



The Weight of Shadows: A Memoir of Immigration & Displacement

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Tracing his story of becoming a US citizen, Jose Orduna's memoir explores the complex issues of immigration and assimilation.

In July of 2011 Jose Orduna was naturalized as an American citizen, a decision made, he admits, in bad faith and purely out of self-interest. Though grateful to his parents for their many sacrifices, which resulted in his citizenship, he feels anger and resentment towards a punitive and racist government. With a searingly original voice, Orduna reflects on the complicated and contradictory experience of morphing into a legal young, brown immigrant. He describes the absurd feeling of being given a piece of paper his naturalization certificate handed to him by a robed judge to certify something he has always known: he has a right to be here and is, at least in theory, equal under the law. A trenchant exploration of race, class, and identity, "The Weight of Shadows" chronicles the process of becoming a North American citizen in a post-9/11 United States."

The Weight of Shadows: A Memoir of Immigration & Displacement Details

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From Reader Review The Weight of Shadows: A Memoir of Immigration & Displacement for online ebook

Kimberly Sheridan says

I'd file this under required reading. Nonfiction at its best. Combines engaging passionate personal narrative with the larger history of immigration and policies in America. Informative and moving. Highly recommend.

Carol says

The Weight of Shadows: A Memoir of Immigration and Displacement by Jose Orduna is a difficult book to rate and review. I am thankful for learning some American history that I was never exposed to in high school or even university. I was shocked to learn that President Hoover had removed a very large number of Mexican Americans including those who had every right to live here. They were citizens and had families living in the United States for generations.

Jose Orduna's experience was a bit strange because, his memories of his childhood were right here in the United States. He did not think of himself as someone who needed to become a citizen. Also, many of his friends were undocumented aliens and he knew what they had gone through to get to the United States. He knew of the searing heat of over 100 degrees in the desert, the chance that you could end up dead either by the desert or by man. He knew of his friends who were unable to get good jobs mostly because they were not fluent in English.

This book is his story but it is also the story of so many who risk their lives come through the southern border of United States. This is Jose Orduna's anger against President Obama, against people who look past and do not see brown people on purpose and anger that so many have died trying to get here.

The author tells of his own experience of having to carry a green card when he was a little boy and not knowing why. He rages against racism against Mexican Americans and it is justified by what he has said in this book.

His book is often gritty and went some places that I did not want to go. Some places in this book made me sit up and read very carefully and some of it made my eyes glaze over. I think some editing would make it a more powerful book. An odd thing that really irritated me was how he treated his mother. I am wondering if I am too much like her!

I recommend this book to anyone who is interested in today's problems of immigration procedure and racism but I caution this book may be grittier than you wish for.

I received an Advance Reading Copy of this book as a win from LibraryThing from the publishers in exchange for a fair book review. My thoughts and feelings in this review are totally my own.

Pat says

I am not usually a fan of memoirs. This book is an exception. It was very, very well written. It reminded me of a very well written dystopian work of literature by someone such as Margaret Atwood for example, except that this is not fiction. This is a memoir about the immigration experience in the United States. It is harrowing, enlightening, sad, and engaging. I was very impressed with this work.

A lot of the book was not new information for me, but it was told in such a way that intensified the experience for me as a reader by personalizing the actors affected by the situations presented. For example, I was moved thinking about what it would be like to know that you could be deported after being pulled over for a minor traffic stop without your family being notified. I cannot imagine what it would be like to know that you are just disappearing and your friends and family will not know where you went because to notify them with cause them to be deported as well. That is terrible and dehumanizing for these people.

One thing that was new to me was the farce of a trial that illegals receive through the streamlining program. People who may not even speak English are given 20 minutes with an attorney, rushed into a courtroom en masse, and rushed back out of the courtroom to be detained and sometimes laterally repatriated back to Mexico hundreds of miles from where they crossed and where they came from. From a country that claims to believe in the natural rights of people, this is terrible and dehumanizing.

This is a very good book about a very terrible situation. It was written in a very non-politically partisan way (both the Obama and Bush administrations take a lot of heat), and it focusses more on the impact on individuals than on group dynamics. I felt like these stories needed to be told, and I am glad that Orduña told them. I highly recommend this book.

Sue Blanchard says

Sometimes the truth is stranger than fiction. As a former journalist, I like tell-all books like this. José Orduña chronicles the process of becoming a U.S. citizen after 9/11. He is a Mexican immigrant who shares his experiences with a distrustful American immigration system. The Kirkus Review states, "Xenophobia is embedded in everything from (his) interactions with immigration officials to the many other procedures immigrants must contend with." The officials want to know and catalogue his "whereabouts, purchases and behaviors." The scrutiny and mistreatment lead to Orduña's eye-opening account of an immigration process that depicts the dark side of the American dream.

