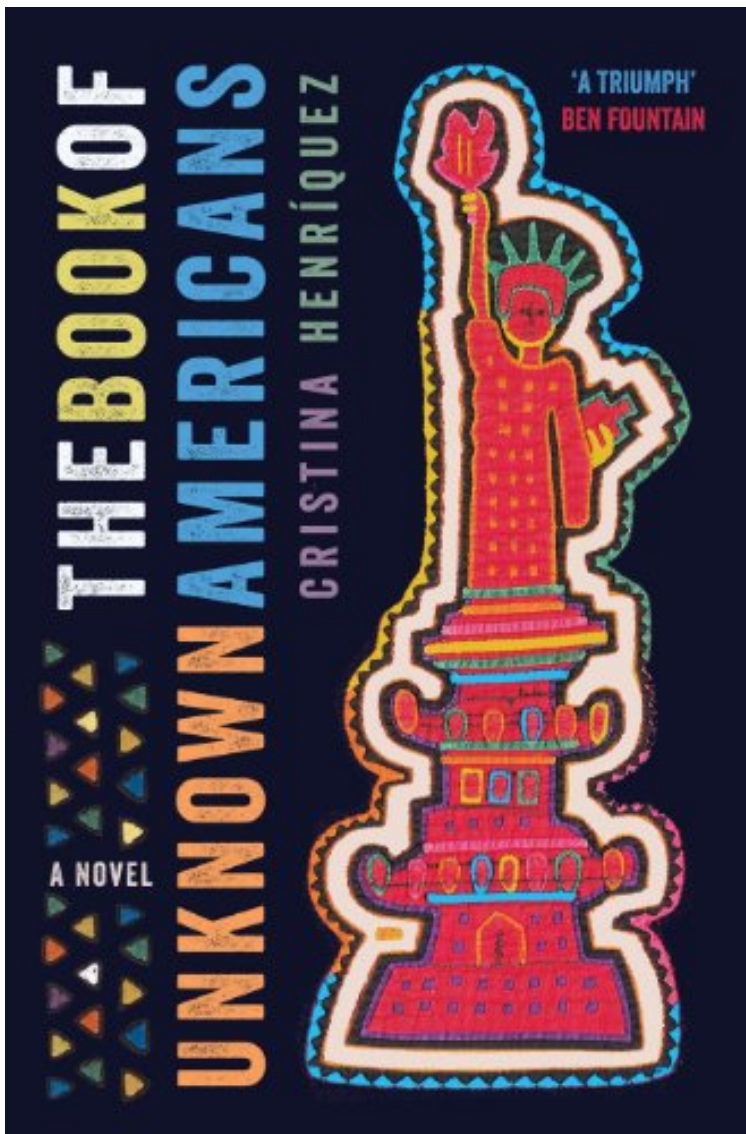


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# The Book of Unknown Americans



*Par Cristina Henríquez*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurWe had been planning our life here for so long. Filling out papers, hoping, praying, waiting. We had all of our dreams pinned on this place, but the pin was thin and delicate and it was too soon to tell whether it was going to hold much of anything at all. When Alma Rivera arrives in Kirkwood, Delaware she is brim full of the promise and possibilities of her new American home. Hope that her luminous daughter Maribel will be helped by the specialist education the US can provide, and faith that her husband Arturo will flourish in a country that celebrates the hard-working and the talented. But the reality of life without status, money, family and friends soon becomes apparent. And when violence casts its shadow, Alma realizes that her biggest mistake was assuming that everything that could go wrong in their lives already had . . . In this tale of great imagination and grace, Cristina Henríquez gives voice to the stories of the

displaced and unknown - the untold stories of our time that resonate for us all. Extrait Mayor We heard they were from Mexico. Definitely, my mom said, staring at them through our front window as they moved in. Look at how short they are. She let the curtain fall back in place and walked to the kitchen, wiping her hands on the dish towel slung over her shoulder. I looked, but all I saw was three people moving through the dark, carrying stuff from a pickup truck to unit 2D. They cut across the headlights of the truck a few times, and I made out their faces, but only long enough to see a mom, a dad, and a girl about my age. So? my dad asked when I joined him and my mom at the dinner table. I couldn't really see anything, I said. Do they have a car?

