**I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter**

by Erika L. Sanchez

Erika L. Sanchez is the daughter of undocumented Mexican immigrants. She grew up in the rough neighborhood of Cicero, Chicago. Sanchez decided when she was 12 that she would be a poet and author. She advises anyone who questions her about becoming an author to ask themselves if they absolutely cannot live without writing. If they can’t, they should go for it or they will never be happy. If they can live without it, they should do something else because being an author is HARD! Sanchez describes herself as a feminist and an overachiever. As a young person she enjoyed reading The House on Mango Street, but it was written the year she was born and so she decided it was time for another book in which girls of color could recognize themselves, so she wrote I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter.

*Photo and Information from author’s website:* [*https://erikalsanchez.com/*](https://erikalsanchez.com/)

*Q&A at Writers Read - Erika Sanchez at College of DuPage at this site:* [*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=20n-7n7Y7ZU*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=20n-7n7Y7ZU)

*Interview at the Chicago Humanities Festival, at:* [*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XrwdkNmaHAo*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XrwdkNmaHAo)

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| In I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter, 15-year-old Julia Reyes must maneuver through her remaining time at home on her own before going off to college. Her older sister, Olga, has died. Unlike Julia, who has a fiery personality, an independent spirit and whose mouth shoots off before her brain can warn it not to, Olga was obedient, meek and loved staying home with her parents - the perfect Mexican daughter. Or was she?  In trying to discover her dead sister’s secrets, Julia discovers more about herself, her family and the things that make them all tick. This is a very American coming of age story told through the lens of a first generation youth. Julia and Olga may be Mexican daughters, but just about anyone who’s ever been a teenager will find more than one thing to relate to in this delicious novel. | [*https://www.amazon.com/Not-Your-Perfect-Mexican-Daughter/dp/1524700487*](https://www.amazon.com/Not-Your-Perfect-Mexican-Daughter/dp/1524700487) |

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| **Quotes**  When I can’t sleep, I crawl into Olga’s bed… My sister’s bed still smells like her-fabric softener, lavender lotion, and her warm and sweet human scent I can’t describe… I toss and turn for a long time… I can’t stop thinking about the chemistry test I failed yesterday… If I keep going like this, I’ll never get into college. I’ll end up working in a factory, marry some loser, and have his ugly children. ¶After lying in bed for hours, I turn on the lamp and try to read. I’ve read The Awakening a million times, but I find it comforting. My favorite character is the lady in black who follows Edna and Robert everywhere. I also love the book because I’m so much like Edna-nothing satisfies me, nothing makes me happy. I want too much out of life. I want to take it in my hands and squeeze and twist as much as I can from it. And it’s never enough. (pp 18-19)  “Ay, Julia. What a nice party. I bet Olga is so happy for you right now.” She sighs.  “Olga is dead.” I know I should probably shut up, but I’m tired of everyone pretending Olga is an angel looking over us.  Tia Milagros shakes her head as she looks at herself in the mirror. “Que malcriada. What happened to you? You weren’t always so angry, so… I don’t know…”  “What? I wasn’t always so what, tia?” I feel the loud music vibrating my insides like jelly.  Lorena’s eyes open wide, and she sucks in a big gulp of air. She knows I’m about to pop off.  “I don’t know. Never mind.” Tia Milagros shakes her head and applies another coat of her light orange lipstick in the mirror.  “Just say it,” I insist. “What is so terrible about me? Why does everyone treat me like I’m a disappointment? Who are you to judge me, huh? Tell me. Like you’re so great-all bitter because your husband left your ass years ago. Get over it already.”  Tia Milagros’s eyes glisten. She presses her mouth shut as if to keep herself from saying anything else.  “Holy shit, Julia,” Lorena whispers as Tia Milagros storms out of the bathroom. (pp 157-8)  I can’t leave the apartment again because Amá decided to ransack my room to make sure I didn’t have anything else that might be considered scandalous or immoral. At first all she found were an old clove cigarette and a pair of shorts she didn’t like. But then she tried reading my journals, even though she doesn’t speak English. Unfortunately, she does recognize bad words, so she ripped out all the pages that contained *fuck, bitch, shit* and even *sex*, which were incredibly common, of course. I screamed and begged for her to leave my journals alone, but she went through them anyway and left me with only a dozen pages or so. I was hysterical and tried to swipe them from her hands, but Apá held me back. I cried on the floor in the fetal position for hours after. I couldn’t find the motivation to get up, not even when a roach crawled near my head. Life without writing doesn’t feel worth living to me. I don’t know how I’m going to make it to graduation because I feel like a husk of a person these days. Some of the poems Amá destroyed I had worked on for years, and now they’re gone. Poof. Just like that. I’ll never see them again. The one thing loved most in life has been taken away from me. What the hell do I do now? (pp 207-208) | **Commentary on Quotes**  This quote is very near the beginning of the book and tells us a lot about Julia, the main character. This scene establishes Julia’s sadness at the loss of her sister and the affection Julia had for her. It also very vividly depicts her determination to get herself out of her surroundings and get into a college that will allow her to leave not just her home, but the expectations that everyone has for her, which are so much lower than the ones she has for herself. I also like this passage because it’s one of the many references to literature/film/art that Julia makes throughout the book.  This scene takes place at Julia’s quinceañera, her sweet 15 birthday party, a party that Julia did not want any part of whatsoever. For one thing, she’s less than two months away from her 16th birthday. For another, she didn’t want her parents to waste that money, and if they had to spend it couldn’t they help her pay for college instead? Julia is embarrassed about the ugly frilly dress, she doesn’t want to dance with cousins she hardly knows, she feels that most of her relatives can’t stand her. The worst thing about the party is that her mother has forced her into it because she, the mother, feels badly about never having thrown a quinceañera for Olga. Julia doesn’t want to be used to assuage her mother’s guilt, she doesn’t want to be her dead sister’s proxy. But she has not been given a choice. Julia’s anger in this scene is the result of her feelings not being considered at all, not since her sister’s death and actually not ever. She’s not allowed into her sister’s room, she’s constantly compared to her sister in a disparaging way, no one seems to consider her grief over losing her sister. In this scene, she snaps and takes it out on her aunt Milagros. This is an example of how she is always letting her mouth get her into trouble.  This scene is pivotal in the book because it brings about the rest of the action until the end. The beauty of this scene is how well it illustrates just how important writing is to Julia. It’s her life’s blood. She says she’s lost the most important thing in her life when she loses her journals. She didn’t say that when she lost her sister, when she and her boyfriend broke up or when she got in a fight with her best friend. I also feel this scene is important because it’s real; being the child of immigrants myself, I had something similar happen when I was Julia’s age and this scene is totally genuine. |

