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# Reading Group Gold

## *Make Your Home Among Strangers:* *A Novel*

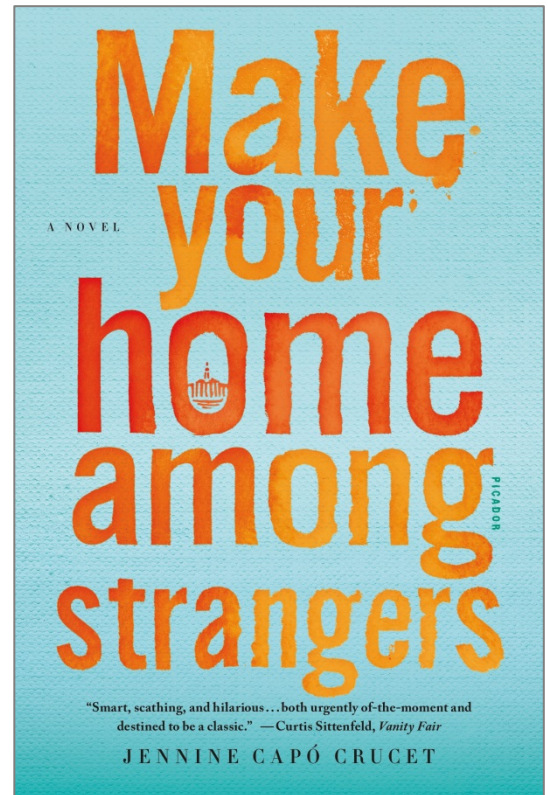
By Jennine Capó Crucet

### ABOUT THE BOOK

When Lizet—the daughter of Cuban immigrants and the first in her family to graduate from high school—secretly applies and is accepted to an ultra-elite college, her parents are furious at her decision to leave Miami. Just weeks before she's set to start school, her parents divorce and her father sells her childhood home, leaving Lizet, her mother, and Leidy—Lizet's older sister, a brand-new single mom—without a steady income and scrambling for a place to live.

Amidst this turmoil, Lizet begins her first semester at Rawlings College, distracted by both the exciting and difficult moments of freshman year. But the privileged world of the campus feels utterly foreign, as does her new awareness of herself as a minority. Struggling both socially and academically, she returns to Miami for a surprise Thanksgiving visit, only to be overshadowed by the arrival of Ariel Hernandez, a young boy whose mother died fleeing with him from Cuba on a raft. The ensuing immigration battle puts Miami in a glaring spotlight, captivating the nation and entangling Lizet's entire family, especially her mother.

Pulled between life at college and the needs of those she loves, Lizet is faced with difficult decisions that will change her life forever. Urgent and mordantly funny, *Make Your Home Among Strangers* tells the moving story of a young woman torn between generational, cultural, and political forces; it's the new story of what it means to be American today.



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## **An Interview with Jennine Capó Cruet**

### **What is your novel about?**

The simplest answer is probably: It's about Lizet Ramirez as she becomes the first in her family to go to college, which coincides with the arrival of a kid named Ariel Hernandez, who comes to the U.S. from Cuba on a raft. It tells the story of the year where their lives intertwine in significant and devastating ways. It's about people landing in places and having no clue who they are as a result.

I wrote this book in the hopes it would eventually serve as a kind of roadmap for the first-generation college student's expectations, but it was also my way of thinking through my own questions and worries about immigration and how broken and crazy our current barely-a-system is.

Ultimately, it's about big things and small things: family and identity; class and access and privilege; Miami heat (the weather, not the basketball team) and New England cold; academic integrity; finding yourself surprisingly attracted to gingers and lab equipment; the successes and failures of college diversity initiatives; the successes and failures of the American Dream.

### **You used to be a sketch comedienne. How does your comedy background inform your writing?**

I sometimes joke that I'm a writer because I'm a failed comedienne, but that's not actually funny so I stopped saying it. But yes, I started off writing sketch comedy and would sometimes turn those sketches into short stories when they didn't make it into a show or when I felt like the sketch form wasn't doing my characters justice.

From writing sketches, I learned a ton about dialogue and the sense of timing that good dialogue must have. I also learned a lot about pacing. I have a whole craft lecture on how humor can enrich very serious literary writing, the gist of which is how I apply a lot of the "rules" of sketch writing to literary fiction—the rule of threes, for instance. Writing humor taught me how effective it can be as a setup to something much more serious—think David Sedaris, how he usually has something really funny before something deathly sad comes up. It's like taking someone up a cliff before pushing them off: the effect is more substantial than if I were to just shove them over.

