

I AM NOT YOUR PERFECT MEXICAN DAUGHTER

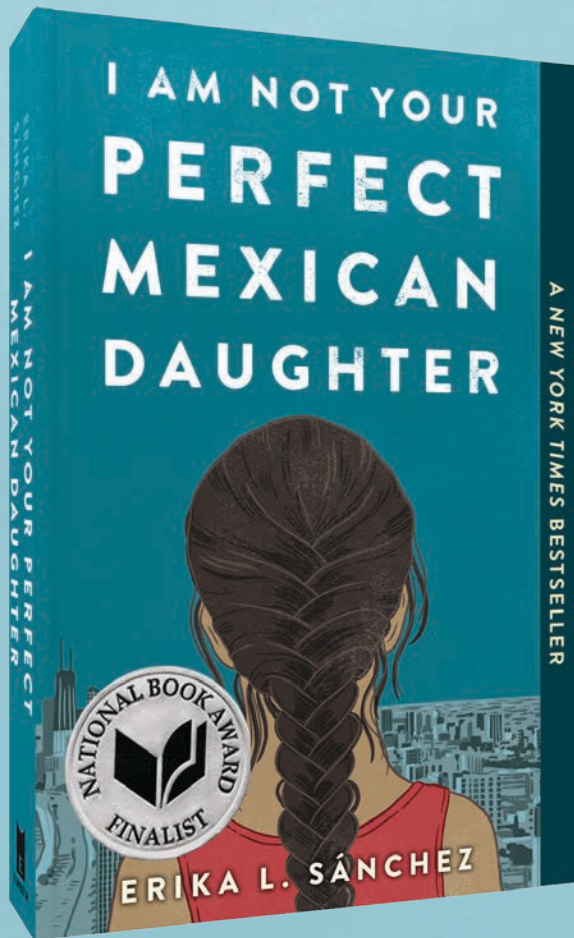


ERIKA L. SÁNCHEZ

DISCUSSION GUIDE

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Erika L. Sánchez
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About the Book

A National Book Award Finalist
A New York Times Bestseller

Julia is not the perfect Mexican daughter. That was her sister Olga's role. Olga didn't go away to college—she stayed home to take care of their parents, clean the house, and work a part-time job. Julia has big dreams, and she wants no part of her older sister's path. But one mistake—texting while crossing the busiest street in Chicago—leaves Olga dead and Julia left behind to cope with the aftermath.

Their parents, who came to Chicago illegally from Mexico to find a better life, are devastated. Julia's mother seems to channel her grief into pointing out every possible way that Julia fails to be the perfect Mexican daughter that Olga was. But Julia soon discovers that Olga may have had secrets, too. With the help of her best friend Lorena, Julia is determined to find out. Was Olga really what she seemed? Or was there more to her sister's story? And either way, how can Julia even attempt live up to a seemingly impossible ideal?

About the Author

Erika L. Sánchez is a poet, novelist, and essayist living in Chicago. Erika was a Fulbright Scholar, CantoMundo Fellowship recipient, and Bread Loaf Scholar. Most recently, she was a columnist for *Cosmopolitan for Latinas*, and has written for *Salon*, *Rolling Stone*, *Jezebel*, the *Guardian*, and *BuzzFeed*. As a daughter of undocumented Mexican immigrants, Erika has always been determined to defy borders of any kind. Find her on the web at ErikaLSanchez.com and on Twitter at [@ErikaLSanchez](https://twitter.com/ErikaLSanchez).



