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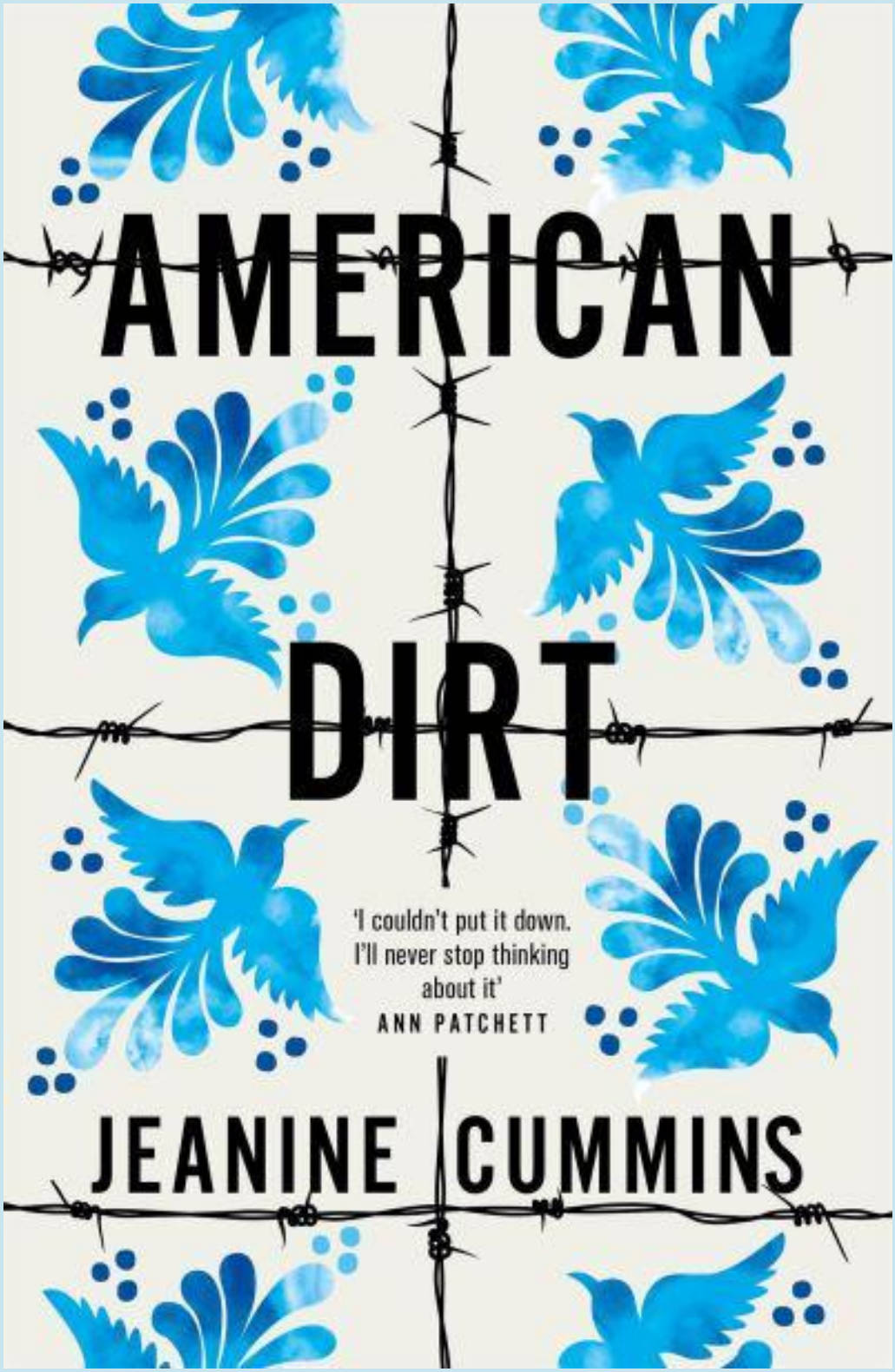
Book Club Kit



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Notes To Readers

Spoiler warnings

This kit was created for book clubs to use in their discussions of *American Dirt* and contains spoilers

Content Warning

Please be aware that *American Dirt*
contains content that may trigger including rape , drug use and murder

Interview with the Author

Which book or books are on your nightstand right now?

