



The Madonnas of Echo Park

Brando Skyhorse

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We slipped into this country like thieves, onto the land that once was ours.

With these words, spoken by an illegal Mexican day laborer, *The Madonnas of Echo Park* takes us into the unseen world of Los Angeles, following the men and women who cook the meals, clean the homes, and struggle to lose their ethnic identity in the pursuit of the American dream.

When a dozen or so girls and mothers gather on an Echo Park street corner to act out a scene from a Madonna music video, they find themselves caught in the crossfire of a drive-by shooting. In the aftermath, Aurora Esperanza grows distant from her mother, Felicia, who as a housekeeper in the Hollywood Hills establishes a unique relationship with a detached housewife.

The Esperanzas' shifting lives connect with those of various members of their neighborhood. A day laborer trolls the streets for work with men half his age and witnesses a murder that pits his morality against his illegal status; a religious hypocrite gets her comeuppance when she meets the Virgin Mary at a bus stop on Sunset Boulevard; a typical bus route turns violent when cultures and egos collide in the night, with devastating results; and Aurora goes on a journey through her gentrified childhood neighborhood in a quest to discover her own history and her place in the land that all Mexican Americans dream of, "the land that belongs to us again."

Heralding a new young ethnic literary talent: Brando Skyhorse's first novel gives voice to the Mexican-American community in Echo Park, CA.

The Madonnas of Echo Park Details

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From Reader Review The Madonnas of Echo Park for online ebook

Stacy says

More like 3.5. Interconnected stories set in Los Angeles. The vivid descriptions of the world the characters live in held my attention but not always the stories. I heard this on audiobook so I feel that played a factor in my rating. I feel like this will be a re-read for me in print. However, Mr. Skyhorse is a storyteller. I look forward to his next novel.

Robert Starner says

This is a book that I will definitely need to revisit. I am not sure that it got my undivided attention, and this book respectfully commands and deserves it. The author presents a kaleidoscope of imagery and characters that populate the ethnic neighborhood of Echo Park buried in downtown L.A. Much like the movie Crash, Skyhorse weaves and interconnects the stories of many inhabitants of Echo Park through familial and non-familial relationships with one of the main events involving the driveby shooting that kills a young girl who is celebrating Madonna's Borderline video outside the mercado where part of the video was originally shot. The characters are well crafted and the incidents that tie the characters together are greatly intriguing. I did repeatedly find the beginnings of some of the vignettes confusing and somewhat hard to follow and that would not gain my immediate interest. But several of the tales are redeemed within the last third and become quite riveting. The author's note at the beginning is quite an alluring tale, but it is also part of the fiction of the novel and not knowing this at the beginning definitely altered my view of the novel and the author, and not necessarily to the better. So well I am judgmental here, I will revisit this book a bit later and definitely block out as many distractions as possible to give it a more focused read.

Tattered Cover Book Store says

Jackie says:

This book had me from the author's note, which begins, "This book was written because of a twelve-year-old girl named Aurora Esperanza." It seems that he, who was also 12 at the time, had said something terrible to her and then never saw her again, so was unable to apologize to her directly. He had to find a different way to apologize, and now, 25 years later, he has. In the form of this book. "I'm ready to dance with you, Aurora. This is my confession. I hope you understand why I need to say this here, to you, in this way: because a work of fiction is an excellent place for a confession."

Aurora is one of the many reoccurring characters in this collection of stories from different times through different eyes of the same neighborhood in East LA. This book is a fascinating patchwork of interwoven (whether they know it or not) lives and experiences that show what it is to be Mexican-American in LA (and perhaps anywhere).

Skyhorse introduces us to characters who may only be a brief part of any given story but linger in the reader's mind long after the covers close on the book. This is a powerhouse debut novel that introduces us to a writer of rare skill--we WILL be hearing much more about him soon.

