

## Children of the Land by Marcelo Hernandez Castillo

### Summary:

With beauty, grace, and honesty, Castillo recounts his and his family's encounters with a system that treats them as criminals for seeking safe, ordinary lives. He writes of the Sunday afternoon when he opened the door to an ICE officer who had one hand on his holster, of the hours he spent making a fake social security card so that he could work to support his family, of his father's deportation and the decade that he spent waiting to return to his wife and children only to be denied reentry." This unforgettable memoir from a prize-winning poet about growing up undocumented in the United States recounts the sorrows and joys of a family torn apart by draconian policies and chronicles one young man's attempt to build a future in a nation that denies his existence. "You were not a ghost even though an entire country was scared of you. No one in this story was a ghost. This was not a story." When Marcelo Hernandez Castillo was five years old and his family was preparing to cross the border between Mexico and the United States, he suffered temporary, stress-induced blindness. Castillo regained his vision, but quickly understood that he had to move into a threshold of invisibility before settling in California with his parents and siblings. Thus began a new life of hiding in plain sight and of paying extraordinarily careful attention at all times for fear of being truly seen. Before Castillo was one of the most celebrated poets of a generation, he was a boy who perfected his English in the hopes that he might never seem extraordinary. With beauty, grace, and honesty, Castillo recounts his and his family's encounters with a system that treats them as criminals for seeking safe, ordinary lives. He writes of the Sunday afternoon when he opened the door to an ICE officer who had one hand on his holster, of the hours he spent making a fake social security card so that he could work to support his family, of his father's deportation and the decade that he spent waiting to return to his wife and children only to be denied reentry, and of his mother's heartbreaking decision to leave her children and grandchildren so that she could be reunited with her estranged husband and retire from a life of hard labor. Children of the Land distills the trauma of displacement, illuminates the human lives behind the headlines and serves as a stunning meditation on what it means to be a man and a citizen.





### About the author

Marcelo Hernandez Castillo is the author of *Cenzontle*, winner of the A. Poulin, Jr. prize (BOA editions 2018), winner of the 2019 Great Lakes Colleges Association New Writers Award in poetry, a finalist for the Northern California Book Award and named a best book of 2018 by NPR and the New York Public Library. As one of the founders of the Undocupoets campaign, he is a recipient of the Barnes and Noble "Writers for Writers" Award. He holds a B.A. from Sacramento State University and was the first undocumented student to graduate from the Helen Zell Writers Program at the University of Michigan. His work has appeared or is featured in the New York Times, the Paris Review, People Magazine, and PBS Newshour, among others. He lives in Marysville, California where he teaches poetry to incarcerated youth and also teaches at the Ashland University Low-Res MFA program. "Sometimes I wonder if what brought me to writing in the first place is the same thing that keeps me going. Last year I sat in a large barren field and called my friends because I honestly couldn't find reason as to why I wrote anymore, I couldn't find joy in it. I blew my nose, wiped my face, and drove away. I interviewed myself in my journal just to keep my hand moving: —Marcelo, are you okay? —It's complicated. It's not that I come back to writing after something revelatory or after a profound moment of change, but rather, it's something small, inconsequential even. I eat berries, I drink stovetop espresso, I run until my knee gives out, I stand in the middle of my room for long periods of time, I water my plants and talk to them. I read somewhere: Don't give too much power to the first draft, and I wish I was that reckless. I rub large circles with the ashes of palo santo in my journal, eat a bowl of yogurt with fruit, and write to myself on my large white board in big balloon letters, cariño. I'm surprised when I eventually do come back to write. I read Alejandra Pizarnik's line from her poem "Del Silencio" ("Fragments for Subduing the Silence"): Sin embargo, quedé cautiva de la antigua ternura. Each time I read it, I realize that's all I can do: be tender and patient with myself, and captive in something older than me."—Marcelo Hernandez Castillo, author of *Cenzontle* (BOA Editions, 2018)

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## Beyond the Book

### Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)