I was going to fib and say The Dead Republic by Roddy Doyle because that's next on my list. But in truth, right now I'm reading a very depressing book called Famine Echoes by Cathal Póirtéir as research for my next novel. It's a really harrowing collection of first-person folk-memories of the Irish famine, which makes it horrible pre-sleep reading. So I'm also reading Jennifer Belle's very funny new novel, The Seven Year Bitch.

What was your favourite book when you were a child?

I could never choose just one! Top few were probably Tuck Everlasting, Bridge to Terabithia, all of The Chronicles of Narnia, and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry.

What book would you most want to read again for the first time?

The Hobbit. It really was astonishing, to read that for the first time.

How did you get started writing?

I wrote my first book when I was about seven years old. It was seventy-five looseleaf pages in a blue, three-ring binder with stickers on the front, and it was about a little girl who skateboards across America. I did all kinds of poetry and story contests, too, when I was a teenager, and I never won anything – I didn't even manage to get published until my college literary magazine.

If you heard someone describing your books (or just the latest book) to a friend out in public, how would you most like to hear them describe them/it?

I would like them to say, "The Outside Boy is the greatest book in the history of the universe." But I guess that might be a bit of a stretch. So I think I'd just like them to say that my narrator Christy is funny and loveable, that his story is a compelling one. And maybe also that he opened the reader's mind to an unfamiliar culture.

What's the coolest thing that's happened to you since becoming a published author?

Probably the most gratifying thing has been all the mail I received (and still receive) in response to my memoir, A Rip in Heaven. So many people have written to tell me about their stories, their personal traumas. I've heard from sexual assault survivors, homicide survivors, people who have lost children – and in many cases those people found some healing in my book, or a sense of kinship with my family. That always makes me feel like, despite the emotional difficulties of writing and publishing that book, it was a worthwhile endeavor.

What was the first thing you did when you heard that you were going to be published?

I called or wrote to every member of my family to warn them. Publishing my first book wasn't the unreservedly joyous experience for me that it is for many authors – it was really bittersweet. I mean, I was proud of A Rip in Heaven, both as a love letter to my lost cousins and as a battle cry for victims' rights. But because that book was about a very personal trauma and my family's ensuing grief, I knew the publication would be difficult for a lot of people in my life, but I really wasn't prepared for how hard it was going to be. I never anticipated the publicity that would surround the book, or that it would become a bestseller. So, while I felt pleased that the book surpassed my hopes in those ways, there was also a lot of emotional fallout surrounding that success.

How was writing fiction different emotionally from writing A Rip in Heaven about your cousins' murders?

Oh, writing fiction was so refreshing, after the darkness and terror of that memoir. It was so nice to be writing about made-up characters, people who I could mold and shape, and who would make the choices I wanted them to make. Which isn't to say that these characters don't make some questionable choices, or that I don't grieve for them in their suffering – but it's the kind of grief that I can leave on the page, and it doesn't infect my life. However, I did find that it wasn't as easy to strip my own psychology out of the story as I thought it might be.

Tell us three interesting or offbeat but true things about yourself.

1. I am a HUGE Green Bay Packers football fan. My great uncle was one of the founding members of the team – he worked at the Indian Packing Company in Green Bay, and played football with Curly Lambeau and crew on Sundays before the NFL even existed. My grandpa used to pass the hat on the sidelines to raise money for their team uniforms. I have made pilgrimage to Lambeau Field, and I'm often seen sporting an actual cheesehead on autumn Sundays. I cried when Favre signed with the Vikings. My Irish husband finds this kind of ritual devotion slightly bizarre.

2. When I was nineteen, I participated in an international Irish cultural pageant called The Rose of Tralee, where I won the right to represent the Washington DC Irish Community. I travelled to Ireland where I was interviewed for seventeen minutes on live, Irish national television by Gay Byrne, who's sort of the Johnny Carson of Ireland. Then I sang a song called Kilkelly,about the Irish American diaspora, in front of an audience of something like three million people. My mom showed the very embarrassing video of said performance to anyone who came within 200 yards of my house for many years. I think even our postman has seen it.