Photo credit: Robyn Lindemann

Discussion and Writing Questions

1. In the opening chapter, we find Julia viewing the body of her dead sister, Olga, in the casket. Julia notes that Olga, somehow, managed both in life and “from beyond the grave” to look meek, fragile, unattractive, and plain. “Olga never looked or acted like a normal twenty-two-year-old.” Julia wonders, “What kind of life is that? Didn’t she want more?” (p. 2)
What can we surmise about Julia as a person and her relationship with Olga?
2. Olga, the “perfect Mexican daughter” (p. 3), was killed by a semi-truck when she “stepped into the busy street at the wrong time” (p. 8). “Amá was supposed to pick her up, but because she had to deal with me at school, she couldn’t” (p. 8), Julia reveals. “I would give anything to go back to the day she died and do things differently” (p. 6). “[Amá] hasn’t blamed me directly, but I can see it in her big sad eyes every time she looks at me” (p. 9). Do you think Julia feels more deeply the loss of her sister or the resentment of her mother? Why? Is Julia right to blame herself for the pain she inflicts on her family with her habitual “word-puke” that gets her in trouble at school?
3. The house has been in disarray since Olga passed away, and there is little to eat in the home. “Amá and Olga were the ones who did all the cleaning” (p. 12). “I know I should clean, but whenever I look at the mess, I think, what’s the point? Nothing feels like it has a point anymore” (p. 12), Julia admits. She adds that she would “rather live in the streets than be a submissive Mexican wife who spends all day cooking and cleaning” (p. 13). Despite the intense grief, Julia continues to be in conflict with her family. Is she struggling for acceptance and independence or against culture and tradition? Explain your answer.
4. Julia desperately tries to break through to Amá and tells her, “Olga’s gone now. All you have is me. Sorry.” But Julia only receives silence from her mother. Julia’s desire seems simple: “I want Amá to tell me that she loves me and that we’ll get through this together, but she doesn’t. I stand there like a dope, waiting and waiting for her to say something that will make me feel better” (p. 14). What does Julia mean when she tells her mom “sorry”? Is it said as an apology or as a regret? Is Julia wrong to hope for a better relationship with her mother?
5. Julia is shocked when Amá informs her that she is going to have a quinceañera. Amá says, “I never got to give Olga a quinceañera. It’s something I’ll always regret” (p. 16). Julia cannot understand Amá’s intent, given that Julia is already fifteen, money is tight, and it makes more sense to apply what little they have to her college education. What is significant about this turn of events? Who is being more reasonable? Why would Amá want to host an event of this magnitude after the loss of Olga?
6. Julia has taken to sleeping in Olga’s bed at night after her parents have gone to sleep. As she lies in her sister’s bed, restless, Julia sifts “through the pillowcase” (p. 22) and finds “a folded piece of paper. . . . On the back, it says, *I love you*” (p. 23). Confused yet intrigued, Julia quietly goes through Olga’s bedroom and finds “skimpy lingerie” (p. 24) and “a hotel key” (p. 25). How does Julia’s discovery shape or reshape your impressions of Olga? How is it possible two sisters lived under the same roof yet didn’t really know each other? How do family dynamics affect relationships between members of the family?

Discussion and Writing Questions (continued)

