

Big Familia: A Novel

Tomas Moniz

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In Tomas Moniz's bighearted novel *Big Familia*, a man comes to terms with changes in his family, his neighborhood, and himself.

Juan Gutiérrez lives with his daughter, Stella, in a gentrifying neighborhood in Berkeley. Stella is about to graduate and leave for college. Juan's boyfriend, Jared, wants a level of commitment that makes him uncomfortable, and karaoke enthusiasts are taking over his favorite dive bar, Nicks. He is haunted by difficult relationships with his parents, who refuse to recognize his queerness, and he is doing his best to shake their legacy by creating his own family structures.

Characters and their relationships are drawn with satisfying depth. Juan is a self-aware but troubled narrator, knowing that his daughter, boyfriend, and other friends and family deserve more from him. His uncertainty about what he wants and what he can give others comes through. Jared's patient readiness for commitment and Stella's determination to forge her own path are recognizable and vibrant. The regulars at Nicks form a loose band of friends whom Juan relies on but doesn't know well, and each character is memorable.

The novel's focus is less on its plot and more on the inner lives of its characters as they wrestle with issues of race and sexual identity. Plot developments, while few, push the characters further on their emotional journeys.

The tone is sunny and warm, even while touching on fraught subjects. The gentrifying Bay Area setting is drawn in sharp terms, including its changing demographics and new racial tensions. As Juan and Jared ride their bikes through the city streets, the neighborhoods come alive. Nicks becomes a central symbol, with its mix of comforting familiarity and portents of change.

Big Familia is a timely and entertaining exploration of family, sexuality, race, and community, and Juan's efforts to change and grow are moving.

REBECCA HUSSEY (November / December 2019)

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