3. Although my legal name is Jeanine, my real name has always been Tink. When I went to my first day of kindergarten, and the teacher called role, afterwards, she asked if anyone hadn't heard her name on the list, so I put my hand up. She asked my name, and I told her "Tink Cummins." She said, "Well, I have a Jeanine Cummins here. " And I replied, "Never heard of her." To this day, all of my family and friends still call me Tink – I only use Jeanine in my professional life.

If you couldn't be an author, what profession would you choose and why (and no cheating and falling back on your previous life in publishing)?

I would like to do something involving hardhats and heavy machinery.

What's the hardest thing about writing, besides having to answer goofy interview questions like these?

No question, for me it's the solitude. I'm an extremely sociable person, and my former position as a sales manager at Penguin took full advantage of my outgoing nature. I feel so lucky to be able to write full-time now, but in the beginning, I found the isolation of that position to be a little daunting. Social networking has been a God-send for me, because I can spend the whole day alone, writing, and still feel like I'm interacting with friends and colleagues on Facebook or Twitter.

Are you working on something new now (besides the baby)? If so, give us a teaser for it.

I just started work on a novel half-set in Irish famine times, and half-set in modern day New York, with a young mother who's researching her Irish roots. Summing up a book concept in just a sentence is hard! But I hope it will turn into a story about all kinds of physical and spiritual hunger.

Reading Group Discussion Questions

1. Throughout the novel, Lydia thinks back on how, when she was living a middle-class existence, she viewed migrants with pity: “All her life she’s pitied those poor people. She’s donated money. She’s wondered with the sort of detached fascination of the comfortable elite how dire the conditions of their lives must be wherever they come from, that this is the better option. That these people would leave their homes, their cultures, their families, even their languages, and venture into tremendous peril, risking their very lives, all for the chance to get to the dream of some faraway country that doesn’t even want them” (chapter 10, page 94). Do you think the author chose to make Lydia a middle-class woman as her protagonist for a reason? Do you think the reader would have had a different entry point to the novel if Lydia started out as a poor migrant? Would you have viewed Lydia differently if she had come from poor origins? How much do you identify with Lydia?

2. Sebastián persists in running his story on Javier even though he knows it will put him and his family in grave danger. Do you admire what he did? Was he a good journalist or a bad husband and father? Is it possible he was both? What would you have done if you were him?

3. Lydia looks at Luca and thinks to herself: “Migrante. She can’t make the word fit him. But that’s what they are now. This is how it happens” (chapter 10, page 94). Lydia refers to her and Luca becoming migrants as something that happened to them rather than something they did. Do you think the author intentionally made this sentence passive? Do you think language allows us to label things as “other” that is, in a way, tantamount to self-preservation? Does it allow us to compartmentalize things that are too difficult to comprehend?

4. When Lydia is at the Casa del Migrante, she learns the term cuerpomático --- “human ATM machine” --- and what it means. Were you surprised to learn how dangerous the passage is, and for female migrants in particular?

. When Lydia, Luca, Soledad and Rebeca are at the Casa del Migrante, the priest warns them to turn back: “If it’s only a better life you seek, seek it elsewhere.... This path is only for people who have no choice, no other option, only violence and misery behind you” (chapter 17, page 168). Were you surprised that he would be issuing such a dire warning when he must know how desperate they are to be there in the first place? Under what conditions might you decide to leave your homeland?

6. When they get to the US–Mexican border, Beto says, “This is the whole problem, right? Look at that American flag over there --- you see it? All bright and shiny; it looks brand-new. And then look at ours. It’s all busted up and raggedy” (chapter 26, page 273). Later he says, “I mean, those estadounidenses are obsessed with their flag” (chapter 26, page 274). Do you agree with Beto? Do the flags symbolize something more than just the countries they represent?

7. The term “American” only appears once in the novel. Did you notice? Why do you think the author made this choice?

8. When Luca finally crosses over to the United States, he’s disappointed: “The road below is nothing like the roads Luca imagined he’d encounter in the USA. He thought every road here would be broad as a boulevard, paved to perfection, and lined with fluorescent shopfronts. This road is like the crappiest Mexican road he’s ever seen. Dirt, dirt, and more dirt” (chapter 31, page 329). Discuss the significance of
the title, AMERICAN DIRT. What do you think the author means by it?

