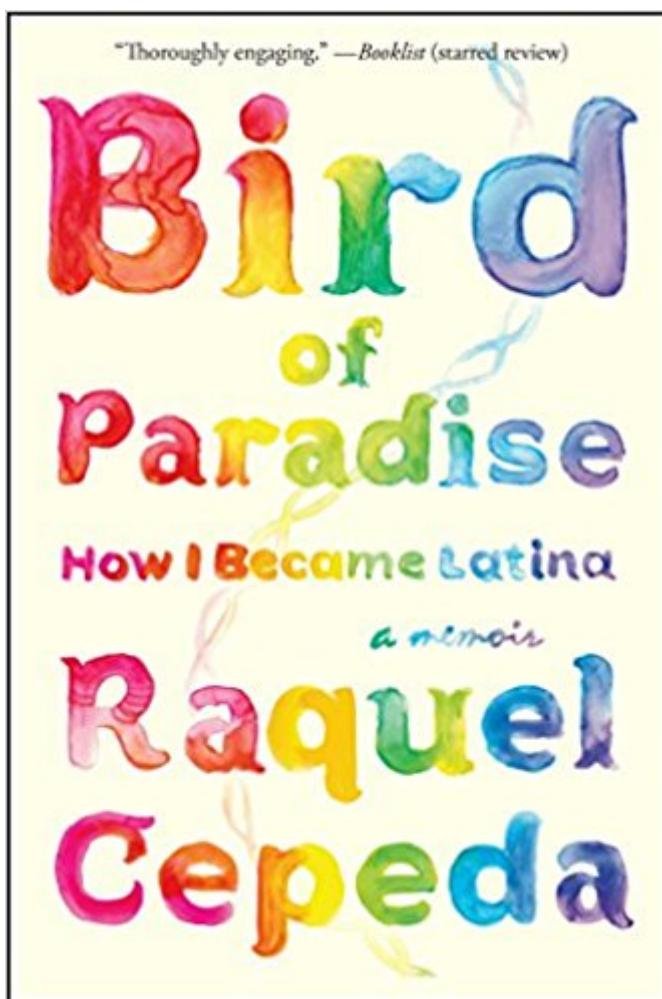


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# Bird Of Paradise: How I Became Latina



## Synopsis

In 2009, when Raquel Cepeda almost lost her estranged father to heart disease, she was terrified she'd never know the truth about her ancestry. Every time she looked in the mirror, Cepeda saw a mystery "a tapestry of races and ethnicities that came together in an ambiguous mix. With time running out, she decided to embark on an archaeological dig of sorts by using the science of ancestral DNA testing to excavate everything she could about her genetic history. Digging through memories long buried, she embarks upon a journey not only into her ancestry but also into her own history. Born in Harlem to Dominican parents, she was sent to live with her maternal grandparents in the ParaÃ±o (Paradise) district in Santo Domingo while still a baby. It proved to be an idyllic reprieve in her otherwise fraught childhood. ParaÃ±o came to mean family, home, belonging. When Cepeda returned to the US, she discovered her family constellation had changed. Her mother had a new, abusive boyfriend, who relocated the family to San Francisco. When that relationship fell apart, Cepeda found herself back in New York City with her father and European stepmother: attending tennis lessons and Catholic schools; fighting vicious battles with her father, who discouraged her from expressing the Dominican part of her hyphenated identity; and immersed in the '80s hip-hop culture of uptown Manhattan. It was in these streets, through the prism of hip-hop and the sometimes loving embrace of her community, that Cepeda constructed her own identity. Years later, when Cepeda had become a successful journalist and documentary filmmaker, the strands of her DNA would take her further, across the globe and into history. Who were her ancestors? How did they "and she" become Latina? Her journey, as the most unforgettable ones often do, would lead her to places she hadn't expected to go. With a vibrant lyrical prose and fierce honesty, Cepeda parses concepts of race, identity, and ancestral DNA among Latinos by using her own Dominican-American story as one example, and in the process arrives at some sort of peace with her father.