Jessica says

Every memoir is the history of a person, but also a culmination of several countries' worth of history. José Orduña weaves a vivid story by describing immigration in a political context and interspersing linked events from his own memory. His story is more relevant than ever as the United States once again finds itself confronted with an immigration question.

Ever since Christopher Columbus, the area of land now known as the United States of America has been occupied by immigrants. It's paradoxical to think of an "American identity" or to uphold a perfect "American

"citizen" when everything that makes somebody or something America is a dynamic mix of everything that has come before—an ever-changing melting pot. It's almost preposterous to say that one culture doesn't belong in a country whose culture itself is a result of new, incoming cultures.

In a land where waves of rights movements overshadow others, it's easy to miss populations who don't have or haven't had a strong voice. José Orduña points out that the rate of Mexican lynchings between 1880 and 1930 was about 27.4 per 100,000, a crazy number that very few people are aware of. Few people know about the Mexican Repatriation during the Great Depression, few people understand the impact of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and so on.

José Orduña captures some universal emotions and aspects of human nature perfectly. Many of his phrases are simply worded, yet profound. For example: "They knew it would be hard, but people really don't understand what that means until it becomes their life, and even then there's no understanding. It just becomes the condition in which you live." Unfortunately, I feel like I would have enjoyed the book more if I had an understanding of Spanish. Orduña inserts many Spanish phrases in his story purposefully; however, he did not provide translations and I found that it disrupted the flow of the book when I had to go online to find a rough translation.

When it comes to injured people, pregnant people, weary people, etc. who make it across the Mexican border, José Orduña finds that we often treat them brutally by denying them any sort of aid before sending them back. Volunteers who treat the injuries of incoming immigrants and provide them with water are regarded with hostility and suspicion by some members of the Border Patrol.

We should not isolate a group of people because of their culture because it's our culture too. We should not isolate a group of people because of which direction they come in from. We should not isolate a group of people because they don't speak English. And even if you want to argue that we can because it's in America's best interest, sure, I can see where you're coming from. But notify the families of those being deported straight away. Offer medical aid to those with life-threatening injuries. Don't shackle them to each other as if they are runaway slaves. José Orduña makes the compelling argument that no matter how they ended up in the United States, they're here and they deserve to be treated like humans. The men and women of the Border Patrol, Immigration and Naturalization Service and so on are not evil but neither are those who are coming in.

José Orduña's book is a reminder that you don't have to speak English or look European or have an American citizenship to be American. While I would have liked to have seen more personal anecdotes from his own life, his book is a profound and extremely relevant reflection on immigration.

Note: I received this book through the Goodreads Giveaway Program

Sorayya Khan says

This memoir demonstrates what it means to be an immigrant in the US, what it feels like to be ostracized, what vulnerability looks and sounds like. It's heartbreakingly relevant than ever in today's climate. It's urgent work that we should all read to know ourselves better.

Tegan Kehoe says

Cross-posted from my blog <http://acatalogofcuriosity.blogspot.com>...

I hear the phrase "must read" tossed around a lot, and when I find a book particularly captivating, I'm often tempted to use it myself. It comes up especially when a book illuminates something about society, so that reading it is "homework" for the ongoing process that is being a good member of the community. It's overwhelming, as a reader, for so many "musts" to come out each year. I recommend José Orduña's *The Weight of Shadows: A Memoir of Immigration and Displacement* in part because it's well-balanced between analysis and emotion and touches on many people's experiences. If you only read one or two of this year's must reads, I recommend this one.

Orduña writes expressively of his own experience, of challenges faced by friends with different immigration statuses, and of people he meets in his travels. It's a compelling book which reads like a novel when Orduña is talking about his family or childhood. He reflects on the slow process of coming to understand that his family's situation was different from other families he knew after coming to the United States from Mexico as a toddler. He also speaks frankly about risks he has taken such as accepting a fellowship which took him out of the US while in the final stages of his citizenship application. I appreciated that the book rejects the notion that immigrants need to prove their worth and respectability. Orduña writes about going on all-night benders and other exploits without self-flagellation but without any "I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell" style bravado. While our political climate paints immigrants with a broad brush, the choices that he makes in how he portrays himself underscore the fact that the author is a person, as unique and common as anyone else.