9. “Lydia had been aware of the migrant caravans coming from Guatemala and Honduras in the way comfortable people living stable lives are peripherally aware of destitution. She heard their stories on the news radio while she cooked dinner in her kitchen. Mothers pushing strollers thousands of miles, small children walking holes into the bottoms of their pink Crocs, hundreds of families banding together for safety, gathering numbers as they walked north for weeks, hitching rides in the backs of trucks whenever they could, riding La Bestia whenever they could, sleeping in fútbol stadiums and churches, coming all that way to el norte to plead for asylum. Lydia chopped onions and cilantro in her kitchen while she listened to their histories. They fled violence and poverty, gangs more powerful than their governments. She listened to their fear and determination, how resolved they were to reach Estados Unidos or die on the road in that effort, because staying at home meant their odds of survival were even worse. On the radio, Lydia heard those walking mothers singing to their children, and she felt a pang of emotion for them. She tossed chopped vegetables into hot oil, and the pan sizzled in response. That pang Lydia felt had many parts: it was anger at the injustice, it was worry, compassion, helplessness. But in truth, it was a small feeling, and when she realized she was out of garlic, the pang was subsumed by domestic irritation. Dinner would be bland” (chapter 26, pages 276–77). Do you think the narrator intends for the reader to wholeheartedly censure Lydia in this scene? Do you think Lydia is a stand-in for the reader and that the author is sending a broader message? After reading the author’s note, do you think the author includes herself in this group?

“I heard if your life is in danger wherever you come from, they’re not allowed to send you back there.”
To Lydia it sounds like mythology, but she can’t help asking anyway, “You have to be Central American? To apply for asylum?” Beto shrugs. “Why? Your life in danger?” Lydia sighs. “Isn’t everyone’s?”
(chapter 26, page 277)

If you were writing the rules for asylum eligibility, what would they be?

11. Toward the end of the novel, Soledad “sticks her hand through the fence and wiggles her fingers on the other side. Her fingers are in el norte. She spits through the fence. Only to leave a piece of herself there on American dirt” (chapter 28, page 301). Why do you think Soledad spits over the border? Is doing so a victory for her?

12. “Luca wonders if they’re moving perpendicular to that boundary now, that place where the fence disappears and the only thing to delineate one country from the next is a line that some random guy drew on a map years and years ago” (chapter 30, page 317). In his 1971 book THEORY OF JUSTICE, the philosopher John Rawls came up with what he called the “veil of ignorance.” Rawls asked readers to think about how they would design an ideal society if they knew nothing of their own sex, gender, race, nationality, individual tastes or personal identity. Do you think the decision-makers of the borders might’ve made a different decision if they’d donned the veil of ignorance? Do you think borders are a necessary evil or might their delineation serve a societal good? Do you think that the world would be a better place if we all brought Rawls’s thought experiment to bear in our everyday individual and collective decision-making?

13. Why do you think there are birds on the cover of the novel?

14. “But the moment of the crossing has already passed, and she didn’t even realize it had happened. She never looked back, never committed any small act of ceremony to help launch her into the new life on the other side. Nothing can be undone. Adelante” (chapter 30, page 323). Do you think Lydia is better or worse off for not having known about the moment of her boundary crossing? What importance do rituals have in marking milestones in our lives? Can the done be undone, the past rewinded?

15. Was Javier’s reaction to Marta’s death at all understandable? Humanizing? Do you believe that he didn’t want Lydia dead? Is what he did, in the name of his daughter, any less paternal than what Lydia does for Luca is maternal?

https://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/american-dirt/guide

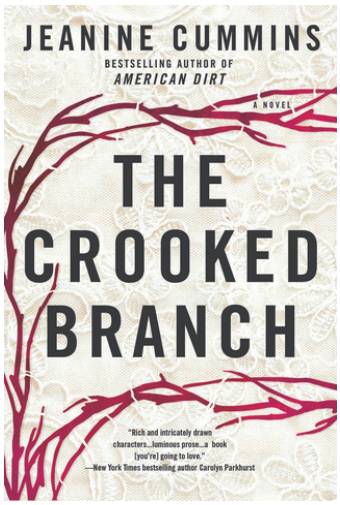
About the Author

Jeanine Cummins is the author of the bestselling memoir A Rip in Heaven, and the novels The Outside Boy and The Crooked Branch. Her fourth book, American Dirt, was an Oprah's Book Club and a Barnes & Noble book Club selection. It has been translated into 34 languages and has sold more than two million copies worldwide. She lives in New York with her husband and two children.

