



ESTELA

undrowning





About the Book

Estela Morales is one of the only Latinas who tested into San Francisco's most elite public high school. Senior year, she just wants to survive, which means passing her racist Spanish class and getting into her dream college. But life has other plans. When her family is threatened with eviction and she places second in the Latiné Poetry Contest—behind someone who isn't even Latino—Estela is pushed into citywide debates about identity, merit, and belonging. The pressure is overwhelming, but as her friends begin to organize for change, Estela has to decide who and what she is for. Can her words and choices mean more than survival? *Estela, Undrowning* is a powerful story about finding strength in community to resist, to heal, and to make a path together.



About the Author

René Peña-Govea is a Chicana writer, musician, and educator who was born and raised in San Francisco and still lives there with her family. She published her first poem and released her first album at age fifteen. Since then, she has been named an inaugural Bay Beats musician, a YBCA-100 Honoree, a Las Musas Hermana, a Brown-Handler Resident, and a Creative-in-Residence at the Ruby. René performs music with three generations of La Familia Peña-Govea and as René y Familia. *Estela, Undrowning* is her first novel.

Discussion Questions

1. How do Estela's feelings about her own Latinidad influence the way she talks about and treats her fellow Latiné students? How do Estela's feelings about herself and her peers change after reading Anzaldúa's words about "looking into the mirror" (p. 276)? How do those shifts also show up in the "real" world, not just in her head?
2. We see many examples of how Estela celebrates the cultural traditions of her family, friends, and larger communities—hosting the tamalada, Chloe's family's red envelopes, gathering on Alcatraz Island, setting the ofrenda for Día de Muertos. What cultural traditions do you participate in? How are they the same as or different from the ones people in your family, school, and larger community observe?
3. Rogelio describes the correlation between his cultural identity and his struggle to be "vulnerable," explaining to Estela, "Asian men, we never want to seem weak, because so many people already see us that way" (p. 309). How are characters in this book shaped by trying to defy, resist, or undo stereotypes about race, class, sexuality, and/or gender? Where are these stereotypes derived from? Whom do they benefit and whom do they harm?
4. Estela writes, "Loving Frisco if you're from Frisco / is like an open wound you always carry with you" (p. 49). What is the "open wound" she describes here? How does the threat of eviction affect her throughout the book? How does she connect it to what is happening across her city?
5. Regarding the Latiné Poetry Contest, Ms. Álvarez says, "It helps no one to pretend that we live in a meritocracy, at this school or in this world" (p. 127). What is the difference between equality and equity? (p. 315). How does the idea of "merit" create the illusion of a level playing field when significant racial inequalities persist at Frost?
6. When Estela confronts Madison, she says, "...you don't want to do anything to change this school just because it's working for you" (p. 305). What are some moments where the school system is or isn't working for certain characters? In what ways? What do you think motivates people to advocate for change in a system that harms some people, even if they benefit from this system?
7. Explain the "tangled mess" Estela refers to in the following quote: "...a kid of color wanting to grind me beneath his feet. It's such a tangled mess I need to diagram it out. Who's the villain: me, Chester, the school?" (p. 131). How are Chester and Estela pitted against each other? Who benefits from their division? What role do their segregated schooling system and this country's racial politics play? Who or what do you think is the "villain"?
8. On page 165, Ms. Álvarez says to Estela, "...more and more, it seems like it might be up to you all to make the changes. I'm an untenured teacher, after all." What changes do Estela, her friends, and the Coalition want to see at Frost? What social and structural obstacles are in place that make students' demands for change at their school difficult? What do you think it would take to make these changes happen?
9. How do Estela's experiences during her senior year affect her physically and emotionally? Choose and explain at least one scene from the book: What happens? How does Estela respond or react? How do her friends and family support Estela to manage and heal?
10. "Maybe, with them, / the sea will lose its terrible immensity, / I can dismantle / what I thought was my boat, / add it to the fire, warm us all." (p. 283). Who does Estela refer to here when she writes "us all"? What does she mean by "dismantle her boat"? How does this relate to Estela's "undrowning" and the first poem of the book?
11. What are some of the different choices that the characters in the book make about their lives after high school? What factors inform their decisions? What do you think will inform your decisions?

Extension Activities

CULTUREMAKERS LAB

drink cultura

The word “culture” comes from a Latin word that means “to cultivate.” Culture is a living, breathing thing that can be made and re-made. How does culture (art, music, fashion, food) connect, uplift, and shape communities? Make a piece of art, design a piece of clothing, write a poem, produce a song, or make food to share your culture.

WELLNESS LAB

“Caring for myself...is an act of political warfare” —Audre Lorde

Estela fills out a questionnaire titled “Confronting Anxiety” that was given to her by her therapist at the Community Well (pp. 290-291). How do you deal with stress and anxiety? Take a moment to fill out this questionnaire for yourself. What does this process do for you and your thoughts about your experience? How is caring for yourself important to both your own well-being and those around you?

WRITERS LAB

with my words as oars

Choose a favorite poem in the book and write a response poem. Using your own personal experiences, your poem should engage in conversation with the original poem by exploring similar themes, offering a different perspective, and/or mimicking the form (i.e, rhyme, meter, repetition, simile, etc.).

CHANGEMAKERS LAB

El pueblo unido

Working together to organize for change is a theme throughout this book. Choose one of the political organizations mentioned in the book that you are interested in learning more about. What are their goals? Who are their members? How do they think change happens? Now apply what you’ve learned to a school or community organization that you are connected to—or make one up! Put what you’ve learned into action and make a recruitment document of some kind, such as a flyer, pamphlet, or short video.

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