I shook my head. The trucks just dropping them off, I think. My dad sawed off a piece of chicken and stuffed it in his mouth. Do they have a lot of things? he asked. It didn't seem like it. Good, my dad said. Maybe they are like us, then. We heard from Quisqueya Sols that their last name was Rivera. And they're legal, she reported to my mom over coffee one afternoon. All of them have visas. How do you know? my mom asked. That's what Nelia told me. She heard it from Fito. Apparently the mushroom farm is sponsoring them. Of course, my mom said. I was in the living room, eavesdropping, even though I was supposed to be doing my geometry homework. Well, my mom went on, clearing her throat, it will be nice to have another family in the building. They'll be a good addition. Quisqueya took a quick look at me before turning back to my mom and hunching over her coffee mug. Except . . . , she said. My mom leaned forward. What? Quisqueya said, The girl . . . She looked at me again. My mom peered over Quisqueya's shoulder. Mayor, are you listening to us? I tried to act surprised. Huh? Me? My mom knew me too well, though. She shook her head at Quisqueya to signal that whatever Quisqueya was going to say, she'd better save it if she didn't want me to hear it. Bueno, we don't need to talk about it, then, Quisqueya said. You'll see for yourself eventually, I'm sure. My mom narrowed her eyes, but instead of pressing, she sat back in her chair and said loudly, Well. And then, More coffee? We heard a lot of things, but who knew how much of it was true? It didn't take long before the details about the Riveras began to seem far-fetched. They had tried to come into the United States once before but had been turned back. They were only staying for a few weeks. They were working undercover for the Department of Homeland Security. They were personal friends with the governor. They were running a safe house for illegals. They had connections to a Mexican narco ring. They were loaded. They were poor. They were traveling with the circus. I tuned it all out after a while. School had started two weeks earlier, and even though I had told myself that this would be the year the other kids stopped picking on me, the year that I actually fit in for once in my life, things already weren't going exactly as planned. During the first week of school, I was in the locker room, changing into my gym shorts, when Julius Olsen tucked his hands into his armpits and started flapping his arms like wings. Bwaaak! he said, looking at me. I ignored him and cinched the drawstring on my shorts. Actually, they were my older brother Enrique's shorts that had been handed down to me, but I wore them because I thought that maybe they would make me seem cooler than I was, like maybe some of Enrique's popularity was trapped in the fibers and would rub off on me. He'd been a senior the year before, when I was a freshman, and every single person in the school had adored him. Soccer stud. Girlfriends by the dozen. Homecoming king. So opposite of me that when I tried to earn points with Shandie Lewis, who I would have given just about anything to hook up with, by telling her that I was Enrique Toros' brother, she said that was a really stupid thing to lie about. Bwaaaaak! Julius said louder, jutting his neck toward me. I balled up my jeans and shoved them into my locker. Garrett Miller, who had basically made picking on me last year his special project, pointed at me, laughed, and said, Fucking chicken legs. He flung his boot at my chest. Julius snorted. I took a deep breath and shut my locker. I was used to this kind of abuse. Last year, whenever Enrique caught wind of it, he'd tell me to stand up for myself. I know you don't want to fight, he said once. But at least have the balls to tell them to fuck off. And in my head I did. In my head, I was Jason Bourne or Jack Bauer or James Bond or all three of them combined. But beyond my head, the most I ever did was ignore it and walk away. How do you say chicken in Spanish? Garrett asked. Pollo, someone answered. Major Pollo, Garrett said. The kids at my school loved changing my first name to English and then tacking insults onto it. Major Pan (short for Panamanian). Major Pan in the Ass. Major Cocksucker. Julius started cracking up, and he squawked at me again. A few of the other guys in the locker room snickered. I started walking I just wanted to get out of there but when I did, I bumped Garrett's boot, which was on the floor in front of me. Don't touch my shoe, Pollo, Garrett said. Kick it over here, Julius said. Fuck you, Garrett snapped. Don't tell him to kick my shoe. Don't worry, Julius said. He can't kick for shit. Haven't you seen him out there after school trying to play soccer? He's a total fuckup. Major fuckup, Garrett said, stepping in front of me to block any hope I had of leaving. Garrett was thin, but he was tall. He wore a green army coat every single day, no matter what the weather was, and had a tattoo of