Barbara says

For me, this novel is an eye-opening read of the Mexican American community. It's author, Brando Skyhorse writes in his author's notes (which were in the beginning of the novel, which I LOVE), that he wrote this novel as a "forgive me" note to a twelve year old girl whom he disrespected in 6th grade. Beyond that, Skyhorse wanted to give voice to the Mexican American community who grew up in the Echo Park area of Los Angeles during the 1950's to the present. All the stories are basically true, drawn from his childhood memories. All the people who's voices he used wanted to make it clear that "he or she was a proud American FIRST, an American who happened to be Mexican, not the other way around." Also, this is an illuminating read of those Mexican Americans who want to just stay in the country. It isn't about the struggles of how they got here. It's more about their life here and what they do to stay.

Each chapter is about a character, told in that character's voice. Each character's story ties to other character's storylines so there is a flow. Through each character, Skyhorse is able to highlight different struggles, attitudes, events that the community feels while trying to assimilate to the American Culture. It's the Latino story of Echo Park.

Skyhorse's writing style is easy to read. He's telling stories. There isn't significant prose involved. What is involved is stories that will change the way you see Mexican Americans. Books that illuminate and alter perceptions are phenomenal in that alone. It's a great read and I highly recommend it.

Toni says

I have been talking a lot about this book at work because it just excites me. One of the marketing blurbs about it that I read said that it will do for Mexican-Americans what Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (which I LOVED) did for Dominican-Americans. What that means is that there isn't a lot of mainstream fiction that displays the lives of the various ethnic communities in this country. Especially of the non-white ones.

What makes this book special is the author's note at the beginning that explains the childhood incident that provoked Skyhorse to write these stories. It is brilliant and that's all I will say about that.

The Madonnas of Echo Park is a collection of related, intertwined short stories that follow the lives of the Mexican residents of this neighborhood, a community in Los Angeles. Yes, there are day-laborers, maids and bus drivers, but, like the neighborhoods we all live in, their lives and motivations are diverse. The one event that all of this revolves around is the accidental murder of a toddler in front of the local corner store.

The first line sets the tone - We slipped into this country like thieves, onto the land that once was ours.

I'm going to say this word again, Brilliant. Go buy this book right now.

Constance says

Gosh, I really wanted to like this book, but I couldn't even finish it. The primary word that I keep thinking of to describe this book is "inartful." It is SO awfully and badly executed, in its voices, character descriptions, plot development, everything. It is also inconsistent and hard to follow! Did anyone edit this book?! Here's a one example of many: One chapter is written from the voice of an older Latina woman (another is uninterestingly written from the voice of a self-hating American-born Mexican-American, *yawn*). She is having a conversation with a priest about a vision she had of the Virgin Mary. The priest begins asking her questions, "not a trace of disbelief or suspicion in his voice." Seven lines later, the priest says, "I see. And where did this 'meeting' take place?" Don't those single quotes indicate some sort of disbelief?! Anyway, that's a minor complaint, but suffice to say that it is hard to tell the tone of many of the conversations in the book and even hard to tell what the hell is happening at key moments sometimes. Bad.

Also, is this cover design not the worst thing EVER?

Judy says

Brief news flash: Both of my cataract surgeries are now complete. I can see everything without glasses! Well, except for small print close up in poorly lit places, for which I use those reading glasses you can buy at pharmacies. I am so happy!

Now onto my review. Except for a trip on the week of Christmas, I shall be posting regularly again. Thank you for your patience.

My hand-crafted, boutique, and very special Tiny Book Group is on a project to read books set in Los Angeles. All three of us are from elsewhere, having come to LA in middle age. Echo Park is a Los Angeles neighborhood that began as a Mexican ghetto and has lately succumbed to gentrification. Brando Skyhorse grew up in Echo Park in the 1980s.

His truly wonderful novel is a successful example of a novel written as a series of collected stories featuring characters who appear again and again. By the end you know how they are connected through family and events.

"We slipped into this country like thieves, onto the land that once was ours." There is so much history in that opening sentence. It took my breath away. But history is the last thing on the minds of Skyhorse's characters. Their minds are crowded with fears of deportation, struggles to learn English, make a living, and assimilate.

