

Magical Habits

Monica Huerta

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Monica Huerta's memoir is a bold contemplative account of her family's immigrant history, and of her struggle to forge an identity beyond their influence. Personal reflections, photographs, articles, mystical tales, Yelp reviews, and text messages form this collage representing Huerta's unique background; the daughter of Mexican American restaurateurs, she recalls her childhood and adolescence, and her later career as a scholar, writer, and academic.

Huerta's story is peopled with intense characters. Her Cristero great grandfather was executed by firing squad in 1927 for defying the Mexican government's persecution of Catholics. Her parents emigrated from Guadalajara to Chicago in 1976; for decades, they owned Salvador's Restaurantes Mexicanos. With a menu of 48-ounce "killer" margaritas and other crowd-pleasing items, Salvador's reliable fanfare of mariachi music and attentive service expanded to serve a chain of eateries.

Huerta details the duality of restaurant life, contrasting Salvador's fun and fiestas with the hustle for customers and publicity; the harried pace; and the "grease and steam" of the kitchens, full of overworked staff. Her parents' marriage deteriorated; her father remarried, leaving his family and the restaurants, and taking his omnivorous entrepreneurial energy back to Mexico.

And beyond her family memories, Huerta contemplates Chicago's distinct Mexican community, too, showing people adjusting to the city's fierce winters and ethnic and racial entrenchments. Adaptable, yet also tenacious and cohesive, Chicago's Mexican Americans became a prominent economic, political, and cultural presence.

While she too descends from "centuries of restless migrants," Huerta conveys a more intrinsic yearning as she moves from place to place—not only for economic opportunity, but also compelled by the urge to play "geography hopscotch," and because of her belief in the "magic of Elsewhere."

Thoughtful, wry, and intimate, *Magical Habits* is a memoir that's rich with questions about identity, heritage, authenticity, and the true American dream.

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