



**FRIENDS**  
OF THE **PALM SPRINGS LIBRARY**  
**BOOK CLUB**

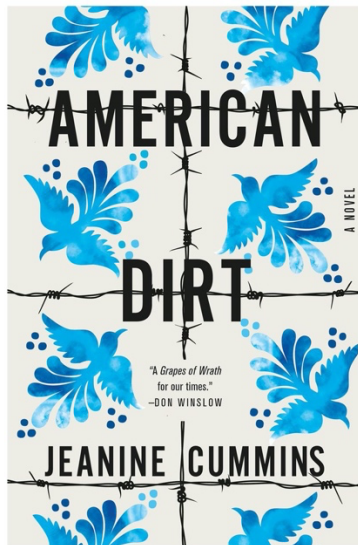
FOPSL Book Club: October 16, 2020

Book: *American Dirt*

Author: Jeanine Cummins

Discussion leader: Mary Barlow

## Mary Barlow Leads Discussion of *American Dirt*



Last month, Mary Barlow presented a novel about an escape to freedom by Jeanine Cummins called *American Dirt*. Most know of the book for two reasons: a release day endorsement by Oprah Winfrey as the 83<sup>rd</sup> book chosen for Oprah's Book Club and controversy regarding whether her book was an example of cultural

appropriation—the co-opting of cultural identity markers originating in minority communities by people with a relatively privileged status. *American Dirt* was Cummins' third book following a memoir and two novels exploring Irish history. She declined offers for film rights to the book. Her next two novels explore Irish history.

Recounting the publication of *American Dirt* reveals questions about the publishing industry which employed Cummins for ten years (seven before the printing of her memoir *A Rip in Heaven* in 2004). In 2018 *American Dirt* was sold to Flatiron after a three-day bidding war between nine publishers that resulted in a seven-figure deal. One month prior to the book's 2020 release, a negative review by Latinx author Myriam Gurba (<https://tropicsofmeta.com/2019/12/12/pendeja-you-aint-steinbeck-my-bronca-with-fake-ass-social-justice-literature/>) followed by a critical New York Times review (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/17/books/review-american-dirt-jeanine-cummins.html>) labeling the book as feeling “conspicuously like the work of an outsider” eventually led the publisher to cancel the book tour. In an NPR interview following publication, Cummins responds to criticism from Latino writers who say her novel is not an accurate portrayal of the immigrant experience by acknowledging “I was aware of my cultural blind spots as I could be.” (<https://www.npr.org/2020/01/24/799164276/american-dirt-author-jeanine-cummins-answers-vocal-critics>)

*American Dirt* is a work of fiction and book club members acknowledged the right of an author to tell a story the way she wants to. A book is judged by its merits and by most accounts, the story was well-received by book club members. No consensus was reached about the origins of the book's title. Will the book become a classic? Perhaps we will wait to see if the publishing industry finds a Latina who survived a migration across the U.S. border and is willing and able to write about it before we judge.

## End Notes

The Palm Springs Public Library is open for your Library-A-Go-Go orders. To learn how and also discover the latest library news go to their website at <https://www.palmspringsca.gov/government/departments/library>.

To see the FOPSL Book Club season list or view our archives go to <https://www.friendsofthepalmspringslibrary.org/book-club> .

Please support the library through your membership and donations to the Friends of the Palm Springs Library. With City budget cuts, your donations have been key to keeping the acquisitions and programming plans for the Library moving forward. To join or renew your membership go to: <https://www.friendsofthepalmspringslibrary.org/page-1786296>. To make a donation go to: <https://www.friendsofthepalmspringslibrary.org/page-1786295>

Coordinator: David Kelly, [DavidJaxKelly@gmail.com](mailto:DavidJaxKelly@gmail.com)

Friends of the Palm Springs Library Book Club meets online

Palm Springs Library, 300 S. Sunrise Way, Palm Springs, CA 92262