7. Julia repeatedly calls Olga's best friend, Angie, but gets no response. Julia shows up at Angie's door looking for answers. Angie tells her, "Now that she's dead, all of a sudden you want to know everything about her? You hardly even spoke to her. Why didn't you ask her anything when she was alive?" (p. 53) Accepting that Angie's questions are good questions, why is Julia so interested in Olga now that she's dead? Is it to tear Olga's image apart to Amá? Is it to find that she and Olga were not that different? What do you think Julia is searching for?
8. Julia is subjected to her seven-year-old cousin's birthday party. The highlight is seeing her cousins' cousin Freddy, who graduated from the University of Illinois and is an engineer. He asks about college, and Julia tells him she's working on her GPA. "Well, listen, if you ever need help with your applications or have any questions, please let us know. We need more people like you in college," Freddy says. Julia thinks, "I don't know what Freddy means by *people like me*. . . . What am I like? Why would anyone care if I go to college or not?" (p. 81) Julia is a smart girl, Latinx, and of limited means. These are factors that could work in her favor in the college application process. Is that fair? Should she take advantage of that to get an education while satisfying a "diversity" statistic for an academic institution? Do these "favorable" factors minimize her ability to contribute in a school environment?
9. Amá asks Julia to clean houses with her so that she will earn her quinceañera. As they go from room to room, Julia wonders "how many chemicals Amá is exposed to every day . . . day in and day out" (p. 101). Amá asks Julia how school is going, and Julia lies and says, "It's okay" (p. 101). "I love my English class. "Mr. Ingman says I'm a good writer," (p. 102) which is true. However, Amá is not paying attention. "It's so strange not being able to talk to your parents about something so important" (p. 102), Julia thinks. She is facing a life without an education, but how can she prevent that when there is no academic interest or capital at home? Do you think Julia's performance in school is indicative of the dreams she wants to fulfill? Are her struggles more internal than external?
10. In chapter 9, we start to see Julia unravel: "I've always had trouble being happy, but now it feels impossible" (p. 116). "Sometimes I feel so lonely and hopeless that I don't know what to do" (p. 117). Though she thinks of herself as strong, Julia acknowledges that "I'm missing something . . . but I can't figure it out" (p. 120). In Mexican culture, seeking mental help is taboo, a sign of weakness. Do you think she knows she needs support? Does Julia seek help or tough it out?
11. While on a school field trip, Julia's classmate Pasqual asks her if she misses her sister, and Julia says she does. Pasqual then asks Julia, "Was she pretty like you?" Julia brushes him off, and Pasqual tells her, "You don't even know you're pretty. That's sad." She responds with "Shut up. Leave me alone." Pasqual replies, "You shouldn't hate yourself so much. Everyone is messed up, even when it doesn't seem like it." Julia says, "You don't know what you're talking about." Pasqual answers, "I do. And you know I do" (p. 131). Julia can't bear the compliment or the thought of someone knowing she's weak or in pain. How is it that a classmate whom she rarely speaks to can see right through her?

Discussion and Writing Questions (continued)

- 12.** Julia cannot wait for the farce that is her quinceañera to be over. She waltzes with her boy cousins and gives up her flats for heels, but is apprehensive about the father/daughter dance; she doesn't understand why she has to do this. "He doesn't know anything about me. If you ask him what my favorite band or food is, he couldn't tell you," Julia thinks. "Standing so close to him makes me uncomfortable. I don't remember the last time he's touched me" (p. 155). Do you believe that it even crosses Julia's mind that he, too, might feel the same way about her, and that his discomfort and pain is equal to hers? What would it feel like to live in a home with the man who has been your father for fifteen years and not know what he likes or dislikes, what makes him laugh, about his childhood or his interests?
- 13.** While Julia is lacing herself back up in the bathroom at her quinceañera, her tía Milagros comes into the bathroom and tells Julia, "I bet Olga is so happy for you right now." Julia responds, "Olga is dead." Tía Milagros calls her "malcriada" and asks, "What's happened to you? You weren't always so angry, so . . ." Julia unleashes her mouth. "So what, tía? . . . What is so terrible about me? . . . Who are you to judge me, huh? Like you're so great—all bitter because your husband left your ass years ago. Get over it already" (p. 157). Julia knows she has crossed the line, but she can no longer go on with niceties for the sake of her family's feelings. Is it wrong for us to do things or behave a certain way out of obligation? Is it healthy to forsake your feelings for those of others?
- 14.** Julia's parents are outraged with her disrespectful behavior. Amá says, "You know, Julia, maybe if you knew how to behave yourself, to keep your mouth shut, your sister would still be alive. Have you ever thought about that?" (p. 162) Amá confirms what Julia has suspected all along—that Amá blames Julia for Olga's death. Do you believe that this affirmation changes the relationship between Julia and Amá? Does Julia have a right to be hurt by her mother's words given the poison she has dispensed to friends and family? With Julia already on an emotional ledge, does this revelation by Amá put her over the edge?
- 15.** Julia's character is complicated. On one hand, she is a feisty feminist with a sharp tongue, quick wit, and intellectual curiosity. Yet Julia is mean, spiteful, belligerent, and intolerant, and feels life is so unfair to her. What do you think about Julia? Is it hard to like her? Do you feel she's truly the victim in this story?
- 16.** Bound and determined to go to college, Julia accepts Mr. Ingman's help with the college application process, but she fears la migra will discover her parents are undocumented and deport them. Even though Mr. Ingman tells her that it is impossible, she worries about being separated from her family and what would happen to her. Does her family's tenuous immigration status explain why Julia behaves as she does? How can it impact her goals? Should her immigration status be a factor in the application process?
- 17.** We know that Julia struggles to find joy in life, except when it comes to books. When she was last grounded, Amá prohibited her from going to the library, which she thought was "the cruelest kind of torture" (p. 116). Julia saves her lunch money just to be able to buy books. "If—when—I become rich, I want a library so big that I'll need a ladder to reach all my books" (p. 169). How does her relationship with books affect her relationships with people? Knowing what we know about Julia's moodiness, do you think prescriptive bibliotherapy—seeking advice from self-help books—would be a good therapeutic approach for Julia?

