

Coming to America, and becoming American

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Body

MUDDY CUP

A Dominican Family Comes of Age in a New America

By Barbara Fischkin

Scribners, \$ 24

Reviewed by PHILIP HERTER

The current debate over immigration, usually expressed in terms of what "they" want from "us," is starved for particulars that could help frame the discussion. In 1986, Barbara Fischkin, a reporter for New York Newsday, began a series of articles chronicling the struggles of "typical" immigrants making their way to America. The result is *Muddy Cup*, the story of the Almontes - Javier, Roselia and three children - journeying from the Dominican countryside to the wilds of New York City. Spinning a universal parable from threads of the particular, Fischkin has written a crisp, focused snapshot of immigration today.

MUDDY

The Almonte's story is one of family rebels and hard-working believers who want a better life. Like every family's tale, *Muddy Cup* is full of anecdote and myth: the record-breaking rain the night the baby was born, the time Papi predicted he would win the lottery, and did. Dominican history is key, especially the miserable years of the Trujillo dictatorship, a grim regime supported by Washington, when thousands disappeared and social progress withered. ***Coming to America***, we are reminded, has made sense for a long time.

Fischkin has a strong reference for the stories of men and women struggling for something better: her own mother's escape, earlier this century, from Ukrainian pogroms. Immigrant imagery is both literary and evergreen - a little boy who dreams of flying, the pretty daughter longing for big city lights, the wealthy landowner on his white horse - and Fischkin plays up these tropes. Rightly so as the lives of rural Dominicans are as vivid and hard as those of Dostoyevski's serfs.

By tale's end, the Almontes have blended into the hurly-burly of New York, in Queens coincidentally, not far from Fischkin's mother. One daughter has survived the terrorist bombing of New York's World Trade Center, (how American can you get?) The youngest, Mauricio, is at college in Ohio, majoring in English lit and dreaming of becoming a writer. The Dominican sierra, it turns out, is not so far from Walton's Mountain.

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Anyone unsure about "aliens" or American immigration policy would do well to read Muddy Cup and reflect on the circumstances of their own presence in America. Some might recall tales told by parents, or maybe grandparents. But most of us won't need to look very far into the past to see ourselves in this splendid and frank portrait of new, and very authentic, Americans.

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Graphic

BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO; cover art for Muddy Cup by Barbara Fischkin

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