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Book Wars

IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

TWO TALES OF CROSSING BORDERS

DOMINICANA

Stylist contributor Zoë Apostolides fights for *Dominicana* by Angie Cruz (£16.99, John Murray), out 23 January

Traditional romances end with a wedding, but this impressive novel begins with one, or rather with a proposal. Ana is just 11, living on the southern coast of the Dominican Republic, when Juan Ruiz asks. She is 15 when she marries him, after much pressure from her family and the promise of a new life in New York – he's twice her age, "grey hairs around his ears, thinning around his forehead".

Ana's early life is one of poverty and power outages; she shares a bed with her sister and watches her brother lug baskets of produce to sell on the streets. To everyone else, the chances offered by the US seem endless.

"Ana is 15 when she marries Juan, after much pressure from her family and the promise of a new life in New York"

On 1 January 1965, the newlyweds leave the Dominican Republic, Ana on a fake passport that says she's 19: "In less than an hour, I've lost four years of my life."

Angie Cruz's third novel blends the personal and public, shining a spotlight on the violence, isolation and homesickness experienced by its protagonist in short, pacey chapters. These are interwoven with social commentary on life in the wake of the dictator Trujillo, the Dominican Civil War and the assassination of Malcolm X. The *Dominicana*, a faceless ceramic doll Ana keeps with her in New York, represents



the ethnic diversity of both her home and adopted country and the need to assume her own identity, to resist becoming featureless, devoid of colour.

The experience of migration is also explored in Jeannie Cummins' fourth novel – a literary thriller about a mother and son's

journey from Mexico to *el norte* following their family's massacre. It's a vital story, capturing the atmosphere of exhilaration and fear that has become horrifically commonplace for so many people seeking refuge around the world. Both books are political rallying cries with determined individuals at their centre, but the coming-of-age portrait offered by *Dominicana* wins the day. It's based on the experience of Cruz's mother, who when told about the project asked, "Who would be interested in a story about a woman like me? It's so typical." ★★★★★

a migrant died every 90 minutes. More specifically, a migrant died every 21 hours along the USA-Mexico border.

In *American Dirt*, Lydia is a middle-class Acapulco bookshop owner whose journalist husband received death threats for writing about the local drug cartel. The novel opens with a horrific scene of him and 15 relatives being gunned down at a party. Only Lydia and her eight-year-old son, Luca, manage to hide. Lydia's survivor's guilt is compounded by the knowledge she may have brought this on her family by unwittingly befriending the cartel's chief.

Realising the cartel is still after them, Lydia and Luca head north, joining Central American migrants in hopping onto La Bestia, a dangerous freight train network running the length of Mexico. Their fellow travellers' histories reveal the situations migrants leave and the hazards they face along the way, including revenge killings and rape. They never know who they can trust. Strangers give food and supplies, while government officials expect bribes and sexual favours. And this is all before they reach the border.

The novel alternates between the compelling perspectives of Lydia and Luca, a geography genius whose sections are reminiscent of Jack's in Emma Donoghue's *Room*. The suspense of their journey is unrelenting. Although *Dominicana* is also an absorbing story of immigrant life, *American Dirt* feels so current and crucial that no reader should miss it. At a time when countries are passing exclusionary laws and constructing walls, empathy can build bridges. ★★★★★

AMERICAN DIRT

Stylist contributor Rebecca Foster backs *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins (£14.99, Headline), out 20 January

Research tells us that reading fiction enhances our capacity for empathy. Most of us will never have to flee violence to settle in another country, but by reading about the plight of migrants we can understand the unimaginable. Jeanine Cummins wrote this novel for several reasons: her Puerto Rican grandmother never felt welcome in her adopted America; her husband was once an undocumented immigrant; and a brutal attack on her cousins shifted her focus to life's victims. But her main inspiration was dismay at these statistics: globally, in 2017,

The verdict: *American Dirt* wins

Two vital stories, both bringing to life the immigrant experience. But it's *American Dirt* that feels particularly relevant, told from the perspectives of the relatable Lydia and heartrending Luca. "I defy anyone to read the first seven pages of this book and not finish it," says Stephen King. We couldn't agree more.

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