Discussion and Writing Questions (continued)

18. While at her favorite used bookstore, Julia finds herself in a conversation about her favorite books with the cute Connor. They discuss the magnitude of *The Great Gatsby* and how people romanticize the 1920s, missing its significant commentary on themes like greed, class, and the American dream. Julia says, “I doubt a person like me would’ve been allowed into those kinds of parties in the 1920s. Maybe I’d be in the kitchen or cleaning the bathrooms” (p. 171). Discuss whether life has improved for people like Julia since the 1920s? What barriers do immigrants face in America today? Is the American dream possible given those barriers?
19. Julia cannot believe she has finally met someone who likes David Bowie and books. Connor asks to see her again, and they meet outside of an Indian restaurant. “My legs feel rubbery as I walk toward the restaurant and see Connor standing outside with his hands in his pockets. Is that what love feels like? I don’t know” (p. 178), she admits. For Julia, love is not something she can relate to, yet in this passage she actually senses it. How do you feel about Julia’s newfound excitement and joy? Do you think it is possible for her to fully embrace this new sensation, given that she has never felt love from her family?
20. As Julia’s relationship with Connor develops, so does her interest in having sex. She wonders if she’s ready, how to prepare her body for the act of sex, and whether she needs to buy condoms. Amá is not a resource for her since she thinks sex is a *cochinada*, a dirty act. Julia seeks advice from her best friend, Lorena, but ends up with more questions. How do culture and religion play into sexual fear and ignorance? Do perceptions of culture and religion contribute to rates of teenage pregnancy among certain demographics?
21. Julia comes home to see Amá crying on the couch. Amá found Julia’s condoms and Olga’s lingerie and hotel key in Julia’s room. Amá says, “I always knew you would do something like this.” Julia repeatedly tells her, “They’re not mine” (p. 203). She does not tell Amá the truth. Olga is dead. Julia is alive and present. Why should Julia preserve Olga’s “perfect Mexican daughter” image instead of redeeming herself in her mother’s eyes? Julia has evidence, but should she use it? Do you think Amá would believe it?
22. Between not seeing Connor for weeks because she’s grounded and Amá ripping pages out of Julia’s journals, including poems she had worked on for years, Julia feels everything “has been taken away from me” (p. 208). What can Julia do at this point to get back on stable ground? Who or what can she resort to at this low point in her life?
23. Julia wakes up in a hospital bed at the beginning of chapter 17. “I’ve never been very good at life, but, man, was this a stupid thing to do” (p. 211), she thinks. How evident was it to you this would be the answer to her pain and hopelessness? Do you think Julia truly believes what she did was a stupid thing?
24. “I suffer from severe depression and anxiety. . . . I’m not surprised—I always knew something was wrong; I just didn’t know what it was, that it had an official name” (p. 219), Julia reveals. Do you think in knowing and accepting her condition Julia will be more likely to reach out for help? Can Amá provide the support Julia needs moving forward?