The Weight of Shadows also successfully balances Orduña's need to speak from his own experience and analysis of situations much more dire than his own. He looks at intersections of race, nationality, and the effects of colonialism while describing his visit to the Philippines. He discusses how arbitrary it is that he is in a position to bring water to would-be immigrants in the desert on the US-Mexico border. On one of these trips, he met a group of men from his mother's home region, who picked up on the regional accent of his Spanish. It's a difference of circumstance only that these men are crossing the desert to improve their lives, and US border patrol and paramilitary vigilante groups deny them access to food, water, and medical care, while Orduña is there by choice. Despite all of the systematic reinforcement of power structures in the immigration system, he gets strange looks and rude words from fellow US citizens, but nothing more.

My main complaint about the book is that the chapter about his time volunteering with No More Deaths to save the lives of immigrants crossing the border stands out from the others with its intense emotional weight, so the rest of the book feels disconnected from it. Orduña tries to connect it to his own journey with immigration, and I think he does a decent job, I just wished for more. For all that it feels like a novel in some places, the book lacks a strong narrative arc, which bothered me. Perhaps, since the sheer meaninglessness of many of the immigration regulations is a recurring theme in the book, that's part of the point.

Surrealist painting in which a slender dark silhouette of a person walks off the frame to the left. Behind it, the "shadow" of the figure stretches over several stairs. The thing that should be the shadow is a person in full color, while the figure walking is a shadow.

Remedios Varo, *Fenómeno*, 1962. Orduña says the painting speaks to the zeitgeist of Latin America in the 1960s and more recently, of living with the spectre of murders and disappearances orchestrated by the state.

I added *The Weight of Shadows* to my reading list for this blog because I believe that being informed about what's going on in society and how that affects individuals is necessary to teaching and creating good

museum experiences. I'm not alone -- just for museums, there is a growing tide of resources and groups devoted to creating more civic-minded, welcoming spaces. The Incluseum, #museumsrespondtoferguson, and The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum are a few. What The Weight of Shadows did for me was remind me of the importance of empathy -- we never know how complicated people's stories are. Additionally, it made me think I should be more proactive about providing multilingual resources in the museum where I work. If someone lives here and English is not their dominant language, they probably face many more barriers than communication every day, and they deserve all of the consideration and courtesy we can extend to them.

Sue says

"This is America.
Each passage and inscription of a human being as "illegal" is a reiteration.
We are in the zone where justice reaches its vanishing point,
sheds its veneer, and reveals itself fully as punishment."... José Orduña

José Orduña was born in Veracruz, Mexico. His mother, Yoli, was a semester from graduating with a degree in agronomy when she found out she was pregnant. Unmarried, Yoli was forced to quit school and summarily disowned by her parents. Martin Orduña , José's father and his parents gave her a home. After they married, Martin left his wife and new baby with his parents while he joined his Aunt Hilda in Chicago hoping to find work. When José was 2-years old his mother and he joined Martin entering the United States on a tourist visa.

Yoli and Martin struggled to make a life for themselves and José in the US. Limited by legalities and language, lived in shadows; caught between two worlds. Yearning for Mexico but needing the US for a life. Fearful of ignoring the need for "papers" and fearful of living under the radar just one small mistake from the unimaginable without them.

José as a child was aware there was tension in the home but growing up "American" he really didn't grasp the dangers facing his family. He knew that he wasn't one of "them" facing bullying and discrimination in the community and school but he couldn't remember any other life. Their labor class income limited their options, but nonetheless, his parents were determined to make a better life for their child and they did the very best they could for him.

It must have taken extreme courage for Martin and Yoli to begin the process of obtaining their "papers." Once they step out in the open and into the system they would be exposed as "undocumented" and subject to the arbitrary whims of every "politically correct authority". The smallest misstep- running a stop sign, failing to signal a turn, anger a neighbor - could result in displacement.

Orduña relates his life's story with a sharp edge in The Weight of Shadows . Every sentence conjures a raw emotion. He holds nothing back in explaining his ambivalence at having to "earn" his right to be here; a place he feels he already had a right to be.

He lays his story and the story of friends and relatives all out straight with every wart and wrinkle exposed. The hypocritical history of immigration into the US is laid open across the path of every "undocumented alien". An immigration system so unwieldy, unpredictable and arbitrary that is often safer to just stay in the background.

It's a tough story to read. Every page sizzles with his unrestrained emotion. The descriptions of the desert crossings, the inhumane treatment of detainees, the despair, the fear, the hunger, the pain, and the desperation. You cringe at what you know to be the truth that an employer would take advantage of an undocumented status to pay inadequate salaries or withhold time off with the threat of job loss.

