



# Book Review: Alegria pens inspiring tale of cultural discovery

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## Sofi Mendoza's Guide to Getting Lost in Mexico

By Malin Alegria

Simon & Schuster Young Adult, \$15.99

Thanks to my parents' hard work and perseverance, I never had to experience life below the poverty line. I sometimes wonder if I truly could have survived growing up without my Keds canvas sneakers, my portable transistor radio and a remote control TV. After reading Malin Alegria's remarkably touching new young adult novel, I'm glad I never had to find out.

"Sofi Mendoza's Guide to Getting Lost in Mexico" is a traditional coming-of-age story with a Hispanic twist that is contemporary in its present-day setting, yet manages to highlight a time and culture south of the border that is foreign to first-generation Americans of Mexican descent living in the United States.

Alegria amusingly weaves together the shallowness of youth and all its material trappings with the realization that it's not the Paris Hilton-inspired fashion of the month that ultimately defines who we are, but rather it's our family, culture and traditions that serve as the guidepost that sets us apart from the rest of the pack.

The novel's protagonist, Sofia "Sofi" Esmeralda Mendoza de la Cruz, is a 17-year-old high school senior born in Mexico but raised in Southern California after her parents left Baja California in order to provide Sofi a better life. When we meet her, Sofi is busy spending her final days in high school getting ready for the prom, finals and graduation, but most importantly, a trip into Rosarito, Mexico, code-named "Operation Papi Chulo" where she plans to let her secret crush, Nick Hoffman, know how much she likes him.

While Rosarito Beach is only a short drive from Southern California, it's 100 years away in terms of modern conveniences. In the area frequented by tourists, one finds the beaches and Mexican culture extremely relaxing when compared to American life, but as you move toward the edge of town where the neon lights fade, the stark reality of poverty amid the absence of 21st-century technology can be difficult to comprehend.

Sofi's saga grips the reader from her opening instant message to her best friend as they plan a Memorial Day bash at a classmate's parents' vacation home in Rosarito that promises "no adults, plenty of booze, and tons of opportunities for unregulated debauchery," to the ill-fated attempt to return to California when she discovers her legal papers aren't so legal after all.

Forced to remain in Mexico with Spanish communication skills that can best be summed up as a Taco Bell menu, living with a strict aunt, a lazy but kind-hearted uncle and mischievous cousins she barely knows, Sofi takes self-pity to a dramatic level until she comes to the realization that material possessions come

and go, but cultural heritage and family members are forever.

Alegria notes that the book was inspired by the real-life story of Martha and Carmelia Luna of Santa Paula, Calif. In 2004 they were denied re-entry into the United States after visiting Tijuana for the afternoon. The sisters had originally arrived in the states when they were children and had lived in California for 16 years with work permits. They were Cal State Northridge students looking forward to completing their degrees, but by visiting Mexico that day, they had voluntarily deported themselves without knowing it.

"Sofi Mendoza's Guide to Getting Lost in Mexico" is heartwarming tale of how a confused teenage girl is forced to adapt to her surroundings as she faces and overcomes challenges of the heart and soul that lead to a deeper appreciation of life on both sides of the border.

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