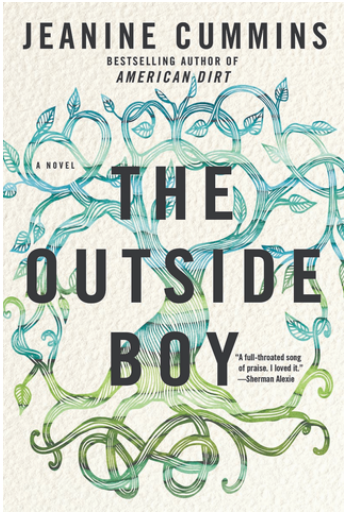
A note from the Author

When I was traveling in Mexico and the borderlands researching for American Dirt, nothing surprised me more than the preponderance of HOPE among people who endure so much hardship. That is what the United States of America still represents to the people who risk everything to get here. So many good people in the US and Mexico are deeply committed to protecting refugees in their most vulnerable moments; these folks are out there just quietly saving lives every single day.

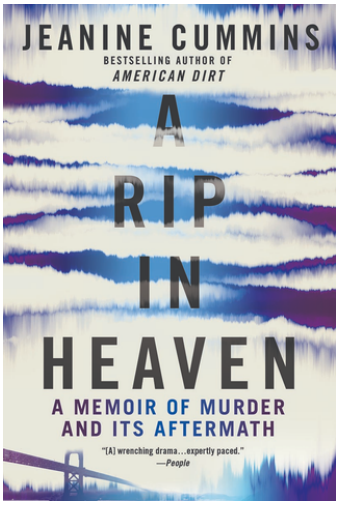
More From Jeanine Cummins



After the birth of her daughter Emma, the usually resilient Majella finds herself feeling isolated and exhausted. Then, at her childhood home in Queens, Majella discovers the diary of her maternal ancestor Ginny—and is shocked to read a story of murder in her family history.
With the famine upon her, Ginny Doyle fled from Ireland to America, but not all of her family made it. What happened during those harrowing years, and why does Ginny call herself a killer? Is Majella genetically fated to be a bad mother, despite the fierce tenderness she feels for her baby? Determined to uncover the truth of her heritage and her own identity, Majella sets out to explore Ginny's past—and discovers surprising truths about her family and ultimately, herself.



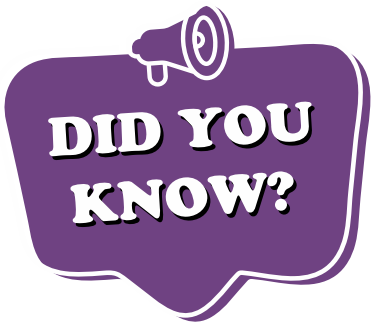
IIreland, 1959: Young Christopher Hurley is a tinker, a Pavee gypsy, who roams with his father and extended family from town to town, carrying all their worldly possessions in their wagons. Christy carries with him a burden of guilt as well, haunted by the story of his mother's death in childbirth.The wandering life is the only one Christy has ever known, but when his grandfather dies, everything changes. His father decides to settle briefly, in a town, where Christy and his cousin can receive proper schooling and prepare for their first communions. But still, always, they are treated as outsiders.As Christy struggles to find his way amid the more conventional lives of his new classmates, he starts to question who he is and where he belongs. But then the discovery of an old newspaper photograph, and a long-buried secret from his mother's mysterious past, changes his life forever



A Rip in Heaven is Jeanine Cummins' story of a night in April, 1991, when her two cousins Julie and Robin Kerry, and her brother, Tom, were assaulted on the Old Chain of Rocks Bridge, which spans the Mississippi River just outside of St. Louis. When, after a harrowing ordeal, Tom managed to escape the attackers and flag down help, he thought the nightmare would soon be over. He couldn't have been more wrong. Tom, his sister Jeanine, and their entire family were just at the beginning of a horrific odyssey through the aftermath of a violent crime, a world of shocking betrayal, endless heartbreak, and utter disillusionment. It was a trial by fire from which no family member would emerge unscathed.

Who Else Writes Like...?

A readers' guide to fiction authors



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