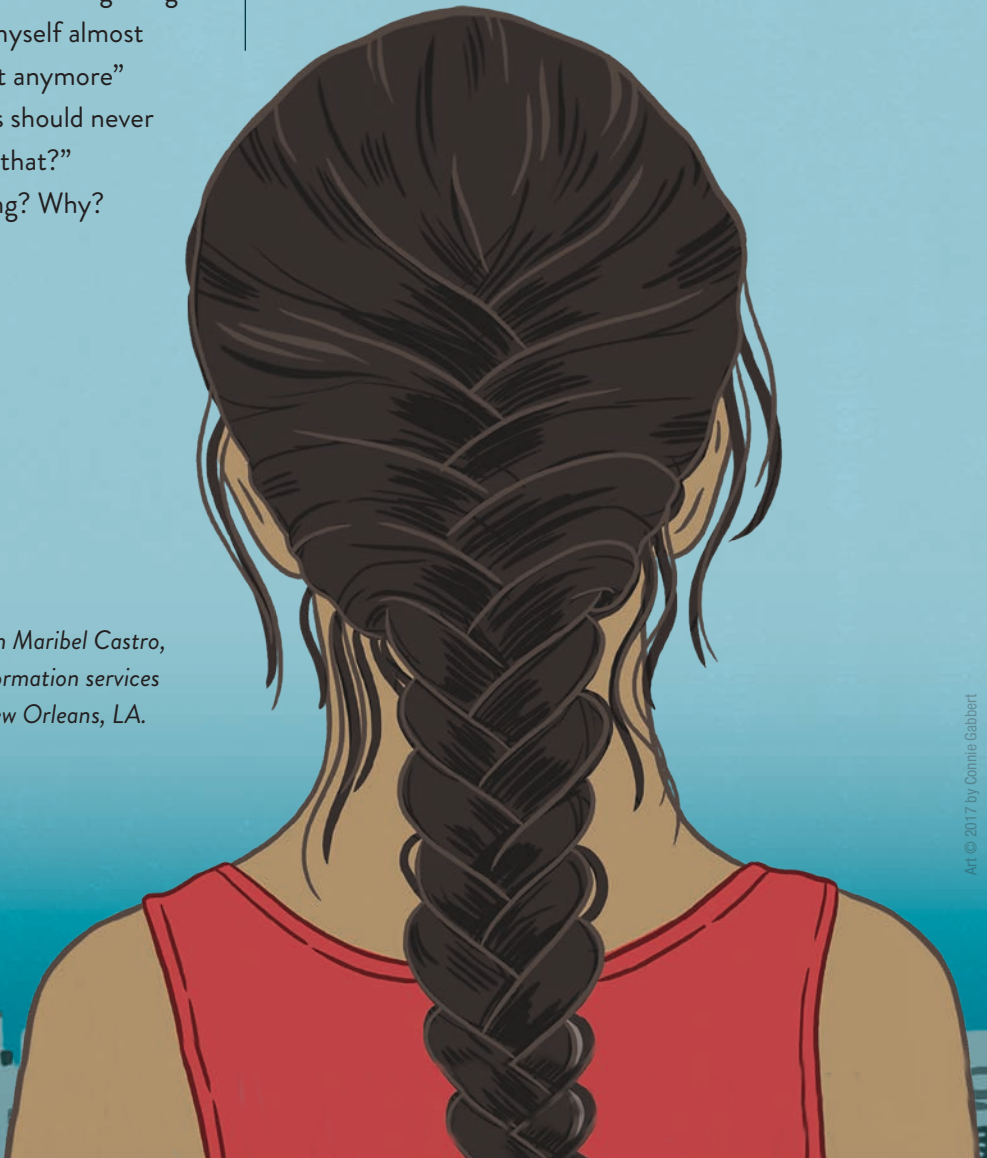
Discussion and Writing Questions (continued)