an eagle on his neck. The year before, he'd spent a few months in juvenile detention at Ferris because he beat up Angelo Puente so bad that by the end of it, Angelo had two broken arms and blood pouring out of his nose. There was no way I was going to mess with him. But when the bell rang and the other kids started filing out into the gym, Garrett still didn't budge. The locker room was in the school basement and it was so quiet right then that I could hear water coursing through the pipes. There wasn't anywhere for me to go. Garrett took a step closer. I didn't know what he was going to do. And then Mr. Samuels, the gym teacher, poked his head into the room. You boys are supposed to be out in the gym, he said. Garrett didn't move. Neither did I. Now! he barked. So that was one thing. The other thing, as Julius had pointed out, was soccer.

The only reason I'd gone out for the team in the first place was because my dad had forced me into it. For him, the logic went something like: I was Latino and male and not a cripple, therefore I should play soccer. Soccer was for Latinos, basketball for blacks, and the whites could keep their tennis and golf as far as he was concerned. He'd applied the same reasoning to my brother, too, except that in Enrique's case, it had actually worked out. Enrique had been the first player in the history of our school to make varsity as a freshman, and when he got a full-ride soccer scholarship to Maryland, it was like my dad had been vindicated. See? he'd said, waving around the offer letter when it came in the mail. You were meant to do this! The next Pel! And this one, he'd said, pointing at me, the next Maradona! Enrique might have been the next Pel, but I wasn't even in the same galaxy as Maradona. Two weeks into practice, I had bruised shins, a scabby knee, and a scraped elbow. Coach even pulled me aside once to ask whether I was wearing the right size cleats. I told him they were size seven, which was my size, and he patted my shoulder and said, Okay, then. Maybe you should just sit it out for a while, and directed me to the sidelines. In the past few days, a flock of girls had started coming to our practices, sitting in the empty stands and pointing at us while they texted and talked. Word got around that they were new freshmen. They didn't look like any freshmen I knew, in their skimpy tank tops and lacy black bras they wore underneath, but what I did know was that our team got a hell of a lot better after those girls showed up. Everyone was running faster and kicking harder than before. I felt like a loser, hanging around the sidelines all the time. Whenever the girls broke out in laughter, I was sure they were laughing at me. One day, I asked Coach if I could go back in, even if just for a few drills. When he looked ambivalent, I lied and said, I've been practicing with my dad at home. Even he thinks I'm getting better. Coach worked his jaw from side to side like he was thinking about it. Please? I said. Finally he gave in. Okay. Let's see what you got. We set up a star drill where guys spread out into a circle and dribbled the ball a few paces into the middle before passing to a teammate who took the ball and repeated the sequence.

Each time I ran through and got back in line, I looked up at the girls in the stands, who weren't laughing anymore, just watching. Maybe I got overconfident. Maybe there was a divot in the grass. The next time I ran into the middle to get the ball, my ankle turned. Ethan Weisberg was stepping toward me, waiting for me to pass to him. I was so eager to get the dribble going again that when I went for the ball with my other foot, I rolled my cleat up over it instead. The ball was still spinning, and I stumbled again just as Ethan, impatient and frustrated, finally came at me and tried to spear his foot in to swipe the ball out for himself. When he did, I fell. His leg caught under mine. And before either of us knew it, I had taken him down, both of us

landing on top of each other in the middle of the field. What the fuck, Mayor! Ethan yelled. My hip throbbed. Coach blew his whistle and jogged in to untangle us. The girls erupted in laughter. *Revue de presse* Timely . . . powerful . . . genuinely moving . . . a chronicle of a beautiful Mexican teenager named Maribel Rivera and her admiring friend and neighbor, Mayor Toro. Maribel and Mayor's star-crossed love lends this novel an emotional urgency; the story of their families gives us a visceral sense of the magnetic allure of America, and the gaps so many immigrants find here between expectations and reality. In slowly revealing the back stories behind [their] arrival in America and what they have at stake in remaining here,

