

We Heard It When We Were Young: Tales of Growing Up Mexican American in Small-Town Iowa, by Chuy Renteria. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2021. 221 pp. Photos, map. \$16.00 paperback.

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We Heard it When We Were Young is an engaging, unflinching account of growing up Mexican American in West Liberty, Iowa. Chuy Renteria provides a bird's-eye view of what it was like growing up nonwhite in the 1980s and 90s in small-town Iowa. As Renteria points out, while much ado has been made of West Liberty, Iowa's place as the state's first Latinx "minority majority" city, the complexities and difficulties of growing up nonwhite in Iowa and in West Liberty is much less documented and lauded. *We Heard It When We Were Young* is a must-read for anyone interested in understanding more deeply what it is like for nonwhite Americans to grow up in small town Iowa and in the United States more broadly.

Renteria's story of growing up Latinx in West Liberty, Iowa, is a borderlands story. He chronicles his struggle to claim an identity in an America where whites establish borders around Black, Brown, and White, and where those who are not considered White are made to feel like outsiders. As I read *We Heard it When We Were Young*, I was reminded of the Chicana intellectual Gloria Anzaldúa's rendering of the border as more than a geographic location specifically on the U.S.-Mexico border. Borderlands is a capacious concept introduced by Chicana scholars in the 1960s and includes literal as well as emotional and psychological spaces where two worlds collide and where pain exists; "Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* [2007], 25).

Renteria provides numerous, unsettling examples of the racist treatment he, his friends, and family members experienced. His book is an elegy of living in a midwestern borderland, and his story of experiencing trauma and racism runs parallel to Latinx authors who have chronicled their childhoods of ethnic and cultural inbetweenness and are working to craft an identity in America. In addressing the feeling of being caught between Mexican and American cultures, and not fitting in with either, *We Heard it When We Were Young* joins the ranks of books by

Latinx authors such as Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, and Margarita Longoria.

Renteria is intentional in the details of his struggles that he shares. *We Heard it When We Were Young* avoids nostalgia and sentimentality for the more honest and complicated reality that kids growing up Brown in Iowa (and the United States more broadly) face struggles that majority Whites do not. As a scholar of the Midwest and Iowa, I find this book to be an important contribution not only to our understanding of Iowa history, but also of the impact White racism and ethnocentrism has had on Mexican American individuals and families. It is a hard read, but a necessary one, as it sits alongside histories of Iowa that veer toward nostalgic renderings of small town living and midwestern history more generally. Renteria chronicles his experiences with racism, physical and emotional abuse, and eventual struggles with bulimia, with grace and in gritty detail. He lends a critical lens to “puff pieces” that celebrate towns like his for being a Latino majority town and to what he calls the “three F’s: Food, Festivals, and Fun” (61). Renteria writes, “When it comes to celebrating diversity or cultural appreciation, the three Fs lie in wait. It makes sense; they’re a big part of who we are. Of what West Liberty is.” Yet the problem, as Renteria points out, is that too often, people ignore the social realities that are glossed over by the three Fs; “The festivities ignore the trauma and ugliness of the kids on the playground. The food and fun ignore the internalization of things like swastikas on playground equipment” (61).

The author eventually finds release and purpose in break dancing and in becoming a “B-Boy.” For Renteria and other nonwhite boys “stuck in the middle of all of these different cultures . . . it was the dance that most connected us” (141).

Renteria’s portrayal of his West Liberty childhood is gripping and draws the reader into the life of a young Mexican American man and the intrafamilial struggles and the white racism of teachers, police officers, and everyday Iowans. The author shares numerous examples of “micro” aggressions as well as the more virulent macroaggressions that he and his family experienced in a small Iowa town. This reviewer was struck by the honesty of Renteria’s assessment of his youth and by just how difficult it is to grow up Brown in the midwestern United States. *We Heard it When We Were Young* is a must-read for anyone who wishes to understand the complexities and challenges of growing up nonwhite in Iowa and the broader United States.