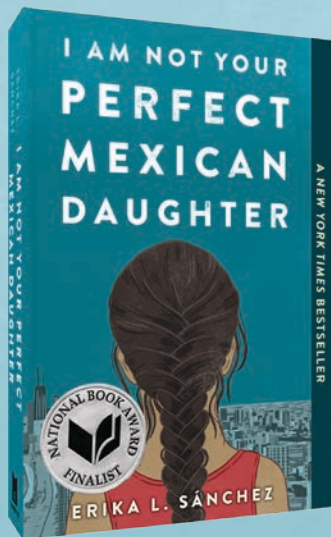
- 25.** In discussing happiness with Julia, Tasha says, “Sometimes I feel happy for, like, a second, but then it goes away” (p. 230). Julia tells her, “I just can’t convince myself to feel good, like my body won’t allow it or something” (pp. 230–231). One does not have to suffer from anxiety or depression to feel this way. What are some things society does to make one feel less than happy?
- 26.** An overarching theme in Julia’s therapy sessions with Dr. Cooke is the feeling of inadequacy. Julia feels she is not enough of a student, a girlfriend to Connor, or a daughter to her mother. She tells Dr. Cooke that she wishes her life was like one of those sitcoms “where mothers and daughters talk about feelings and fathers take their kids to play baseball or get ice cream. . . . It’s so stupid . . . to want your life to be a sitcom.” Dr. Cooke says, “That doesn’t seem stupid to me. You deserve all of those things” (p. 236). Does Julia have it within her to realize these things? Does it take more than just effort to make them happen? If so, what else would help her attain them?
- 27.** Before Julia goes off to Mexico, she goes into Olga’s bedroom one more time and finds the password to Olga’s laptop in an old planner. Julia discovers “dull, dutiful Olga” (p. 239) was having an affair with a married man from her office. They’d see each other on the nights Olga was supposed to be in class at the community college. “I don’t want to be mad at Olga because she’s dead, but I am” (p. 240), Julia concedes. Does she have a right to be angry about Olga’s secret life? Did it alter Julia’s life at home and her relationship with Amá?
- 28.** When Julia informs her family of her desire to become a writer, she is met with disbelief and told repeatedly, “just make sure you work in a nice office” (p. 243) and “don’t work like a donkey like me” (p. 121). For Julia’s undocumented and poorly educated family, getting an office job is considered a mark of success. However, to Julia, this belief is a product of a culture of low expectations. Why would working in an office with air-conditioning be considered a sign of success in Julia’s family? Why are they so quick to try to crush her dreams of being a writer?
- 29.** As much as Julia fought her parents about being sent “back to the motherland” (p. 228), she finds her family in Mexico quite endearing. They make her feel “like a celebrity,” unlike her family back in Chicago, who treat her like a “designated pariah” (p. 246). “Maybe Amá was right for once. Maybe this is what I needed” (p. 246), Julia thinks. Were her parents sending her to Mexico because they felt she was going astray? Do you think going back to Mexico will help her reconnect with her roots? Can this change in environment really help Julia in her recovery?
- 30.** Julia is stunned when Mamá Jacinta tells her the framed picture she finds of her mother was drawn by her father. “He was the town artist” (p. 251), Mamá Jacinta reveals. Incredulous, Julia says, “If I don’t write, I feel like I’m going to die. How could he stop just like that?” (p. 252) Do life’s struggles kill one’s dreams?
- 31.** Julia comes across an india in the streets asking for a limosna (handout). Belén says, “They’re here begging every day. She should work like everyone else. Typical indias.” Julia cannot understand why Belén would feel superior to the india, given Belén is just as dark-skinned and wears the same “frayed red dress every other day” (p. 258). What does this reveal about race and colorism and class in Mexico?