Henriquez gives us an intimate understanding of the sense of dislocation they experience almost daily, belonging neither here nor there, caught on the margins of the past and the future. She conveys the homesickness they feel missing not just family and friends but also the heat and light and rhythms of the places they left behind and their awareness of the fragility of even their most ordinary dreams of safety. The story encapsulate[s] the promises and perils of the American dream . . . Henriquez's myriad gifts as a writer shine. Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times* Henriquez distills the vast sea of immigrant stories into a small apartment building community in Delaware. At the center are two star-crossed teens, Mayor and Maribel . . . Through their friendship and budding romance, Mayor becomes a hero, protecting Maribel from a dangerous boy. He starts to bring her out of her shell [and] Maribel begins to reconnect with her former self. Their doomed love is just one of the Romeo Juliet twists in the book Henriquez threads that theme

through the relationships between parents and their children, husbands and wives, the immigrant community with their home countries and their new one . . . Through her unadorned prose, these struggles ring clear, voices rising above the din of political debate. Korina Lopez, USA Today Gripping . . . genuinely devastating. Henriquez has found a memorable way to open up complex topics: discrimination, love and grief in family life, and the experiences of being displaced or feeling at home. A novel that can both make you think and break your heart. Sarah Stone, San Francisco Chronicle Reminiscent of the chorus of voices that made Oscar Lewis's *The Children of Sanchez* so memorable, and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* so profoundly humane, Henriquez's tale about coming to America is a striking original . . . It's no easy trick to pull a good story from the classic immigrant chronicle, the strivers tale. But this novel about the Riveras and their hastily cobbled world is sure to bring Henriquez many readers. It is a deeply stirring story about a budding romance between two unlikely lovers, but also a ringing paean to love in general: to the love between man and wife, parent and child, outsider and newcomer, pilgrims and promised land. With a simple, unadorned prose that rises to the level of poetry, Henriquez achieves the seemingly impossible: Without a trace of sentimentality, without an iota of self-indulgence or dogma, she tells us about coming to America. The *Book of Unknown Americans* leaves you in thrall to its vivid characters and its author's sure hand. Marie Arana, *The Washington Post* In a TED talk titled *The Danger of a Single Story*, Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie noted that the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. Henriquez's big-hearted novel challenges the single story by exploring a wide range of Latino experiences. The *Book of Unknown Americans* is a welcome contribution to a broadening literary conversation that features immigrants from all across the Americas, and all walks of life. As Henriquez shows, theirs is a story composed of many stories. Ashley Hope Prez, *Texas Observer* There's an aura of benevolence in these pages that feels honestly come by, stemming in part from Mayor and Maribel's innocent romance but mostly from the steady support and encouragement among the families of the charismatic residents of the Redwood Apartments in Delaware. Who comes to the U.S. and ends up in Delaware?, one [character] jokingly wonders . . . Henriquez's feat is to make the reader feel at home amid these good, likeable people. Be warned: The price of this closeness is the book's tragic conclusion. *The Wall Street Journal* Textured, resonant . . . rich, human. The *Book of Unknown Americans* ramps up like a rainstorm then releases across the landscape, and once you look outside, touches absolutely everything. It is a graceful examination of the American immigrant experience from the oft overlooked perspective of the immigrant herself . . . It's easy to become lost in the young love story, [but] Almas parenting checks readers back into the fear and newness inherent in life on unfamiliar turf, with the inability to communicate . . . The novel's last line is bone-chilling. A secret peek into lives unknown to which we are not often privy. To walk away without learning something from its pages most of all, empathy would be an opportunity squandered. But leave it to the feeling in your chest on your chest when you reach the last page to tell you that. Meredith Turits, *Bustle* (June fiction pick) I didn't want to read another book about the immigrant experience. So ubiquitous in literature, the theme can feel tired and unoriginal, even to those of us who've lived it. But the first few paragraphs of Henriquez's prose words whose simplicity belies their weight seduced me with beauty and the promise of a rich tale. And Henriquez delivered. This is a book about love, about how we seek to help those we love, sometimes with unforeseen and tragic consequences . . . Henriquez ignites the tension in the first few pages and lets it simmer and pull the story along . . . Lyrical . . . There is beautiful writing in these pages [that] illustrates the full ethnic range of the Americas and how so many people south of our border ended up here. I'm not spoiling it to say that Henriquez brings the story to a heart-crushing explosion of an end fueled by secrets, love, fear and ethnic tension. Bottom line, if you read only one more book about the immigrant experience, make it this one. Beatriz Terrazas, *Dallas Morning News* Observant . . . a big-hearted ensemble of a story. Set at a scrappy apartment complex in Delaware, *The Book of Unknown Americans* is a pan-Latino novel, with characters from Panama, Venezuela, Mexico and Puerto Rico, among other nations. In love and locked out of any reasonably cool social scene in high school, Mayor Toro and Maribel Rivera are the teens at the heart of the novel. Interspersed among their tentative, fumbling love story are chapters devoted to the back stories of the other residents of the complex. Henriquez covers the gamut of the immigrant experience: how they arrived in America, why they came, what they think of their new home, whether they miss their first home. In other words, she captures an experience at the heart of this country's history that is often a cursory, incomplete story in the media . . . Poor and at the mercy of forces they do not entirely understand, her characters nonetheless experience victories that no one but their families and the fellow residents of their complex share. I hope this book can play a small role in maybe opening Americans a bit more to empathy,