## Book Information

Paperback: 336 pages

Publisher: Atria Books; Reprint edition (February 4, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1451635877

ISBN-13: 978-1451635874

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.9 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.9 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 37 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #200,086 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #61 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Ethnic & National > Hispanic & Latino #186 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Specific Demographics > Hispanic American Studies #2460 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Specific Groups > Women

## Customer Reviews

\*Starred Review\* Abandoned by her mother, raised in Harlem by her violent father, Cepeda felt estranged from her family, except for fond memories of her grandparents in the Dominican Republic and her own intriguing image in the mirror. The hints of African and Indio she saw in the mirror were reflected in dreams as well, as spiritual guides occasionally made themselves felt at crucial times in her life. When her father suffered a near-fatal heart attack, Cepeda overcame her animus and spent a year searching for her tangled roots. Through DNA testing, she found the complexity of Hispanic heritage, a blend of indigenous Caribbeans (whose bloodlines were thought to be extinct), Africans, Amazigh, and European. Cepeda details painful memories of her highly dysfunctional family and the crushing adjustments of immigrants to an American culture that imposes race and ethnic categories in ways that defy history and the cultures of other nations. Drawing on the science of DNA testing and her own sense and experience of mysticism, Cepeda, an award-winning journalist and documentary filmmaker, offers a synthesis between logos and mythos in a thoroughly engaging look at race from a Latinaâ™s perspective on what is touted as a postracial society. --Vanessa Bush

--This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

âœI applaud Raquel Cepedaâ™s courage and brilliance. This is an important book, shedding light on questions that many of us ask ourselves, but seldom speak about out loud.â• (Marcus Samuelsson, chef and author of New York Times best-seller Yes, Chef)âœA thrilling and impassioned quest into the heart of the race question and the Latinoâ™a label as we've come to understand it. With meticulous research and refreshing honesty, Cepeda breaks the code not only of her own origins, but those of an entire people. Bird of Paradise is a necessary and important book for our time.â• (Patricia Engel author of Vida)"In >, Raquel Cepeda takes on, with cultural flair and brutal honesty, what it means to be the living embodiment of a global society. A Dominican-American woman seeking the truth about her roots, Cepeda uses tools including DNA testing and her reporterly skill for teasing out family secrets. What she finds is a revelation not just for her or for Latino Americans, but for anyone who cares about the way the past connects us to the

future." (Farai Chideya author of *Kiss the Sky* and *Don't Believe the Hype*) "Snappy, jazzy memoir of a Dominican upbringing by a New York journalist and documentary filmmaker asserts that constructing one's identity requires expressing and celebrating its makeup." (Kirkus Reviews) "Raquel Cepeda has long been one of the hip-hop community's most passionate and visionary writers and filmmakers; now, with this stunning blend of memoir and reportage, mythos and logos, we will have to share her with the world. An elegant, electric mash-up, offers resonant snapshots of a bygone New York City, family portraits saturated with beauty, honesty, and pain, captivating travelogues, and a fascinating, wide-angled look at ethnicity and identity. Cepeda's story is wrought with care and insight and ought to increase the sale of DNA testing kits by about twelve thousand percent." (Adam Mansbach #1 New York Times bestselling author of *GO THE F\*\*K TO SLEEP* and *RAGE IS BACK*) "A beautiful story of reconciliation and redemption." (The Huffington Post) "I hope that Raquel Cepeda's experience searching for her roots will encourage more Latinos to look at themselves with the same honesty and fierceness." (Esmeralda Santiago) "...a fascinating mix of different avenues of spiritual influences." (International Society of Genetic Genealogy) "At a time when Latinas of any age struggle with owning our voice and our identity and dealing with the mixed messages they get from this country -- 'We love you, we hate you! Stay! Go!' -- Raquel Cepeda opens her heart and shows us all a new and real path towards the futuro, the future. I believe this book is transformational and will not only change lives, but save them too." (Maria Hinojosa, NPR and PBS anchor, and executive producer of *Latino USA*) "Drawing on the science of DNA testing and her own sense and experience of mysticism, Cepeda, an award-winning journalist and documentary filmmaker, offers a synthesis between logos and mythos in a thoroughly engaging look at race from a Latina's perspective on what is touted as a post racial society." (Booklist, starred review) "I'm so appreciative of the book. It's the science of the DNA. It's the personal narrative of the finding of the finding of the self. It's a little bit of hip-hop thrown in there. It's all those different things. It is really a lovely book." (MSNBC's Melissa Harris-Perry) "Cepeda's complex family history is both uniquely Latino -- the book is peppered with Spanish idiom -- and paradoxically universal in this nation of immigrants. It will appeal to those who watch *Who Do You Think You Are?* and wonder about themselves." (Library Journal)

