

[Book cover image](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/545723/i-am-not-your-perfect-mexican-daughter-by-erika-l-sanchez/) and [Erika L. Sanchez image](https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.parkrecord.com%2Fentertainment%2Ferika-l-sanchez-author-of-im-not-your-perfect-mexican-daughter-set-for-park-city-appearance%2F&psig=AOvVaw1ks4oJNUa6aaIwDqSm5Bz1&ust=1635706588864000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CAsQjRxqFwoTCPCKrYno8vMCFQAAAAAdAAAAABAD)

About Erika L. Sánchez

Erika L. Sánchez is the daughter of Mexican immigrants, just like the main protagonist of the novel. The poet, novelist, and essayist grew up in the Mexican working class town of Cicero, Illinois and graduated from the University of Illinois in Chicago. Sánchez was able to travel to Madrid, Spain on a Fulbright Scholarship, where she also taught English at a secondary school. She received an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, which is a city that she claims she does not love, but appreciates for their weather and what she calls their “ample” parking. *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* is Sánchez’s debut young adult novel and her memoir *Crying in the Bathroom* is forthcoming in 2022. ([Erika L. Sanchez Website](https://erikalsanchez.com/about/))

Summary

Olga is the perfect Mexican daughter. She did not move away for college, she does not stay out late, and she obediently does anything and everything for her family. Julia, Olga’s teenage sister, is not the perfect Mexican daughter. She is outspoken, independent, and wishes nothing more than to move away after high school graduation in order to become a famous writer.

When Olga passes away in a tragic accident, Julia is left to fix her broken family that expects her to fit the role that Olga left behind. While dealing with the trials and tribulations of adolescence and the cultural expectations placed upon her by her traditional Mexican parents, Julia discovers that Olga might not have been as perfect as she seemed.

Quotes

“Happiness is a dandelion wisp floating through the air that I can’t catch. No matter how hard I try, no matter how fast I run, I just can’t catch it. Even when I think I grasp it, I open my hand and it’s empty” (183).

This quote is very representative of Julia’s mental and emotional state while she copes with her grief-ridden family and her own feelings of loss. Julia constantly reminisces on her childhood days with Olga, causing her to constantly compare her past with her present. Julia tends to maintain a cold demeanor throughout most of the novel, even during her sister’s funeral. At this moment, however, Julia acknowledges that she does not feel fine. Julia’s metaphor for happiness demonstrates even though she has acted like she feels distant from the entire situation, the loss of her sister has deeply affected her. This quote also exemplifies how her family’s cultural expectations have affected her. Julia’s parents do not express their emotions towards losing Olga; they also do not ask Julia about her feelings as well. In Mexican culture, it is not normal to openly express emotions and it is even considered even less normal to discuss or struggle with mental illness. Due to these expectations and pressures, Julia feels that she must repress all of her emotions even when she is trying to cope with a very traumatic circumstance.

“I understand. I’m trying to at least.’

‘How could you? Do you have any idea what my life is like?’ [...], I yell, and hang up the phone” (206).

This excerpt is from a conversation between Julia and Connor, a boy that Julia is romantically involved with. Due to her mother’s strict rules, Julia no longer has her cell phone and is no longer able to meet with Connor, causing her mental health to deteriorate. As Julia increasingly struggles with her mental health, the differences between her and Connor become much more prominent. Even though they like each other, there are cultural and economic divides between them. Connor does not understand Julia’s emotional struggles and her life with her Mexican parents, as he is a Caucasian boy with a wealthy background. Connor also does not understand the correlation between Julia’s mental struggles and her life experiences, as it appears that he has never experienced them himself. Even though Julia has a negative perspective of her life and denies any type of help, Connor distances himself as he does not relate to Julia’s experiences. This excerpt exemplifies the cultural differences that there can be between people and the lack of understanding that people can have for one another.

“I’m tired of being broke. I’m tired of feeling like the rest of the world always gets to decide what I can do. [...] I can’t keep going like this anymore. What is the point of living if I can’t ever get what I want? This doesn’t feel like a life; it feels like a never-ending punishment” (210).