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| **Lexile Level** | 730L Ages 14-18  Since the Lexile numbers are not concrete in their relation to grade level, this is a good score. Although 730L is generally associated with 4th or 5th grade, the age appropriate level is actually 14-18. The book contains profanity, a sex scene, a suicide attempt, and other, more mature themes. However, it is very easy to read and is written in a conversational tone. So, quantitatively, it’s a lower scaled number but qualitatively, it’s for an older audience. This book is more appropriate for the upper grades in high school |
| **Dave-Chall** | 6.3 Grades 7-8  A younger person could easily read the text, but it would be inappropriate because of the subject matter. This book is intended for high school age and above. |
| **ATOS** | 4.7 Upper Grades 9-12  ATOS also deemed the text easily readable, giving a 4.7 score for the quantitative text, which is a score you would see in 4th grade books, but acknowledged that the interest level is for older, high school aged students. |

**Using I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter in the High School Classroom**

**Some project ideas**

* Throughout the book, Julia references other books, poems, plays and works of art. Have the students choose from these, (1-3 or whatever fits in the time frame of the class) and have them explain how those other works have influenced Julia to become the person that she is. Then have the students write about a piece of literature or art that has influenced them in their personal lives.
* There are multiple themes running through the book – death, generation gap, cultural gap, having undocumented parents, incest, being young and gay, parental violence against gay children, poverty, first generation college students, etc. Have students identify one theme and find other books, poems or works of art that would complement and give more insight into those themes.
* Julia’s journals are the most important things in her life. Have the students journal in class a few minutes every day. Challenge them to keep private journals at home throughout their lives. Perhaps invite a guest speaker who has always journaled, or who has in their possession the journals of their ancestors and have the speaker explain how valuable that is, for family history, genealogy, to understand the past, etc.
* The book is written as an internal monologue. Have the students write a short story in the same genre. It can be fiction or non-fiction.

**Why should students read this book?**

* This book will allow the children of immigrants to see themselves as the main character in the story. They may be facing many of the same issues and this will validate them. (This happened for me!)
* Students in families that have been in the country for generations can increase their awareness and empathy for what immigrant families face.
* The author, Erika L. Sanchez, talks about not being taken seriously, even as a grad student, because of her ethnicity. This book and others like it can increase acceptance and awareness of the abilities of minorities.
* Some students may be in similar situations as the characters: Lorena and her pervert pseudo-step-dad; Juanga and his homophobic, abusive parents; Julia and dealing with depression, the death of a loved one, the loss of virginity, the struggle to go to college, etc. Seeing characters going through similar situations can help a reader just by feeling solidarity with the characters, or it can inspire them to take action.