I otherwise negligently failed to consider.

The book claims it is not about the “politics of immigration” or “immigration at all”. That is a stretch to claim, though it boils down to semantics, so I glossed over it. It is a book about him first and foremost (but let’s not pretend he didn’t spent many a page on political commentary).

The first half of the book gave a unique and fascinating illustration on how a child learns to grow up hiding in plain sight. To fake their identity, yet live it whole. To feel like the world is against you through no fault of your own, without a reasonable way to make amends, and forced to pursue a life that can get taken away at any moment. That is what swayed me.

Then comes the second half… A **complete** tonal shift. It went from a reflection on life to a fact-dispensing manifest of his career.

The second half of the story felt repetitive and rushed. The stories were short and choppy without much detail beyond the usual -feeling unsafe in a country that wants to deport you- trope of the book. Two-hundred pages in, there was not much need to repeat it. The time line skipped around too much for my liking. The last 40-50 pages were 2017 then 2015, 2016, 2014, 2018. There were also parts I felt were a bit exaggerated. He was “thrown off” when Tucker Carlson said he invited him on for “good TV”. Come on, you’ve been in the journalism industry for almost twenty years and you were not prepared for a Fox News host to only care about ratings?

Did you feel that my last paragraph there was rough to read? That’s how the second half of the book felt.

Don’t get me wrong, the book did make me tear up at times. However, many chapters were underdeveloped, only exploring the surface of the situation and not dissecting the underlying problem leaving “how” or “why” questions unanswered, while others felt too… impulsive. The Bank of America house loan scene is a particular instance of that spontaneous nature.

I have read a few of biographies in my life—Anne Frank, Emmitt Smith, Helen Keller, to name a few—and this was probably my least favorite. Don’t get me wrong, it is way better than anything I can write and the first half was definitely interesting, but I feel the book gets a lot more praise than it deserves because of the topic it addresses.

I give this book a 4/6 since it did change my viewpoint. I hate to be so harsh on the second half because the beginning is worth a read.