Henriquez says. Claiborne Smith, Kirkus Remarkable . . . the narrative of our two central families could easily sustain the novel, but Henriquez has taken it further. The Book of Unknown Americans gives voice to an entire society of people who struggle and work for the hope of better lives but these lives don't necessarily turn out as they may have dreamed. These people live days steeped in uncertainty and sometimes fear, and the sacrifices that are made in a move toward a better lot in life are huge. Henriquez opens the doors to this experience. Amid the grit and shadows, doubt and desperation, Henriquez finds beauty in community, in love, in family, in perseverance. And lucky us we have the beauty, too, that is Henriquez's writing. Kristin Fritz, Everyday eBook With eloquence, grace and, yes, sorrow, Henriquez creates an ensemble cast that speaks for millions of people who live among us but whose voices are rarely heard. This is a remarkable novel that every American should read. Meganne Fabrega, Minneapolis Star Tribune Enrapturing and heartbreaking . . . a stunning cross-cultural love story under the guise of a narrative about Latino families trying to make their way in America . . . Like a music master at the harp, Henriquez elegantly plays with human heart strings as she illustrates the complexities of the immigrant experience through the story of two families, as well as the company with whom they surround themselves. Morgan Ribera, Bustle The stories you hear about immigration are the ones that generate sensational headlines: sheriffs patrolling the border with shotguns, finger-pointing on Fox News, red-hot rhetoric in political campaigns across the country. But as Henriquez was reminded a few years ago, there are plenty of stories that are told rarely, if ever . . . At the center of The Book of Unknown Americans are Arturo and Alma Rivera, who have immigrated legally from Mexico to enroll their daughter in a special-needs school because she has suffered a brain injury. When Mayor Toro, a young naturalized citizen originally from Panama, falls in love with her, the Rivera and Toro families become forever intertwined . . . The Riveras' vulnerability increases [and] ultimately the story spins toward tragedy. Along the way, Henriquez allows the characters to speak for themselves . . . The politics of immigration, while never explicitly argued, remain subtly in play, as do more existential matters affecting immigrants, such as mixed national and cultural allegiances and affiliations between the generations . . . Henriquez's most ambitious book yet. Kevin Nance, Chicago Tribune A novel told in many voices of Latin American people who come to this country and live in one apartment building in Delaware: a book about the love affairs and various things that go on but it's really about what it means to be an American, and what it means to have come here what it cost them and what you get. Sara Nelson, on CBS This Morning, s Must-Have Titles for Your Summer Reading List Henriquez's best yet . . . The notion of somewhere we make it, how we define it, and why we leave it lies at the heart of The Book of Unknown Americans. Gut-wrenching. Rachel Bertsche, Chicago Magazine Poignant and profound . . . Beautiful, heartbreaking, hopeful and enlightening. Each character in The Book of Unknown Americans tells their story of how they came to America. How much they wanted to become part of this wonderful country with so many opportunities . . . Little did they know that leaving Mexico, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Panama, Guatemala or Nicaragua, each with their own unique heritage, food, language and culture, they would all be lumped together as a group of immigrants that were not welcomed or wanted. [But] these strangers soon became friends, something of a newly established family . . . Candid, thoughtful . . . This book had to be written. And needs to be read. A copy should show up on each politician's desk, teachers' desk, in each American citizen's hands. Marisa Robinson, The Daily Dosage A novel crowded with characters as vivid as they are resilient families and neighbors who have bravely chosen hope over fate. The Book of Unknown Americans begins with a vivid vision of promise. [But] Hollywood hopes sink like L.A. smog when Alma Rivera, her husband, Arturo, and their daughter wind up in a dingy apartment with found furniture, and Arturo, who owned a construction firm in Mexico, finds work as a mushroom picker. The Riveras come seeking better care for their daughter, Maribel, but they find camaraderie and destiny in their apartment complex, which teems with other immigrant clans such as the Panamanian Toro family, whose gawky son, Mayor, falls hard for Maribel. Their collective story is interlaced with tales of dreams deferred from the other tenants, [including] a Puerto Rican dancer who could well be a proxy for anyone from far away with an American-size appetite to dream. Jennifer Arellano, Elle A novel as disturbing as it is beautiful: a testament to the mixed blessings our country offers immigrants, who struggle against bigotry and economic hardship while maintaining just enough hope to keep striving for something better. A narrative mosaic that moves toward a heartrending conclusion. Daniel A. Olivas, The Los Angeles Times Passionate . . . Henriquez imagines the sweet and bitter reality of coming to America, giv[ing] voice to the unheard stories of people who have quit their native countries for what they hope will be a better life. Alternating points of view bring to life nine families living in an apartment building in Delaware who have fled their birthplaces dusty towns in Panama, Mexico, Nicaragua,

