



## Juventud

**Vanessa Blakeslee**

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*Half romance, half meditation on global affairs, Juventud examines how the past can affect the present and how memory can be fallible.*

Vanessa Blakeslee presents a stirring coming-of-age tale in her evocative debut, *Juventud*. In a story set in tumultuous Colombia, the sheltered daughter of a wealthy man falls in love with a fiery political activist who opens her eyes to the realities of both her family and her country, changing her life forever.

As the only daughter of an upper-class family, fifteen-year-old Mercedes Martinez has never had a reason to contend with the civil unrest and bloodshed that pervades her beloved home country of Colombia. That changes when she meets and falls madly in love with Manuel, a young musician and passionate activist. Clandestine meetings and political rallies turn her privileged life upside down as she learns more about her father's past. But when a tragedy destroys her plans for the future, Mercedes must decide whether she can remain in the only home she's ever known or leave it forever.

More than a story of the loss of innocence, *Juventud* paints turn-of-the-millennium Colombia in vivid detail. Daily violence, political strife, and criminal dealings punctuate Mercedes's life as Manuel's influence infringes on a previously safe existence. The sometimes shocking events parallel the youthful, intense nature of Mercedes's illicit affair with her lover.

Loneliness and a need to belong weave through the novel as Mercedes struggles to understand her father's past and reconnect with her estranged mother. Her attempts to build a family consistently flounder due to the scars left behind by her experiences in Colombia. While her teenage exploits are shown to be larger than life, accounts of her later adventures in Florida, Israel, California, and Washington, DC, suffer due to a lack of the same loving detail given to the time spent in her birth country.

From Colombia to Washington, DC, *Juventud* crosses international borders as it follows the growth of a singular young woman. Half romance, half meditation on global affairs, it portrays how the past can affect the present and how memory can be fallible. And above all, it demonstrates that while personal history can influence someone, it does not have to define them.

VERNIEDA VERGARA (Winter 2016)

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