



Juventud

Vanessa Blakeslee

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Growing up as the only daughter of a wealthy landowner in Santiago de Cali, Colombia, teenaged Mercedes Martinez knows a world of maids, armed guards, and private drivers. When she falls in love with Manuel, a fiery young activist with a passion for his faith and his country, she begins to understand the suffering of the desplazados who share her land. A startling discovery about her father forces Mercedes to doubt everything she thought she knew about her life, and she and Manuel make plans to run away together. But before they can, tragedy strikes in a single violent night. Mercedes flees Colombia for the United States and a life she never could have imagined. Fifteen years later, she returns to Colombia seeking the truth, but discovers that only more questions await.

In the bristling, beautiful prose that won her an IPPY Gold Medal for her short story collection *Train Shots*, Vanessa Blakeslee's *Juventud* explores the idealism of youth, the complexities of a ravaged country, and the stories we tell ourselves in order to survive.

Juventud Details

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From Reader Review *Juventud* for online ebook

Larry H says

Full disclosure: I received a copy of this book from the publisher in exchange for an unbiased review. Many thanks to Curbside Splendor Publishing for making it available!

The epigraph of Vanessa Blakeslee's emotional debut novel includes a quote from the great Gabriel Garcia Marquez which I feel so accurately sums this book up: "What matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember and how you remember it."

Growing up the daughter of a wealthy landowner in Colombia, Mercedes Martinez lives a life of privilege—a driver takes her where she needs to go, maids take care of her every whim, and she never wants for anything. Yet her life isn't perfect—her mother left when she was very young and never tried to get in touch, and what Mercedes really hopes for is true love.

When she meets Manuel, a passionate young activist who is firmly rooted in his faith and the need for radical changes in their country, she is instantly smitten. Manuel and his brother Emilio open her eyes to the plight of the poor in Colombia, and how she cannot simply accept her father's worldview on what is happening around her.

It's not long before Manuel and Emilio cause Mercedes to re-evaluate all that her father has told her about his life before she was born, and why her mother left Colombia and never tried contacting them. She begins to suspect that her father is far more dangerous than she could ever have imagined, and wonders exactly why he is trying to keep her and Manuel apart, instead forcing her to go to boarding school in America.

An act of violence one night changes everything, and she realizes her only option is to flee to America and leave her old life behind her. But as she grows older, her life is always shadowed by her suspicions and the events of her teenage years. Fifteen years later, she returns to Colombia to try and find answers, but is absolute truth ever possible, or just more questions?

I'll admit I know very little about Colombian history and the violence which occurred in that country, so I found *Juventud* both enlightening and disturbing. Blakeslee really captured Mercedes' voice so well, and I felt she gave the character complexity so she was so much more than a pampered teenager who suddenly found a conscience. I also found that she had a deft hand when it came to evoking the dichotomy of Colombia's beauty and the extreme poverty and violence affecting the country.

At times the plot moved a little slower than I would have liked, and yet I felt it rushed a bit when Mercedes went to America. I felt as if some of the other characters were a little less fleshed out, but this is Mercedes' story. At its heart, *Juventud* is a moving story about love and loss, and how our lives are shaped not only by what we see and what we do, but also by the things we don't say, the questions we don't ask.

See all of my reviews at <http://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blo...>

Thing Two says

I really enjoyed this coming-of-age story about young love amidst the turbulent 90s Colombian drug wars.

The first half of the book is told through the eyes of teenager Mercedes Martinez; the second half of the books picks up fifteen years later, when Mercedes returns after living in the US for an extended period.

It very much reminded me of Julia Alvarez, and of the more political writings of Isabel Allende. If you enjoy good writing, Latin American political stories, you'll enjoy this book.

John Fleming says

Terrific read! This novel has so much going for it. A well-researched look at life among the drug cartels in Colombia. An engaging coming-of-age story. Youthful romance. A harrowing escape. An immigrant's struggle to adjust. A mother and daughter struggling to connect. A dark family secret that haunts and grows more complex. It's beautifully written and entertaining throughout, and Blakeslee juggles all of these elements with a deft touch. I read it quickly and had a hard time putting it down.

Jennifer says

This is the story if a young Colombian girl. When I picked up the book, I thought it was written by a Columbian. At first I thought the awkwardness of this book was that it was a translation. Nope this book was written by an American. First part 2 stars but it did improve when the character's life was close to the author's realm of experience.

I likely would not have finished this book if it weren't something I promised to read for a book swap. Others seem to really enjoy this but it seemed hollow to me. There are likely many similar stories written by Columbians and those might be a better read.

