Let us all be from somewhere; let us tell each other everything we can.

When I read the opening epigraph in *The Book of Unknown Americans*, I’m reminded that Henríquez herself grew up in Delaware, attended the Iowa Writer’s Workshop in Iowa City, and now lives in Chicago. Her Panamanian father immigrated to the United States to study engineering in 1971. I suppose we are all from somewhere.

Perhaps Henríquez drew from her father’s experience when she wrote *The Book of Unknown Americans*, her second novel, but she also drew from our common human experience. In fact, the enduring questions for the Fall Semester of Paideia are, “What makes us human? What does it mean to be human?” These questions will frame our discussion about works by Frederick Douglass, Mary Shelley, Charles Darwin, Karel Čapek, Joseph Haydn and Michelangelo Buonarroti.

While these texts address our enduring questions, they each reflect a particular place and time as well. For example, in our current political environment, Henríquez has sometimes been asked what her novel has to say about immigration reform. She tends to reply, “That’s not what the novel is about. It’s about the human faces, the human *lives* behind what for many people has become only an issue” (Olivas). Once you’ve read the novel, you can decide for yourself: does the author emphasize the common threads of human experience, or the differences?

Our conversation will begin during New Student Orientation. Right from the start, you’ll be developing your ability to read carefully, think critically, and write persuasively. Because the Orientation schedule will involve many events, you will need to complete your reading of *The Book of Unknown Americans* before you arrive on campus on Saturday, August 29th.

Your first step will be to purchase the book: copies will be available for purchase at the Luther Book Shop during Summer Registration. You’ll write your first Paideia paper about *The Book of Unknown Americans* and, as with each of our readings, it will be important to have your own copy at hand for discussion.
Paideia is fundamentally a course in reading and writing. We've provided questions below to help you read closely and thoughtfully. Please think about these questions as you read the entire novel, making notes as you go.

Writing notes in the margins as you read to answer questions may be the best way to enhance your comprehension—and those annotations will prove to be extremely useful when it’s time to write about the book! When you have finished a section of the novel, stop to review what you’ve read and capture in a few notes what the chapter was about.


* * * *

1. What are the Rivera family's first impressions of Delaware? What ways do they find to manage in a setting that is so unfamiliar? What aspects of the new environment are unrecognizable or confusing to them?

2. At the close of the first chapter, Alma Rivera says, “The three of us started toward the road, doubling back in the direction from which we had come, heading toward home,” but it isn’t really home. Beginning with Alma’s second chapter (24) and following, make note of the sounds, tastes, and rituals that she identifies with Pátzcuaro. How do characters learn to “outrun the wave” of homesickness?

3. By what means do the Riveras’ neighbors offer a sense of belonging that compensates for the isolation that they feel from the larger community? What brings the neighbors closer?

4. What is your first impression of Maribel? Notice how Henríquez very gradually reveals the nature of Maribel’s disability, leaving the reader—much like the Riveras—with uncertainty. Do you see patterns in Maribel’s behavior or are her challenges “sin pies ni cabeza,” with no rhyme or reason (31)? Pay attention to how characters respond to Maribel’s disability.
5. Why is Mayor drawn to Maribel? What is she able to offer to Mayor that he lacks at home and at school? How does Mayor’s concern for Maribel evolve throughout the novel?

6. As you continue to read the novel, a narrative structure will take shape. Each cycle in this framework begins with a chapter from Alma Rivera’s point of view, followed by a chapter from Mayor Toro’s perspective, and culminating in a chapter that gives voice to another individual in the apartment building. Think carefully about how the voices of these individuals—Raphael Toro, Benny Quito, Gustavo Milhojas, Quisqueya Solís and the others—comment on and illuminate the central narrative.

For example, beginning on p. 19, as you read Raphael Toro’s chapter, is it possible to describe Raphael’s feelings about leaving Panama in a single word? What would that word be? Explain the complexity of Raphael’s feelings for Panama and think about how his chapter casts light on the immigrant experience.

7. Compare the characters of the two fathers, Rafael Toro and Arturo Rivera. How does each man meet his perceived obligation to provide for his family? How do their wives, Alma and Celia, respond differently to the challenges of assimilation?

8. How does a language barrier contribute to the social distance between the Riveras and the people of Delaware? How does life in Newark require trust in the bus driver, the translator, school personnel, the cashier and even the police? Locate examples of the limitations of not knowing English. What is behind Alma’s observation, “So this is the doorway … between us and the rest of this country” (27)? How do Fito (35-36) and others serve as guides through that doorway?

9. How do the Riveras and their neighbors become American? What social barriers and economic hardships do they face in realizing the opportunity that is symbolized by America?

Is what they gain worth the cost of what they leave behind? How do the Toros, for example, feel “torn between wanting to look back and wanting to exist absolutely in the new life they’d created” (78)?
10. How do characters react to Latino stereotypes? How do you understand the motives behind the prejudice they experience? How do you see the characters being, “simultaneously conspicuous and invisible” (186)? Do you agree with Micho Alvarez’s declaration, “Maybe if [people] take the time to get to know us . . . they might realize that we’re a lot like them” (237)?

11. Be alert to signs throughout the novel that Maribel is getting better. What are the Riveras' hopes for Maribel? What is the “essence” of their daughter that they hope to recover? Observe how laughter promotes healing for Maribel as well as her family.

To what extent does Henríquez give readers a glimpse of Maribel’s point of view? What do her words (for example, “I lost myself” on page 113) convey about her own understanding of her situation? Do you see Maribel as a fully-developed character or is she (and her disability) a vehicle for the plot?

12. What role does guilt play in the central narrative of the story? How does guilt cloud Alma Rivera’s judgment in the events leading to the outcome of the novel? Is it possible for Alma to forgive herself?

13. When Arturo Rivera loses his job, the Riveras also lose the security of their immigration status. In closing, Arturo says, “People do what they have to in this life” (286). What would you do if you were Alma or Arturo Rivera, facing fear of deportation?

Do you think that it’s unrealistic for Alma to expect that people could understand “how badly a person could want a thing?” What motivates each character in the border crossing stories on pages 89 and 237?

14. Do you think that Alma makes the right decision at the end of the novel? Read the landscape descriptions on the bottom of page 279 and page 281, as the characters move “out of one world and into the next” (284). What does it mean to be home?

We are pleased to announce that Cristina Henríquez, author of The Book of Unknown Americans, will join us on campus for the Opening Convocation as well as a book signing with a Question and Answer event.