This article relates to Children of the Land

In his memoir *Children of the Land*, author Marcelo Hernandez Castillo recounts applying for and receiving DACA. This is a temporary immigration status that alleviates some of his worst fears about being deported as an undocumented college student. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a program administered by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS). It started in 2012, under President Obama, and is sometimes called the "Dreamers" program. DACA allows a very narrow category of people who are immigrants to remain in the USA on a temporary basis while their permanent status is being decided. The program has defined a class of individuals who were brought into the USA as children and remained past their visa (or never held valid travel documents to begin with) as "Childhood Arrivals." While the program has processed nearly a million applications, and approved over 800,000 total, it has in recent years been challenged by the executive branch, some members of Congress and the courts. As of early 2020, current holders of DACA can renew, but no new applications are being accepted pending an anticipated Supreme Court decision. The case is being heard in 2020 and will determine whether the program will continue, be throttled back or be abolished. Lauded as a great success by many, DACA has conferred temporary rights to young immigrants who successfully applied and qualified. DACA recipients may attend public colleges in most states, apply for financial aid, qualify for in-state tuition in most states, take a test for a driver's license, gain access to health insurance and obtain a work permit with a valid social security number. DACA permits must be renewed every two years. Those with DACA status are employed in a wide range of jobs and professions, and add to their communities both in economic terms and myriad socio-cultural ways. Statistics from USCIS show that as of September 2019, more than 650,000 persons currently hold valid DACA permits. While a majority are from Mexico or Central America, "Dreamers" hail from more than 100 nations that include African, Asian and European countries. Approximately 53% identify as female and 47% as male, with less than 1% not defined. Ages of current DACA holders range from under 16 to 38. The current distribution of permits may change if the program opens up to new applicants after court challenges are resolved. There are particular qualifications for young people to be able to apply for DACA. One of the main requirements is to have arrived in the USA before one's sixteenth birthday. Applicants must be able to prove this using school enrollment or other official records. In addition, under current DACA laws, applicants must have been present in the USA as of June 15, 2012, and every day since August 15, 2012 (the date DACA was started).



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Therefore, childhood arrivals from anytime after August 15, 2012 are not qualified for DACA (although they may be eligible for other immigration programs). Anyone applying for DACA must be currently in school, have graduated from high school, hold a GED or be honorably discharged from the US armed forces. To be considered, applicants need to have a record clean of felony convictions and significant misdemeanors. Emotional, economic or other barriers discourage many young people—who might otherwise qualify—from applying. These include the cost of the application (currently \$495), insecurity about revealing private information on family members who may not have legal status, lack of educational qualifications (having dropped out of high school, for example), feeling marginalized as LGBTQ+, missing paperwork that establishes an arrival date, inability to prove consistent presence in the USA and other fears. Because of the complexity and variety of immigration situations that young people and their families live with, experts advise people to consult reputable legal help to navigate their immigration options. For example, USCIS.gov offers tips to avoid scams and find qualified attorneys. While attorney fees can be expensive, some services may be offered free or at low-cost. Several reputable nonprofit advocacy groups including the National Immigration Law Center, United We Dream and RAICES (The Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services) offer confidential services and can provide attorney referrals and more information about various immigration pathways—including DACA. Although DACA and the Supreme Court case deciding its fate only concern temporary status and rights, a possible long-term solution is on the horizon. The American Dream and Promise Act of 2019—which would establish a clearer and more supportive path to citizenship—has been introduced in Congress, where it will undergo debate and perhaps become law, allowing hundreds of thousands of young people to find security as they build their lives in the United States.

Article by Karen Lewis This article relates to Children of the Land. It first ran in the February 19, 2020 issue of BookBrowse Recommends.



## Book Discussion Questions

1. If your book offers a cultural portrait—of life in another country or region of your own country, start with questions a, b, and c ...
  - a. What observations are made in the book? Does the author examine economics and politics, family traditions, the arts, religious beliefs, language or food?
  - b. Does the author criticize or admire the culture? Does he/she wish to preserve or change the way of life? Either way, what would be risked or gained?
  - c. What is different from your own culture? What do you find most surprising, intriguing or difficult to understand?
2. What is the central idea discussed in the book? What issues or ideas does the author explore? Are they personal, sociological, global, political, economic, spiritual, medical, or scientific?
3. Do the issues affect your life? How so—directly, on a daily basis, or more generally? Now or sometime in the future?
4. What evidence does the author use to support the book's ideas? Is the evidence convincing...definitive or...speculative? Does the author depend on personal opinion, observation, and assessment? Or is the evidence factual—based on science, statistics, historical documents, or quotations from (credible) experts?
5. What kind of language does the author use? Is it objective and dispassionate? Or passionate and earnest? Is it biased, inflammatory, sarcastic? Does the language help or undercut the author's premise?
6. What are the implications for the future? Are there long- or short-term consequences to the issues raised in the book? Are they positive or negative...affirming or frightening?
7. What solutions does the author propose? Are the author's recommendations concrete, sensible, doable? Who would implement those solutions?
8. How controversial are the issues raised in the book? Who is aligned on which sides of the issues? Where do you fall in that line-up?



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9. Talk about specific passages that struck you as significant—or interesting, profound, amusing, illuminating, disturbing, sad...? What was memorable?

10. What have you learned after reading this book? Has it broadened your perspective about a difficult issue—personal or societal? Has it introduced you to a culture in another country...or an ethnic or regional culture in your own country?

(Questions by LitLovers.) Source:

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