### **You worked for a time as a counselor/mentor at a non-profit for first-generation college students. In what ways did you draw on this experience when writing *Make Your Home Among Strangers*?**

During the years I lived in Los Angeles, I worked for a college access organization called One Voice, and it was the most rewarding job I've ever had. I had no business doing it, as I had no real counseling experience, but I thought the fact that I was also a first-gen college student who'd gone to a pretty fancy school (like the ones my mentees would be going to) would help me get by. I was right and wrong; it was also the hardest job I ever had.

I think what I drew on the most for this book was that there's this idea in the (largely white) cultural imagination that everyone who is the first in their family to go to college has the full support of their family behind them, and that's not always true. I worked with families who were dead set against their kids going to college—particularly the parents of girls, who saw college as unneeded or just a waste of time for their daughters. While my family was not against me going to college in general, they did outright question why I needed to go so far away, to a more expensive school, when we had Miami-Dade Community College and Florida International University right down the expressway. And they initially took my leaving very personally—like a rejection of them and the way they'd raised me.

Many of the students I worked with at One Voice had this same issue, or worse: they had families that were outright opposed to them going to college for a whole host of reasons (they'd been anticipating the income their child would bring in once they graduated high school, or they'd planned on relying on their son or daughter for child care, or because they didn't trust their child to have that kind of freedom, or some other reason). My point is, the narrative of the mother and/or father working hard and sacrificing so that their child can someday go to the best college they can get into—while absolutely admirable and wonderful and sometimes accurate—isn't in any way across-the-border true for low-income families. Some families sense—either consciously or unconsciously—the riff that such an opportunity will inevitably cause, and so they act in ways that prevent it from happening. And sometimes that comes out of love and fear: the families have experienced tremendous disappointments in this country, so they want their kid to have reasonable dreams—dreams that also happen to keep them close to home. We don't get these stories often despite how common they are, so I wanted to write a book that told that story, one that expanded the cultural imagination.

**Lizet, the protagonist of your novel, leaves Miami, a large city strongly shaped by its significant Latino community, to attend college in a small northeastern town. You made a similar transition for college. How are some of your experiences reflected in the book?**

Nate Silver would probably say that Lizet is about 32+/-2.5 percent me. But she's not really me: she is taller, and she made the wise decision of going into the sciences.

I'd say the experiences she has are versions of what every first-generation student goes through, so of course she and I have some overlap (though my undergrad institution was much better at recruiting and retaining students of color; Lizet's Rawlings is based more on smaller liberal arts colleges with much smaller minority populations). More broadly, though, they are what *anyone* who finds themselves having to build a life in any new, foreign places goes through. Some people fair better than others.

I think, in *Lizet*, I tried to create someone who I'd like to hope would've been a good friend had we found each other in college, but sadly and more likely, we probably would've felt ourselves to be in competition for the role of Everyone's *Sassy* Latina Friend. That's ugly to admit, but it's also accurate.

Actually, one of my own factually true experiences that shows up in the book is something I gave to the character of Ethan (a white dude!): he's an RA and so was I. His attitude about the job is pretty much mine, though I was much better at making bulletin boards than he is.

**There's a fictionalized immigration debate in your novel that draws upon the Elián González case. Why did you choose to look at this subject?**

Because I felt totally torn and confused by my own reactions to the Elián situation, and my head and heart couldn't make peace with each other over it as it was happening—and really never did, until I wrote this book. More than fifteen years after Elián was deported, we still have the same broken immigration system, and I wanted to show how that system impacts real families and real people, how that broken system is still hurting Americans every day. The events of that year and their aftermath haunted me and didn't stop haunting me until the day I wrote the last sentence of this book.

## Discussion Questions

1. Lizet is on a very different path than that of her older sister Leidy, a single mom living at home. Describe their relationship as sisters. Where do they have common ground?
2. Do you remember the Elián González story from 2000? If so, did you recognize the fictionalized references in this novel? How did they contribute to building the picture of Lizet's hometown and Cuban-American culture in Miami?
3. Describe Lizet's relationship with her mom. Do you feel compassion for Lourdes as she tries to navigate the parallels between Ariel Hernandez's journey and Lizet's own?
4. Why does Lizet feel like a fish out of water both at Rawlings and at home in Miami?
5. Which scene was the most powerful for you as a reader? Why?
6. How are Lizet's goals for her future aligned with her mother's, and how are they different?
7. How does Lizet cope with the challenges of being a minority student at Rawlings? What could the school administration do differently to support her?
8. Have you ever experienced culture shock like Lizet does at Rawlings? How did you cope?
9. Who was your favorite character? Who was your least favorite?
10. What could Lizet do, if anything, to bridge the cultural and generational gaps with Lourdes?

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