Kristie Smeltzer says

I thoroughly enjoyed *Juventud*. Blakeslee took me to another world with the book's setting and tone in Colombia in the novel's first act. The protagonist, Mercedes, comes of age with all manner of struggles and intrigues during an already difficult time of growing up. Then we follow her through international travels and blossoming into adulthood, learning how her unique teenage years in Colombia continue to influence her world view and choices as a successful woman. The book felt—escapist isn't the right word—transportive, taking me to other places and teaching me many things along the way.

Jason Pettus says

Yes, yes, I know, an author has every right in the world to write about characters and situations that are vastly different than their personal life, and it's unfair to disparage a book just because the person who penned it doesn't seem "authentic enough" to get away with it; but that said, it's hard not to read Vanessa Blakeslee's *Juventud* without constantly thinking about the disparity of the subject in this case, of a white

New England academe who's written a hefty novel all from the viewpoint of a teenage Latina girl in Central America, whose life takes a series of dramatic turns because of her father's role in a local drug cartel. I mean, I don't want to give the wrong impression; the book is well-written, and hits all the notes you would want from a solidly constructed three-act novel (and is also, by the way, one of the most beautifully designed books in the history of *Curbside Splendor*, and *Curbside* has put out a whole bunch of beautifully designed books over the years). But it's also an overly precious novel in that way you often see from full-time academic writers, a big turnoff for me and a lot of others; and it's also pushing a rather overt political agenda, and I'm not a fan of novels that primarily exist to make a political point. Definitely worth picking up if these things don't bother you, it can also be easily skipped if like me they do.

Out of 10: **7.4**, or **8.4** for fans of MFA novels

Susan says

Terrific book (and especially of interest as I'm going to Colombia in February.) Teenage girl growing up in Cali on an enormous hacienda. Her mother (Jewish, American) left when she was a baby; she has had no contact with her mother and her family since then. Father domineering, gradually - as Mercedes becomes more liberated and connected to friends - he and his friends/associates become frightening. Of course, there's a serious love interest, best girlfriends, all of the expected romance angles - but in a setting where there has been serious political violence for years, with peasants fleeing the land and the violence, and the presence of coca (with the wealth and violence that comes with drug trade.) I found this a totally engaging read, couldn't put it down.

Lisa says

This novel, about a young woman growing up amidst privilege and violence in Colombia had great potential. But the novel faltered under the weight of too much information that didn't propel the story forward. The second part, set in Florida, was better paced but still felt awkward.

Maria Dolorico says

Overall, I found this novel to be captivating -- ambitious in its layers and full of consistent metaphors and illustrations of its themes. Young love is wistful and spontaneous, political passion is idealistic and romantic, and reality is unfeeling and disappointing and inevitable.

It's a love story. It's also a story about loyalty -- familial, social, and national. It's a story about idealism. coming of age, and loss of innocence. It's a story of social justice, freedom, privilege, and poverty, and how those concepts vary from country to country.

My one disappointment is with the structure of the novel. The first 2/3 of the story cover 5 months in the protagonist's life. It's more than back story; it is the source of the entire story and the more compelling plotline. But present day is where the meat of the story is, where the protagonist reconciles her past with her present life and where the past comes full circle. For this reason, I wish the story had been set in the present, and that the novel had alternated between flashback and present. Telling the story in a linear fashion made

the protagonist's adult life seem rushed -- as it was all hurried to get her back to the reconciliation, and the last 1/3 of the novel crams in 15 years of the protagonist's life and is a vehicle for plot line development.

Margo Littell says

A sweeping story of a troubled time in a troubled place, and their effect on one girl seeking the truth about who she is and what her life is meant to look like. Blakeslee has created a riveting portrait of Colombia, with the kind of detail and compassion that make this fictional world wholly realized. As Mercedes evolves from a fifteen-year-old with little idea about her family's darkest secrets into a woman who gives perhaps too much importance to the past, Blakeslee shows us the dangers inherent in believing the worst of those we love the most.

Sharon says

Book buyers who viewed the Netflix Original Series "Narcos" will be engrossed by this thought-provoking novel set in Colombia, the U.S., and Israel. *Juventud* recounts the fictitious story of Mercedes Martinez, an idealistic young Colombian-American woman, as she grows to adulthood. (*Juventud* means "youth" in Spanish.) The author cleverly provides a behind-the-headlines perspective of various factions in conflict in Colombia during the 1990s: Young left-wing revolutionaries. Right-wing paramilitary groups. Ruthless drug lords. An ineffective government and corrupt police force. Idealistic social justice activists. The pro-peace Catholic Church. Wealthy landowners and poor, displaced peasants and villagers. In that context, the novel explores themes of fate, trust, family secrets, forgiveness, and the hope and idealism of youth. The narrative keeps readers guessing until the end: Did Mercedes Martinez's rich, sullen father Diego have her lover killed years ago? What exactly was Diego's connection to drug overlord Pablo Escobar? Why did Mercedes' mother suddenly leave Colombia for Miami and abandon her as a baby? Will Mercedes remain estranged from her father or reconcile?