Every living American today, except for Native Americans, is an immigrant or a descendant of immigrants. I wonder how many immigrant novels have been written here. Brando Skyhorse (descended from Mexicans but raised to think that his Native American step-father was his biological father) took this often told story and made it pulse with sights, smells, tastes, loves, deaths, and the infinite variety of human longings.

To see images of the following locations and get the link to the video mentioned below please go to my blog: <http://keepthewisdom.blogspot.com>.

The Tiny Book Group met in Echo Park to discuss the book. We ate lunch at Xoia Vietnamese Eats. We got pastries at Masa of Echo Park Bakery & Cafe. We strolled to Echo Park Lake to eat our treats, then to Stories Books to choose our next read. All the while we talked about the book and wondered, "Where have all the Mexicans gone?"

Part of the answer can be found in this video, but most of the answers have been encapsulated in *The Madonnas of Echo Park*.

One more thing: reading and learning about the incident that inspired the book's title was a little piece of literary magic.

Danielle says

The Madonnas of Echo Park is a must read for anyone curious about an increasingly diverse U.S. society. Skyhorse skillfully brings readers into Echo Park, and offers a holistic perspective on the many challenges its population faces. He develops a plot line that reads almost like a movie - each character's chapter/story seems unique and more revealing than the ones before until, suddenly, one realizes that the current narrator is actually the previous narrator's mother and a later character-narrator's grandmother. In addition to fantastic, believable, yet sometimes magically real prose, Skyhorse incorporates a number of contemporary social issues that affect all people, but especially some of the nation's most vulnerable and already disfavored populations. Without casting judgment or imposing his own opinions on readers, Skyhorse manages to comment on a number of hot-button topics, such as immigration, gentrification, and jobs, and effectively raise people's awareness. Overall, I thought The Madonnas of Echo Park was a wonderful novel because it transported me into a world from seven different passageways (distinct lives), and incorporated a number of social issues I am curious and passionate about.

Favorite quotes:

"There were many bosses to practice my English on, and while I'd never command the language the way my daughter would, I could speak it as well as a man making a promise - that is, with equal doses of earnestness and desperation, along with enough wiggle room to escape out of a commitment by feigning a misunderstanding," (Skyhorse 52).

"Faith is a luxury for those who are able to ignore what the rest of us must see everyday," (Skyhorse 156).

Karissa says

This is the thing about this book: when I started it, I was convinced I was going to love it. From the meta-pseudobiographical author's note, to the first couple of stories, I was riveted. I loved the interweaving story idea to create a novel. I was drawn in by the language (though perhaps overwritten at times), I was intrigued by the characters who felt honest and compelling, and the book made me nostalgic for Southern California. I settled into chew through a book that I would be exhilarated by. And at first I was. I really loved the second story, "Blossoms of Los Feliz". I think the first few stories are the strongest of the book. But when I got to the one about the bus driver, I began to feel it was a little too self-conscious. The bus driver didn't feel authentic to me, and the book felt like it took a turn away from the lovely, honest pieces that the first stories were, and became a book that the author felt had to BE something. Skyhorse is a great writer -- but I felt like in the second half of the book, I could see him working, trying to get a point and a lesson across in a way that was overt, something I hadn't felt in the first half of the book. It's still a great read and not at all a chore to get through, but something about the second half felt less complex and honest and believable, and that disappointed me. Also, I'm not sure the ending section tied in all the strings completely or even as artfully as I'd have hoped -- something which, of course, is a difficult thing to do. Overall though, I still enjoyed it

greatly, and in no way was it a bad book. I think I just felt it couldn't have been even better if it taken a more subtle route, and allowed the characters to just emerge on their own instead of being saddled with the preconceived themes of the book. But still, very enjoyable in a lot of ways.

Madeline Knight-Dixon says

This is one of those books that is constantly making you think, and constantly realize how ignorant Americans are. It's about Echo Park, a Latino neighborhood in LA that is predominately Mexican. One of the chapters focuses on illegal workers, how terribly they are treated and how much they are looked down upon even from people in their own community. The novel constantly struggles with are you a Mexican-American, or an American-Mexican.