"We've been used as disposable, malleable bodies that can be drawn in and purged according to labor demands and cyclical xenophobic trends."

"It is difficult to establish happiness and a necessary sense of communion with members of a society that allow for you, in actuality and in representation , the space of a maid, a nanny, a janitor, a day laborer, or a landscaper, and nothing else, and who barely meet your eye."

And in the end, following the rules, José Orduña was sworn in as a naturalized United States citizen in July of 2011. It is not a day to celebrate. The piece of paper just makes him legal.

He says, "I feel a[n]...ambivalence about being here [at the ceremony]...because being here doesn't feel like a celebration or an accomplishment. It's something of a relief, of course, but it also feels like acquiescence - like I'm tacitly agreeing that this is necessary and legitimate...I am one of the 'good ones' and that I have 'done it the right way'."

At times I didn't think I could read on...The use of Spanish in the beginning without context felt purposeful. The described trip to the Philippines was unnecessary and salacious. But, as a debut work, it's a truthful chronicle voiced by one who knows too well what it means to be an "illegal alien". There is no doubt Orduña's voice will be heard again and again.

Note: A copy of the book was received though LibraryThing and Beacon Press free of charge in exchange for my honest review.

Danielle Mootz says

I was very moved by Jose Orduna's experiences becoming a naturalized American citizen post 9/11. Assimilation has always struck me as such a conflicting process and Orduna's experience speaks strongly of it. From the guilt he feels for his parents disjointed and lost relationships to make a better a life for him in the U.S. to his need to to come as close to migrants and recognize their lives and existence as he can. At every step of Orduna's process of obtaining his "paperwork" his awareness heightened for those not considered "the good kind" of Mexican, like himself.

...There's no humane or ethical way to deny people who live in countries riddled with violence, poverty, and corruption the right to try to make a livable life in "your" country much less so when "your" country's government has been deeply involved in creating the conditions being fled...

Elise Payette says

This memoir gives unique insight into navigating the U.S. immigration system while providing political and historical context in order to better understand displacement and constructed borders.

Geri Degrugy says

Everyone should read this book. This is how immigrants coming to the US and in the US are treated, how they feel, what they experience of the "American dream." We need to know this and we're "protected" from most of it every day.

As a baby, the author leaves Mexico with his parents to come to the US. None of them are citizens but he eventually goes through the long, laborious and disrespectful process to become a US citizen. Even then he is treated with suspicion. Later he works as an activist on the border, seeing first hand the awful treatment of migrants who have risked their lives in the desert to try to find a better life. He witnesses the mass "streamline trials" where immigrants are considered guilty as a group and imprisoned or sent back, often to a totally different area than where they lived. The border patrol is known to refuse medical care to desperately sick people, refuse water to people dying of dehydration, destroy containers of water placed in the desert by helping groups. Rape is rampant.

The border patrol only keeps count of a certain type of immigrant death with only certain types of evidence. They report 6330 deaths from 1998-2014. Other civil groups estimate the death toll from 2006-2012 to be more like 70,000.

This is a well written book that reads more like a novel, but it is real. We shouldn't be ignorant of what our country is part of.

Crystal says

It is always interesting to read about your country from another person's eyes. Having lived abroad myself, and taking multiple trips back to Mexico to visit family, it is always interesting to see how different worlds within a world can be. I can really identify with his feelings and thoughts on exploring your own identity. The treatment received I can also identify with when living abroad. It can all be so confusing. Wonderfully written, and certainly made me feel I was not alone!

Dee says

"Valentine's Day. Along I-80, the corn and soy have long been harvested, the landscape is topped with husks and wisps of snow. What's left is the gray geometry of agribusiness. Talk radio has been tranquilizing me with a voice at a volume so low that it no longer carries words, only textures. I feel like I'm gliding on the muted surface of a Luc Teymans painting: colors one would expect from a drowned corpse, images stripped of their context and mediated into blase obscurity. The monstrous actuality of the landscape concealed by its absolute banality." p. 46

Esther Marie says

"The Weight of Shadows: A Memoir of Immigration & Displacement" is, simply, a very good book. This is José Orduña's debut, and it is a strong and well-written story.

Orduña is a graduate of University of Iowa's Nonfiction Writing Program, and a very talented writer. He has a knack for presenting brutal facts and figures in a way that - although upsetting - isn't inflammatory. That is to say, although he rails against racism and oppression, he does so in a very careful and systematic way.

I learned a lot about the history of Mexico and the United States, much of which was downright appalling. I hope that Orduña continues to focus his attention on injustices, because I think he has a real gift for doing so.