Guatemala, Paraguay to begin anew in the States . . . The Riveras arrive at dusk, unfolding themselves from the back of a red pickup truck after a days-long journey from Mexico. They are here legally, desperately hoping that an American school will restore their daughter, Maribel, who has suffered a traumatic brain injury, to the outgoing girl she used to be . . . The Toros offer their new neighbors friendship; their son, Mayor, is smitten with Maribel from the moment they meet. As the novel unfolds, the two share a tender love. Through her characters fears, their robust affection for one another, and their resilience, Henrquez illuminates the disparity between the lives theyve given up and the benefits theyve gained. For some, the struggle to find new identities as Americans yields rewards; for others, the transition is too difficult, and they return home the way they came: out of one world and into the next. Abbe Wright, O, The Oprah Magazine

Henrquez borrows both the epic scope and the immediacy of oral history in *The Book of Unknown Americans*, taking readers inside the private anxieties of immigrantsstrangers in a strange land. The final crashing together of all the [story] forces is devastating, as is the deftness with which Henriquez handles both the dramatic conclusion and the aftershocks. (Yes, I cried.) The books structure contributes greatly to the emotional impact: Hearing the stories told in Alma's and Mayor's own voices brings us inextricably close to them. Dividing their tales is a chorus of voices in which other inhabitants of the building tell their stories. The effect is that of both bridge and ballast: the stories enrich the experience with their depictions of the delicate line between heartache and triumph. Henrquez is a world-class stylist. Jonathan Messinger, Chicago Reader