Discussion and Writing Questions (continued)

- 32.** Julia's favorite painting is entitled *Judith Slaying Holofernes* by Artemisia Gentileschi. In this painting, Gentileschi paints herself as Judith and her mentor, Agostino Tassi, as Holofernes, after Tassi was tried in court for raping her. Later, Julia learns from her aunt Fermina that Julia's mother had been raped by a coyote when crossing the border illegally with Julia's dad (p. 274). How does her mother's struggle and survival compare to that of the "bad ass" (p. 44) Judith from Julia's favorite painting?
- 33.** The border: "It's nothing but a giant wound, a big gash between the two countries. Why does it have to be like that?" (p. 280), Julia asks. What is your interpretation of Julia's idea of the border as a giant wound between two countries?
- 34.** Julia is exhausted by all of the family secrets. She tells Angie, "I'm tired of pretending and letting things blister inside me. Keeping things to myself almost killed me. I don't want to live like that anymore" (p. 295). Angie replies, "Some things should never be said out loud, Julia. Can't you see that?" (p. 296) Are some truths worth hiding? Why?
- 35.** On her way to college, Julia thinks about why it's so important for her to accomplish her goals of graduating from college, becoming a writer, and being well traveled. In Julia's mind, achieving these goals is not so much for her, but for Amá, Apá, and Olga as well. "What a waste their journeys would be if I just settled for a dull, mediocre life. Maybe one day they'll realize that." Through the lens of Julia as a first-generation Mexican American, in what ways will Julia's goals, once reached, change her and her family?

This guide was created by former librarian Maribel Castro, currently director of technology and information services at the Louise S. McGehee School in New Orleans, LA.





Praise and Awards for

I AM NOT YOUR PERFECT MEXICAN DAUGHTER

A National
Book Award
Finalist

A
New York Times
Bestseller

★ “Ultimately, it’s Julia herself who’s the key to the novel. . . .

A CREATION OF RAW AND JAGGED DIMENSIONALITY, she’s pushing back against just about everything, feeling both guilty and resentful about her parents’ sacrifices and modest life expectations, and yearning for more while fearing she doesn’t deserve it.”

—*The Bulletin*, starred review

★ “This novel richly explores coming-of-age topics; a **TIMELY AND MUST-HAVE ACCOUNT OF SURVIVAL** in a culturally contentious world.”

—*School Library Journal*, starred review

★ “In the beautifully written *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, Erika L. Sánchez **CAPTURES THE HEARTS AND TRUST OF TEEN READERS**, struggling at the crossroads of familial and personal identities.”

—*Shelf Awareness*, starred review

“**SÁNCHEZ PAINTS AN EVOCATIVE PORTRAIT OF A MEXICAN AMERICAN FAMILY**, effectively capturing the bicultural tensions that can arise from growing up in a different country than did one’s parents.”

—*The Horn Book*

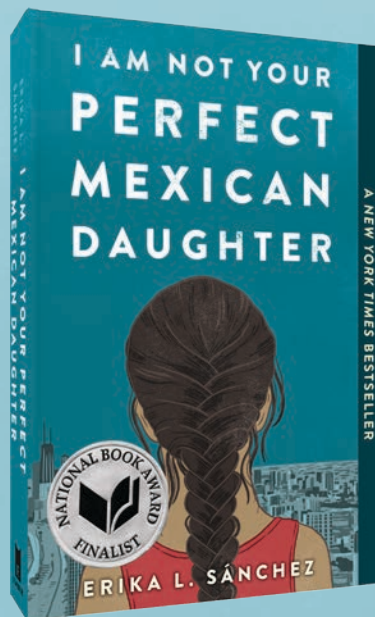
“This bildungsroman immigrant story **CAPTURES THE CHAOTIC LIFE OF A YOUNG PERSON TRYING TO NAVIGATE TWO WORLDS** while trying to follow her own path.”

—*Booklist*

“This book will change everything. . . . **A PERFECT BOOK ABOUT IMPERFECTION.**”

—Juan Felipe Herrera, Poet Laureate of the United States

Praise and Awards (continued)



2017 National Book Award for Young People's Literature Finalist

2018 Bank Street College Best Children's Books of the Year List

2018 Kansas NEA Reading Circle Catalog Book

2018 Virginia Capitol Choices Book

2018 YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults Book

2018 YALSA Quick Picks for Reluctant Readers Book

2018 YALSA Teens Top Ten

2019 Illinois Reads Book

2019 Texas TAYSHAS High School Reading List Selection



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