Readers who are experiencing estrangement with their family will also closely relate to the protagonist.

Megan says

Being totally upfront: I have no idea why I'm giving *Juventud* four stars. There was a quality to this book where I couldn't put it down (I flew through this book in about 3 days). But there was another part of me that thought this was going to go in a totally different direction, and in a way, I'm disappointed it didn't go in the direction that I thought it was going to, or at least I'm disappointed that the protagonist didn't come to the same conclusions that I did.

Mercedes is an innocent 15 year old girl that lives on her father Diego's hacienda. She has a personal chauffeur, Fidel, and a host of jefes and guards live on her property. This is her normal. Her mother, Paula, abandoned her before she ever formed a memory of her. Mercedes knows virtually nothing about her mother

except that she lives in the US. In Cali, where Mercedes lives, there is heightened violence and political tension between the ELN (a guerrilla group), the FARC (another guerilla group), and the paramilitary. Mercedes is mostly oblivious to all of this; she is rich, her friends are rich, and she lives a cushioned life where she knows virtually nothing about the desplazados that are being forcefully removed from their pueblos and are now homeless.

This changes quickly. Within the first 20 pages, Mercedes meets Manuel, a 21-year-old devout Catholic that participates in peace rallies. From the readers' perspective, the relationship between Mercedes and Manuel is a little clunky, to the point that I believed that Manuel was just duping Mercedes to get information on her father and had no real feelings for her at all. This is heightened by the fact that much of the bonding time between Manuel and Mercedes is wordless; there is not enough dialogue to make their love story believable. Manuel basically divulges to Mercedes her own father's criminal past and asks Mercedes to eavesdrop and pay attention to see if he is still involved in any way, with either the guerrillas or the paramilitary, or if he is paying either of the groups off to stay safe, or keep his secret past secret, or something... unfortunately it's all a little vague. But Manuel keeps manipulating Mercedes, saying things like, imagine how powerful an image it would be if you, the daughter of Diego Martinez, were seen next to me at a peace rally!... even after Mercedes has expressed discomfort with the idea.

Here's an example:

"Promise me that you'll get away for this [peace rally]. I'll never ask you again, I swear."

"Helping you out here is one thing," I said slowly. "Those crowds--even with a thousand snipers and helicopters overhead, I don't feel safe."

His arms fell to his sides. "You think this place is any safer?" He lowered his voice and stepped closer; his lips grazed my ear. "You can be sure the ELN and the FARC, and I've no doubt whoever else is watching this block, are well aware that the motos and cars parked in the alley don't belong to customers shopping for their next bedroom set."

I set down the flyers, now cool. "Okay," I said. "That still doesn't mean the rally is any less dangerous."

"It's not," he said, and sighed. "But you're part of this too. Aren't you?" He held up the flyer, eyebrows raised, and dropped it onto the stack. Then sank into the chair and rubbed his face, his eyes puffy and hair mussed. He badly needed a cut. "It's just that you're my girlfriend, and it's that much more important to me. Not having you there feels like--almost like you don't exist." (133)

Then he promises her that he will delay a very dangerous journey until Mercedes is back from Costa Rica visiting her aunt, but doesn't at all, which like on hand one, there was some pretty high stakes, but on the other hand, why not just be honest with her and tell her you can't wait???

TLDR; I think Manuel is manipulative, I don't buy their love story, and I thought the flash forward to the future would have Mercedes reflecting on the fact that this relationship was a little ridiculous and more a combination of puppy love and lust, and that it got all the more out of hand *because* they decided to run off and elope (seems a little bizarre to me especially as Manuel, the devout and hypocritical Catholic didn't even bother to introduce Mercedes to his parents even once?)

The tensions and dislike between Diego and Manuel heighten. Meanwhile, Diego has been pushing to get Mercedes to go to boarding school in the US and she has been very resistant during the first pangs of love. He hires her an English tutor, Sister Rosemary. Mercedes goes around lying to everyone and paying off her chauffeur to go and have sex with Manuel in his personal side apartment that he shares with his brothers where his parents never ever go. It's all weird. All of it.

And then the night before Manuel and Mercedes and set to get hitched and run away from home and never

talk to Diego again, (view spoiler)

Once Mercedes ends up in the US, however, it is not much like she thought it would be. She meets her mother, who has become a citizen of Israel, but her mom is cold, distant, and doesn't want to be called "Mom." She's not ready. They have no substantial conversations about anything besides school and work. They are awkward strangers. Mercedes grandparents are nicer, more involved, and caring. She lives with them and her mother goes back to Israel. Nine years later, her mom finally says it's alright for her to call her "Mom." I'm shocked at this gap because if it took my mom that abandoned me 9 years after having a relationship with me to allow me that concession, I would never. Paula is basically a shitty mom whom Mercedes forgives because she puts herself in her shoes: *If I had abandoned my daughter because I didn't want to be in that country and felt too alone and isolated and my husband was involved in crime, but I knew he would be a good father (???) it would be hard for me to accept this sudden emergence of my teenaged daughter and I, too, would be aloof.*

It's all very weird, I'm telling you.