This excerpt is representative of Julia’s perspective on her economic status and her transition from adolescence to adulthood. Due to her low financial status and her parents’ expectations to keep her close to home, Julia feels suffocated and without a purpose. As Julia grows older and is expected to find her place in the world, she begins to notice her family’s situation and resents it. Julia compares her present struggles to the easygoing experiences of her childhood when money did not affect her and when expectations were not placed upon her. Additionally, this quote exemplifies how Olga’s death has further affected Julia’s role in the family. Now that Olga is gone, all eyes are on Julia to take over the role that Olga left behind and in a way, replace her. This expectation, however, restricts Julia as she has dreams and ambitions that correlate with her parents’ wishes. Julia’s feelings of doubt and insecurity are very representative of what most adolescents experience as they transition into adult life. Julia’s conflict with her parents is also very similar to what teenagers experience with their parents as they try to claim their own sense of independence.

In *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning*

Due to the themes that the novel touches on, *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* could fit into Chapter 4: “Making Life Choices, Facing Violence or Abuse, and Living through Family and Relationship Issues,” Chapter 5: “Books about Facing Loss and Death,” and Chapter 6: “Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions.”

*I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* fits in with Chapter 4, since Julia goes through a significant amount of issues with her parents due to their generational differences. Julia also has issues maintaining relationships; her relationship with Connor becomes strained due to her need for independence and his struggle in giving her the support she needs, and Julia also has conflict with even her closest friends. Julia has to make important choices in the novel in terms of her parents. She either has to make them happy by suppressing her dreams, or live her dreams and make them incredibly unhappy.

*I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* fits in with Chapter 5 because Julia and her family are constantly coping with the death of Olga. The entire novel surrounds Olga’s death, even Julia’s own personal issues. Olga’s death amplifies the disagreements that the family already had and amplifies each of the family member’s issues.

*I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* fits in with Chapter 6 because one of the novel’s central themes is identity. Due to pressures from her parents and society, Julia is conflicted with her identity, whether it be through her personality, her culture, or her physical appearance. Julia also struggles with making important decisions due to the possible consequences that she may face from her family.

Presenting in the class

This novel could be presented in a unit focused on identity and character development. Additionally, this novel could be taught to address the topic of death. Students could have an open discussion over how grief can manifest itself in many ways. Students could then write an essay in which they could identify how each character in the novel demonstrates their own grief, and how it affects the family’s, and especially Julia’s, journey throughout the novel.

Even though the themes and issues discussed in the novel are very complex, this novel also is quite humorous at times. The protagonist is very relatable, and students can easily relate to her. Therefore, I feel like this novel would be very interesting to teach.

Age Level

*I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* could be read by students that are 14-18 years of age.

Text Complexity

ATOS: **4.7**

AR Points: **12.0**

Book Level: **Upper Grades (9-12)**

Dale-Chall Readability Score

Raw score: **1.7876**

[Adjusted Score: **(3.6365 + 1.7876)**](https://readabilityformulas.com/dalechallformula/dale-chall-formula.php#)

[Final Score: **5.4**](https://readabilityformulas.com/dalechallformula/dale-chall-formula.php#)

Grade Level: **5-6**

Lexile: **HL730L**

**Ages 14-18**

The scores indicate that the novel contains themes and concepts that are very complex, however it is at an appropriate reading level for students that are 14-18 years old. Due to the novel’s language and content, the novel works best with high school students (grades 9-12). The language used in the novel is quite easy to understand, despite the themes of death, loss, mental health, family, cultural identity, and poverty that are mentioned in the novel. One of the scores determined that the novel would be best for students in 5th to 6th grade, however, I believe that the content of the novel would be harder for children in elementary school to understand.

The novel does not demand much prior knowledge for it to be understood. The novel mentions some aspects of Mexican culture and some areas in Mexico, yet no extra research is needed about those details in the story. On the other hand, some knowledge of mental illnesses would definitely help the readers better understand what Julia is going through.

Why teens should read this book

*I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* is an incredibly engaging book that touches on very important issues, such as mental health, family, cultural identity, and poverty and entrapment. These themes can be relatable to high school teens, especially since the perspective of the novel is from a young teenage protagonist. The novel especially touches on grief, loss, and how death can touch our lives in the most unexpected ways. Additionally, I believe that teens should read this novel because these themes are important to know about. Teens should be allowed to know about issues that are often avoided or ignored so that they can be prepared for the realities and complexities of life.