At its core, the book is about identity. Can you escape your cultural identity, or do you have to live in the space created by your race? Do you have to fit into the gender roles your culture gives you? What about the expectations your family has for you? Each character that narrates the book is striving to answer these questions, and figure out how to live their lives with what they have been given.

It's also about the interconnectedness of communities. Without knowing it, each person in the novel is connected to each other. Whether it's through chance encounters, family ties, relationships gone wrong, or violent crimes, they all have influenced each other's lives. There may not be a moral message in this, but it's important to note nonetheless that no matter how hard you try you can't escape from your roots.

Throughout the story, there's the smallest touches of mysticism. A sighting of the Virgin Mary, "the Lord" who frequents the neighborhood, a flower that's omnipresent. It becomes not a novel about religion, but a novel about faith, and finding that faith in your own way. Faith can come in any form, from hard work to cynicism, but allowing yourself something to believe in that is greater than yourself.

It's a beautiful book, and while it is an extremely important work of contemporary Latin American literature, it's also an important book about life. That's what I find so perfect, is that it transcends the label people attempt to put on it. It's staggering and moving, human beyond the concept of race.

Chris says

I found this to be an interesting companion piece to Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat*, which I read earlier this year, but my opinion of this book may have suffered by the comparison. I do enjoy the concept of interrelated stories that create an overall novel-like effect and it has been used to memorable effect by Saroyan (*The Human Comedy*) and Steinbeck (*Tortilla Flat* and *The Pastures of Heaven*).

I will start out by saying that I enjoyed at least half of these stories very much. *The Blossoms of Los Feliz*, *Our Lady of the Lost Angels*, *Rules of the Road*, *Yo Soy El Army* and *The Hustler* were quite good. The others I felt tried a bit too hard to force something extraordinary to come out of very ordinary characters and situations, which just didn't work for me. The obsessions of teenaged girls with pop stars that drive several of the other stories didn't resonate with me and the last (and in my opinion the weakest) story in the work, *La Luz y La Tierra*, seemed to be a conscious (and rather long) attempt to gather all of the story lines together when it just wasn't necessary. In the weaker stories I felt that I was being beaten over the head with the "message" that I was expected to take away.

Tortilla Flat deals with the same ethnic group at a different place in the history of California, yet Steinbeck brings a mythical air and humor to the lives of these characters that is lacking in Skyhorse's work, which is admittedly more current and gritty, but also more deliberate and lacks the master's subtle touch. But considering that this is Skyhorse's first novel the jacket blurb to the effect that we may be witnessing the coming of a top notch new literary talent may well be true. I certainly plan on following this author.

Jimmie says

There's been a string of critically acclaimed novels lately that are basically collections of interrelated character-driven vignettes with little plot (e.g., "Elegance of the Hedgehog," "Let the Great World Spin," "Olive Kitteridge," "The Imperfectionists"--which is one of my Top 5 reads of 2010). I think the book that comes the closest to "Madonnas" is James Frey's "Bright Shiny Morning," not only because they're both set in Los Angeles (or that they were both less well-loved by critics), but also because, even during the seemingly light-hearted funny parts, there's always this cold wistfulness lingering just next to you as you read.

The jacket copy seems to imply that this book is about what happens to the bystanders after a little girl named Alma, dressed with many other girls as Madonna and performing "Borderline" on the street corner, is accidentally killed in a drive-by. And it is, kinda. But it's really more about the invisible divisions of Los Angeles and the connections that stretch between them.

The book is tender, mordant, heart-breaking, beautiful.

It's no secret that, of all the places I've lived, Echo Park is far and away my favorite. But even were that not so, I think I would have loved this book almost exactly as much as I do now.