I'm not going to say much about the plot, other than to say that if you as a reader are at all interested in learning more about the Mexican American experience, you should absolutely read "The Weight of Shadows: A Memoir of Immigration & Displacement".

Two criticisms I have, but they are more stylistic than anything else. There is a brief interlude where Orduña visits the Philippines, and while it's an interesting part of the book, it doesn't seem to fit the story as well. Secondly, a lot of dialogue is written in Spanish, which isn't inherently a bad thing, but it's just frequent enough that using a dictionary when reading this book becomes annoying. I actually started this book and put it down for a few weeks before picking it up again and not looking up the Spanish phrases as I continued. Yes, Spanish is a global language; yes, I as an American should probably know more Spanish. Yes, this was, I'm sure, a very intentional choice by Orduña that is part of his larger commentary and narrative about US/Mexico dynamic. I'm privileged, okay. Even so, that was a barrier to me as a reader that I feel I should mention.

I look forward to reading more from Orduña. This was an excellent debut.

Bob says

Summary: In this personal memoir, the author documents his own experience of naturalization, and the shadow existence of both documented and undocumented immigrants in the United States.

Citizenship. If you were born in the USA, you've never thought much about this except when applying for a passport, or as I was doing today, TSA Precheck. I never think twice about my presence in this country, and celebrate the rights affirmed in our constitution. What this book reminded me of is that these are citizen rights. For immigrants on visas, and even those with the coveted "green card" who have Lawful Permanent Resident status, they are in a shadow land of being permitted without belonging. For those without such papers, life is even more in the shadows, fearing a trip to the hospital or a traffic stop or a raid on one's workplace (where one often is paying taxes, working at low wages doing work Americans don't want).

José Orduña, Mexican by birth, grew up in Chicago, obtained a green card, and while a graduate student at the University of Iowa, became a naturalized citizen. The first half of this book describes his own "shadow" existence and that of his friend, "Octavio" who has no papers. One senses the efforts to escape the weight of this shadow life as they binge drink together. Orduña weaves their stories with those of others who live with the constant fears of arrest, deportation, and separation from family. He helps us begin to see the

contradictions in our local and national economies that depend upon the undocumented and yet punish them, and how that shadow of this fear is troubling even to those legally in the country. This part culminates with his application to become a citizen, the interviews, the biometrics, and finally, the citizenship ceremony. He describes the moment, when he is welcomed via a video of the President to U.S. citizenship:

"How strange to be welcomed now, since I've lived my life here from before I can remember. My cultural references are decidedly eighties and nineties United States--Urkel, Alex B. Keaton, Tom & Jerry, Biggie--and despite my best efforts I sometimes slip into a Chicago accent, cutting my A's short. When I did visit Veracruz as a middle-schooler, the kids I played pickup games of soccer with would immediately detect that something about me was off. I had my first kiss in a bathroom in Bucktown in Chicago in grammar school, and I lost my virginity less than a block away in a church parking lot."

The second half of the book shifts from his own experience of becoming a citizen to his time working with No More Deaths, an organization providing water and basic supplies in drops for those attempting to cross deserts to enter the country, and other organizations that try to advocate for those arrested in the attempt, often without receiving needed medical aid nor legal advice. We learn that our border walls and patrols channel people into the most inhospitable parts of the American Southwest, where death is a constant danger, where over 6,000 deaths have been documented (how many more that are not?) and where deportees often are returned to areas where they are most likely to be killed by Mexican drug lords. The question that cuts through all the ambiguities of our immigration policies is the question of basic human rights and the priority obligations of protecting human life. While their shadow existence has become weighty and dangerous, their real dignity is often stripped by lack of due process and abuse, rape of women on both sides of the border, and a contempt for life.

Toward the end of the book he describes this shadow existence by comparing it to *Fenómeno*, a painting by Remedios Varo:

"?The painting is of a man and his shadow, except the shadow walks upright filling the three-dimensional space of the man while he is confined to the flat parameters of the shadow world."

He goes on to say that the painting captures what was happening to many of his people, either in Mexico, or the desert, the murdering or "disappearing".

Immigration policy is certainly contested ground. This book won't resolve it but it will help us hear "other" voices besides the ones most dominating our media. Neither the author, nor other immigrants are presented to us as saints, but rather simply as human beings who work and strive for the same things many of us were born into. It challenges us to not reduce immigrants to shadows and stereotypes while facing the contradictions between our articulated values and the lived reality of the American "dream".

Disclosure of Material Connection: I received this book free from the publisher via a LibraryThing giveaway. I was not required to write a positive review. The opinions I have expressed are my own. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255 : "Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising."