On a cold, bewildering night, the Riveras, who have just left their happy lives in Mexico, are dropped off at a dilapidated apartment building [in] Delaware. Alma Rivera worries about their beautiful 15-year-old daughter, Maribel, who has suffered a brain injury; her parents have sacrificed everything to send her to a special school. Their building turns out to be a sanctuary; as the Riveras dramatic tale unfolds, Henrquez brings their generous neighbors forward to tell the compelling stories of why and how they left Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Colombia, Mexico, Panama, and Paraguay. As one man says, We are the unknown Americans, those who are feared and hated. As Maribel opens up to the infatuated boy next-door, terror of the unknown becomes a tragic force. Each scene, voice, misunderstanding, and alliance is beautifully realized and brimming with feeling in the acclaimed Henriquezs compassionately imagined, gently comedic, and profoundly wrenching novel of big dreams and crushing reality, courageous love and unfathomable heartbreak. Donna Seaman, Booklist (starred)

Evoking a profound sense of hope, Henrquez delivers a moving account of those who will do anything to build a future for their children even if it means confronting the fear and alienation lurking behind the American dream. Publishers Weekly

Distinctively compassionate and original a moving portrait of people who often pass before our eyes under a veil of invisibility. Gorgeously woven of both hope and delusion, and of the many kinds of love, this is a novel in which characters assimilations and aspirations are as much to a new country as to something even broader: to other, finer versions of themselves. As a reader I felt assimilated too, forever altered by the extraordinary world Henrquez creates. Heidi Julavits, author of *The Vanishing* Spectacular . . . highly believable and poignant . . . A well-written story set among unknown Americans, ostensibly Hispanic but in many ways any family adjusting to a new culture and way of life, regardless of ethnicity. Lawrence Olszewski, Library Journal

Cristina Henrquez has written an exquisite and profound novel of love, longing, and the resilience of the human spirit. Her characters may be invisible souls on the American landscape, but their stories leave an indelible mark on the heart. Gilbert King, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Devil in the Grove*

*The Book of Unknown Americans* is filled with the fiercest kinds of love of a boy for a beautiful girl, of stricken parents for an injured daughter, of an immigrant community for an impossible America. In this powerful novel, Cristina Henrquez gives us unforgettable characters, whose destinies are shaped by force senseless, random, political far beyond their control, and yet whose resilience yields a most profound and unexpected kind of beauty. Ruth Ozeki, author of *A Tale for the Time Being*

Wonderful. If most novels, or at least most good ones, are songs, then *The Book of Unknown Americans* is a choir. In a multiplicity of voices, each one distinct and authentic, Cristina Henrquez tells a whole community of stories, and the book that emerges is warm, wise, and unfailingly generous. It never seems to strive for profundity or grasp at poignancy, and yet page by page, as naturally as can be, it rouses the conscience and touches the heart. Kevin Brockmeier, author of *The Brief History of the Dead* and *The Illumination*

Here is an important story about family, community and identity, told with elegance and compassion. *The Book of Unknown Americans* is unforgettable. Jami Attenberg, author of *The Middlesteins*

Some of the characters in *The Book of Unknown Americans* were born in the United States, others came as adults or were brought here from Central and South America. Their stories speak to us, involve us in their lives. They dream, meet challenges, and dare to

live on hope. Sometimes they cry, but they also laugh, dance, make love. In this beautiful book, Cristina Henrquez introduces us to their vibrant lives, to heartbreaking choices, to the tender beginnings of love, and to the humanity in every individual. Unforgettable. Esmeralda Santiago, author of *When I Was Puerto Rican* and *Conquistadora* Cristina Henrquez's novel is a triumph not just of storytelling, but of

American storytelling, a novel whose breadth and power blow open any traditional definition of American. Henrquez pulls us into the lives of her characters with such mastery that we hang onto them just as fiercely as they hang onto one another, and their dreams. This passionate, powerful novel will stay with you long after you've turned the final page. Ben Fountain, author of *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*