

Familia

Lauren E. Rico

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In Lauren E. Rico's emotive novel *Familia*, two distant sisters receive life-changing results from a genetic DNA test.

Gabby is an aspiring writer who lives in Brooklyn and works for the feature magazine *Flux*, where she and other staff members are offered the opportunity to take free familial DNA tests. Gabby's charming boss, Max, hopes that some of the results will be "unexpected [and] undiscovered" and result in interesting story ideas. And they do: though Gabby insists that she is of Italian heritage, her DNA profile indicates European, African, and Taino ancestry. Gabby's parents are deceased, so she cannot discuss the perplexing results with them; she's also unnerved by her newfound DNA link to an older sister, Isabella, in Puerto Rico.

The book shifts between Gabby and Isabella's perspectives well. Raised as an adored only child in New York, Gabby attended private school and traveled in Europe. In Puerto Rico, Isabella grew up with an alcoholic, heroin-addicted father; she witnessed her mother's childbirth-related death and endured a violent sexual assault when she was fifteen. Now a talented artist who also works at a tourist shop, streetwise Isabella is thrilled by the possible discovery of a long-lost sibling.

The contrasts between Isabella and Gabby are compelling, as is the gradual closeness that develops between the women after they meet in San Juan. But the novel's true verve comes from its depiction of Puerto Rico's natural beauty and urban landscapes, along with the various people who know why Gabby was kidnapped as an infant. Crucial information regarding the decades-old mystery is revealed by dapper El Viejo; formidable Beatriz; Miguel, a compassionate detective; and Gabby and Isabella's flawed yet repentant father, Alberto.

Affecting and complex, *Familia* is a novel about biological and adoptive family ties, in which sisters separated by fate are reunited by science.

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