I only have two criticisms. The first is that about halfway through, I had to pull out a pad of paper and write a flowchart/genogram to keep track of all the characters and their relationships. Also, with each chapter written from a different character's POV, I think Skyhorse had a little trouble staying "in character" sometimes. Specifically, the chapter about Manny Jr., a lifelong gang member who dropped out of junior high school and thinks books are "faggoty" speaks a little too well, has a little too advanced of a vocabulary, and is a little too eloquent to be believable.

Daisy says

I'm ready to dance with you, Aurora. I hope you understand why I need to say that to you here, in this way: because a work of fiction is an excellent place for a confession. p. xx

A novel that feels like short stories or a collection tied together by recurring characters to shape it into a novel. In each chapter you meet a character who later is the centerpiece of another chapter. If you don't read this fast enough, you might forget who's who--or at least I did, with my shoddy memory. I had to page back to remind myself what I'd learned already about some of them so I could apply new information. It starts out clean and strong. I think the first two chapters are my favorites. The last one, unfortunately, is the busiest with symbols and chaos and sentimentality and a rushed sense of trying to bring the novel all together. But the characters are sympathetic and well-drawn. I wish in a way the author had picked one and stayed with her longer.

You get a strong sense of neighborhood, of how it was and of what it's becoming. The lights and sounds and walls and jacaranda trees of Los Angeles are vivid.

I wonder what it's like to read this having no knowledge of Echo Park. Just coincidentally, I'd been there the day I began this book. In fact, I climbed up the concrete stairs towards the house of someone I was meeting in Echo Park, and I sat at the top in the shade waiting for her reading this book. It couldn't have been more fitting.

It's romantic and it's real. And it's actually important learning about this community of Mexicans-who-were-born-here.

3.78 stars

Luke Schwiebert says

This book will surprise you. Not in its themes or its writing style (though the former *are* important and the latter *is* excellent), but in its presentation: every single chapter is told by a different character. This isn't made obvious at first, so you may get thrown for a loop at the beginning of Chapter 2, but once you figure it out, it really works.

I've read some other reviews that say that *Madonnas* "isn't really a novel, more like a short story collection." I guess that's true on its face, since every individual chapter has a beginning, middle, and end, but the stories are all clearly meant to be read together. On their own, they would feel inconclusive and fairly pointless; only when they're tied together, and read in their proper designated order, do they fill out a full story. The book is especially interesting in the ways the stories tie together. Sometimes it's obvious - one's told by a mother, and the next, by her daughter, for instance - but others feel totally unrelated, until a shocking hammer of a line reveals the integral part that the protagonist plays in the overall story.

These masterfully interwoven tales tell the story of Echo Park, a place that many people may not have even heard of - I'm an Angeleno and I've never even been there! - but which has made its immortal mark on the people that lived there. These characters may be fictional (save for Aurora Esparanza, who's based on a girl that Skyhorse used to know), but the people are real, and it's about time their stories were told.

Leonard says

The Madonnas of Echo Park tells the stories of Mexicans who struggle through their daily lives in Echo Park, a section of Los Angeles. The book starts with "We slipped into this country like thieves, onto the land that once was ours," and ends with "This is the land that we dream of, the land that belongs to us again." A summary of the characters' attitudes toward the land they love and struggle to claim as their home.

Echo Park (Photo by User2004 at Wikimedia Common)

For a migrant worker, "I have no heartbreaking story of the journey here; the heartbreaking journey is here, in this small couple of square miles of land called Echo Park." And for the bus driver, "America is there for the taking if you aren't lazy and have no qualms about the kind of work you do." Succinct descriptions of their lives in the United States. They are among those who know that life is tough but also that America is the land of opportunities.

At the same time, Skyhorse shows his witticism when he said, through another character that "Catholicism

gives everyone something to feel ashamed about." And the lady of the house spoke broken English to the maid, believing the latter doesn't understand a word. When in fact the maid understands the mistress and was learning English through her daughter. These bits of humor modulate the gravity of the subject matter.

Through the book, Mr. Skyhorse gives voice to the voiceless and shape to the invisible. And he fills the writing with insights into the dynamics between these invisible people and the country that they seek to claim as home.