This book is a necessary read specially when discussing identity within the Latino community. The journey of this writer and her determination to excavate information about her roots is an inspiring and touching. Her relationship with her parents, growing up in NYC and the influence of hip hop

culture in her life. All these elements weave in this story and keep your attention. From the moment I start reading I couldn't stop. I found myself counting the minutes for my lunch time and for my train rides to continue reading. The descriptions of her characters and locations in NYC are so vivid that you feel as if you are there with her. Also the amount of information about DNA testing she provides, definitely sparked my interest to learn more about it and to take on the opportunity to find out about my ancestors. Raquel Cepeda is an inspiration to Latina writers like myself to keep writing about our stories!

This is an outstanding book. Raquel Cepeda manages to knit together a hip hop narrative of her sharp-elbowed childhood growing up in (mostly) New York City and Santo Domingo with a scientific (DNA testing) examination of, and reconciliation of, her ancestry. It works to a tee when she visits her abusive Dad and hopeless Mom as an adult to talk about her heritage (and get DNA cheek swabs, at least from Dad). She is the least sentimental of writers, so when she finds some flinty charity for her father (who she realizes she loves despite all the BS he laid on her) and her mother, who she realizes did her an unlikely favor by throwing her out of her childhood home and banishing her doom-y fuku (curse I guess), it is very, very poignant. Not quite Dickensian was her childhood but filled with equal parts family misery and hip hop joyousness. Ironically, the "How I Became a Latina" is really more in the memoir, in the content of her character, rather than the DNA research. She was a Latina in her soul before the DNA tests came back and showed her (to her evident delight) that the vanished Taino Indians live on in her, and that our ancestral home of Africa is big in her heritage, as well. Dominican women are the most beautiful in the world and the DNA shows why: the sturdiest of Spanish, Indian and African genes combine into a genetic tree of heaven. Viva Raquel! Besides a writer (on hip hop culture) and filmmaker she is also a boxer so she totally kicks ass. She also seems to have a happy family life and I love happy endings! Living well is the best revenge!

this book was recommended to me by a student that i worked with and so when i was looking for something new to read i decided that this would be it for me. my student, who is dominican, could relate to the book and its message so i figured that it would be a great read for me as well since i am half dominican. i threw myself into the story from the minute i opened the book. the story is really compelling and made me wonder about my own ancestry. although the book is certainly about a journey that the author is still on, i did feel as though it ended abruptly and i was desperate for more information. overall, a wonderful read.

Good book

I was pretty sure that I already reviewed this book here, but seems to think I haven't, so I'll try again. Basically, I loved the book. Enjoyed every minute. I wrote a full review for the Ms. Magazine blog. Just google "Raquel Cepeda" and "Melody Moezzi" and you should find it. I'm thinking they may not have posted my initial review b/c it included a link? Not sure, but point being, this book is fantastic.

The start of this book is relatively interesting, but the author continues down this spiritual journey that is a completely separate genre. Not worth it.

Every high school and college student in the US should be required to read this evocative, powerful memoir! Waiting for the Spanish language version!

A friend recommended I read this book. She thought I'd like it because I grew up in the Bronx during the 1980s. She was right! I really connected with Raquel's struggle to find her identity and was moved by her honesty and vulnerability. It is a very thoughtful and thought-provoking book. I am going to get a DNA test.

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