Mercedes goes to college, and Mercedes goes on a Jewish Heritage trip to Israel, and Mercedes takes her first lover since Manuel on that Jewish heritage trip, and he is the first and only person she confesses everything that happened in Colombia. He totally avoids her after that, like a total dick, but it's all awkward because Mercedes kind of imagined being married to him after like, one hook-up. He tells her he can't be with someone with her father's kind of criminal past because he's in the Israeli army. Mercedes shuts herself off emotionally forever. Mercedes goes to grad school, Mercedes goes for her PhD, Mercedes falls in love with a nice Southern boy, and everything is great and wonderful except that her nice Southern boy has really strong ties to family and wants a big wedding and that PANICS Mercedes. She never tells him what happened in Colombia. He dumps her because of it, and she's devastated, and she waits too long to do anything about it. Her career advances... and advances... and advances, until it takes her back to Colombia where she discovers that (view spoiler)

So essentially the entire novel boils around to: Mercedes fucks up most aspects of her life, including with the person who raised her and loved her, the person who wanted to marry her and loved her, and her entire perception of reality by basing all of her decisions around her 15-year-old love interest who sort of emotionally manipulated and didn't respect her? Bummer deal.

But hey, I liked it, and that cover is gorgeous.

And here's two quotes I liked:

"You know, I didn't realize there could be so much disagreement right away, even if you're in love with someone. That one person could need another to do things, you know?" Her gaze shot up, and I shook my head. "Not what you're thinking. I mean how you fit another person into your life, what they expect. Not that I'm fighting with Manuel or anything."

"Ah, yes," Inez said, and clicked her teeth. "You disagree, good. You don't want to be the kind of woman who just goes along with things. That's just as bad as fighting all the time."

"It is? How?" I'd been rocking and stopped.

"That's how you lose yourself. And the other person. *No* is like a magic staff. If you don't use it, well--..." (133)

From the beginning I had been drawn to his intellect and lack of pretense, and later on I wondered how I had overlooked the even-keeled warmth between us as a sin of something more--that the cornerstone of a great

relationship might not lie in a flush of desire, but in a trusted friend. Someone who shared similar passions and perspectives, and laughed with you at the end of a hard day. (278)

Victor Giron says

Maestro, play me a song, a soft delicate song that will slay my heart, and bring me a bottle of wine.

sarah morgan says

I obtained this as an advanced reading copy. All I can say is, pre-order and read this when it hits the bookshelves. Blakeslee is a wonderful writer with an inquiring mind. She proved her interest in complex characters in her short story collection, *Train Shots*. Now in her new novel, *Juventud*, she delves deep.

This is a big, arcing International coming-of-age story. The novel is about family, deception, Colombia's long, sad struggle with the FARC, but it is also about love. The power it has over us and how sometimes damaged souls are loath to allow the magic to squeak through our defense mechanisms.

I'll be writing a longer, more in-depth review for the Internet Review of Books, but for now consider this one a big, five-star read!

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

This is another book I only discovered after getting "Curbside Splendor" as my result in the Book Riot quiz, Which Indie Press Should You Be Obsessed With?" I had not heard of the publisher, and requested a bunch of interesting looking titles from interlibrary loan.

This book kept me up late into the night just because I couldn't stop reading it. I can't tell you the last time that happened; I am old now and reading usually puts me to sleep. But not this one, I was up until almost midnight because I "only" had 100 pages left.

Mercedes is a privileged teen living in Colombia. She attends private school and has a driver. Her father is a wealthy land owner and her mother is an American who left when she was an infant. She has no contact with her. But the situation in Colombia is violent and unstable, and her father wants to send her to the United States to finish her schooling.

You don't have to know a lot about Colombia in the 1990s to fall into this book. Mercedes has been protected from understanding the political situation, so we as readers learn about it as she finds out more about the FARC, ELN, the drug cartels, and the *desplazado*, the displaced people within Colombia who have

had to flee their homes due to fighting, but are trying to find work and food and shelter.

Then Mercedes meets Manuel, an idealist revolutionary, and falls in love. And so the book is not so much a thinly veiled history lesson but a coming-of-age novel, a romance, a tragedy, etc. While the end section of the novel is Mercedes returning to Colombia as an adult, trying to make sense of some of the events, the majority is Mercedes as a teen and what she goes through. I thought it was very well written and well researched, and while it isn't an "#ownvoices" story from a Colombian author, and sometimes Mercedes is far more reflective than a 15 year old might be, I still think this novel is excellent. I hope the author is working on her next project.
