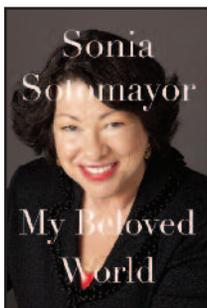


BOOK REVIEWS

My Beloved World

By **Sonia Sotomayor**
Knopf (2013)

Reviewed by **Elizabeth Kelley**



The book's jacket is significant. Across the top, the author's name appears simply as Sonia Sotomayor, not as Justice Sotomayor. Across the bottom is the title *My Beloved World*, taken from "To Puerto Rico (I Return)" by poet José Gautier Benítez. And in the background is a large picture of a smiling justice, not in judicial robes but in an elegant black suit. These details foreshadow what lies inside the book — the story of Sonia Sotomayor before she became a judge; a woman sustained and propelled by her proud Puerto Rican heritage; a woman who openly and honestly takes us not just to Princeton and Yale Law School, but to the lonelier places of her life such as her father's alcoholism and her failure to secure a job offer after working as a summer associate.

From the first chapter, our hearts open to the eight-year-old girl standing on a chair to reach the stove. She is holding a needle in the flame of the gas burner to sterilize it so she can administer her own insulin. Both her mother and her father are too scared to do it.

As a little girl, Sonia was surrounded by love — scores of aunts, uncles, cousins, and a worshipping although annoying little brother. More complicated were her parents — a kind, but alcoholic, father and a mother who worked long hours to provide for the family, particularly after the father died when Sonia was nine. At the center of it all, like a force of nature, was the family matriarch, Sonia's grandmother, her Abuelita.

But make no mistake: this was not a fairy tale childhood. The family lived in the South Bronx, surrounded by poverty and violence. Her parents often fought to the point of screaming. And at the time Sonia was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes, life expectancy for such children was short.

The little girl grew into a very smart teenager. An older classmate told her that she should apply to some Ivy League colleges. She did not quite know what that meant, but she followed his advice. Her on-campus interviews were a bit like *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*; Radcliffe was too prim, Yale was too radical, but Princeton felt just right.

Prior to entering Princeton, Sonia feels the sting of racism. The school nurse makes a snide remark about Sonia's taking the place of someone more deserving, and when she and her mother are shopping for a suitable winter coat, the store clerk is decidedly unhelpful — until she learns that Sonia is bound for Princeton.

It is said that those with the clearest goals have the clearest sense of direction and the best chance of success. That applies to now-Justice Sotomayor. From the time she was a kid watching Perry Mason on TV, she figured out that the judge made the final decision, and that is what she wanted to be. Every choice in her life flowed from that.

Arguably, she made choices that a similarly motivated man would not have to make. She reveals that her first marriage ended in divorce because her ambition and success eclipsed her husband's.

Like most mother-daughter relationships, the one she has with her mother is complex. Undeniably, Celina — Mati — sacrificed for her daughter. She bought a set of Encyclopedia Britannica in installments in order to feed the hungry mind of her young daughter. She worked long hours to send her to Catholic schools. But she seemed emotionally distant and overly harsh to Sonia's beloved father. The mother was glamorous to the point that



she was called the Jackie O of Bronxdale. In contrast, Sonia was awkward and did not care about clothes. The justice reveals that in recent years she has repaired her relationship with her mother and that they are very close. But she is silent as to specifics.

If you read *My Beloved World* in order to gain insight into Justice Sotomayor's judicial philosophy, you will be disappointed. But if you read it in order to understand the woman behind the justice, you will be fully satisfied.

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About the Reviewer

Based in Spokane, Wash., Elizabeth Kelley is chair of the NACDL Membership Committee. She has a special commitment to representing individuals with mental illnesses and intellectual disabilities who are accused of crimes.

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