When does a **sympathetic** representation of immigrants become sentimental?

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Beyond Victimhood: Sentimentalism in Contemporary Immigrations Novels

BACKGROUND

- The representation of immigrants in literature is a timely subject, given ongoing debates about immigration to the US.
- Complex, realistic representations of immigrants can elicit empathy from readers and educate the public about the issue.
- As James Baldwin argues, reductive or sentimental representations can reinforce harmful stereotypes and stigma

KEY TERMS

- **Empathy**: A sentiment, similar to sympathy, felt toward another person that results from understanding or somehow discovering their suffering.
- **Pity**: A condescending sentiment felt toward a party that may be perceived as pathetic or inferior.
- **Sentimentalism:** An emotionally exploitative literary style that is excessively dramatic and emotional. These literary works are often unrealistic and dramatize to increase reader engagement and further the author's agenda.
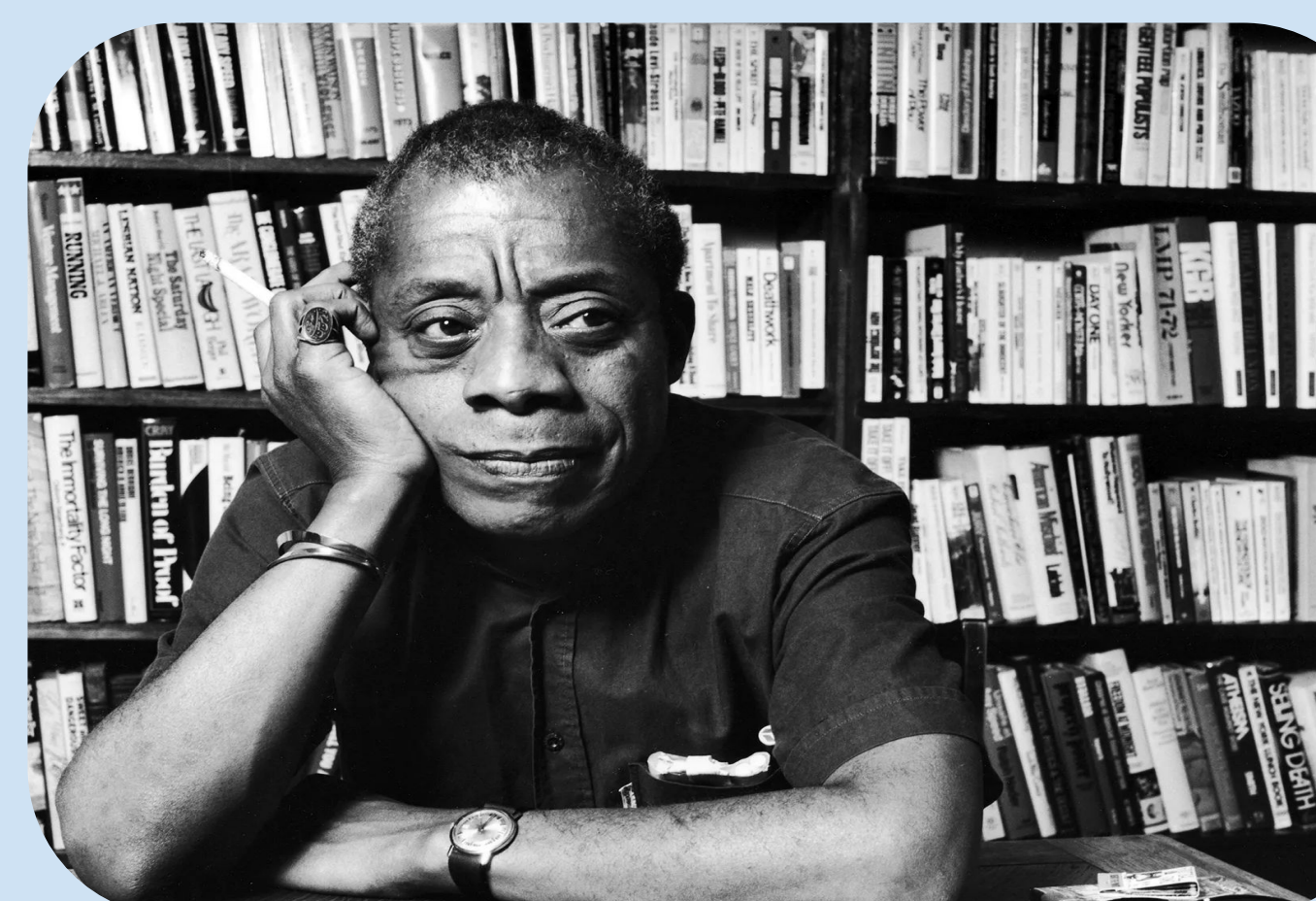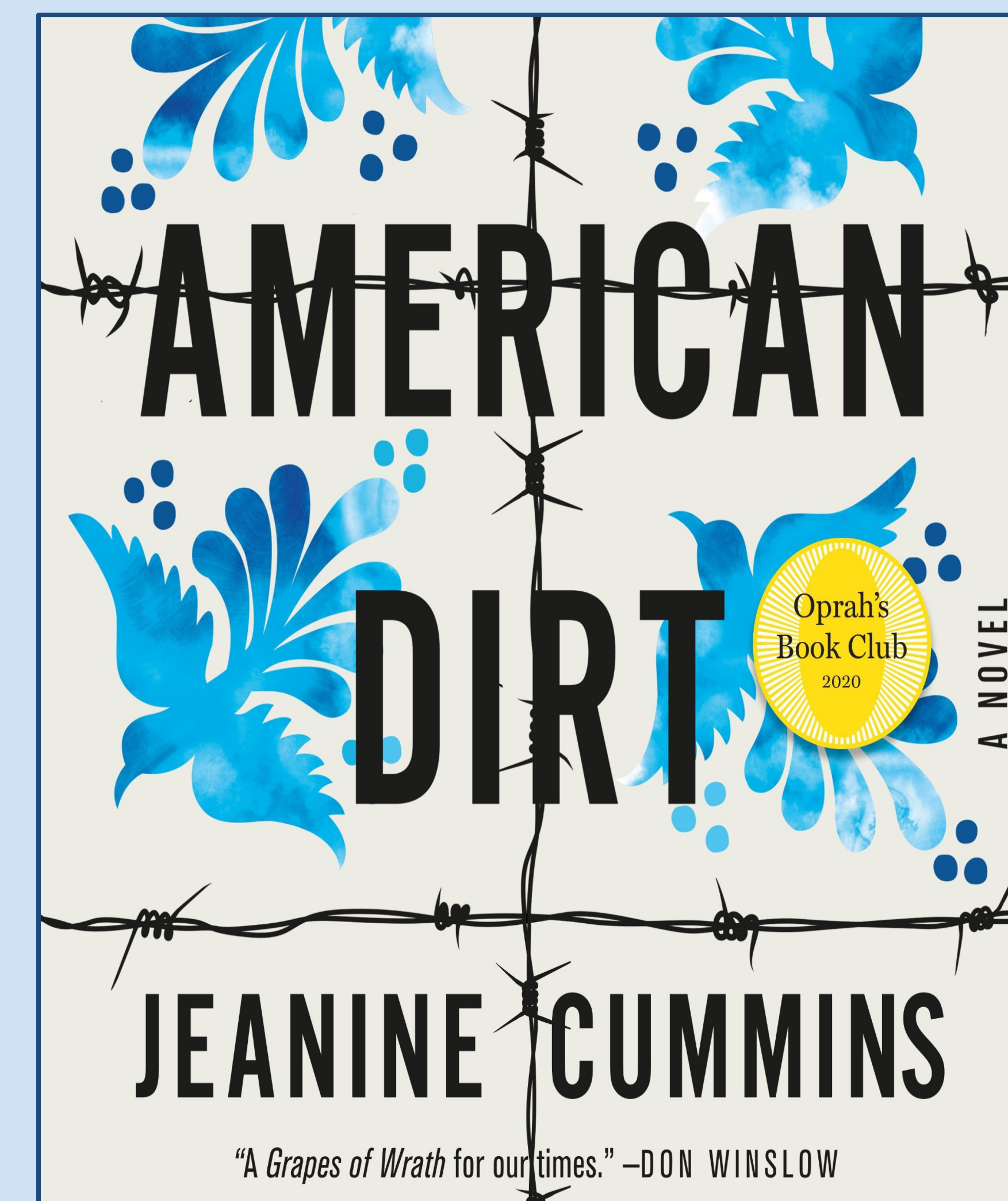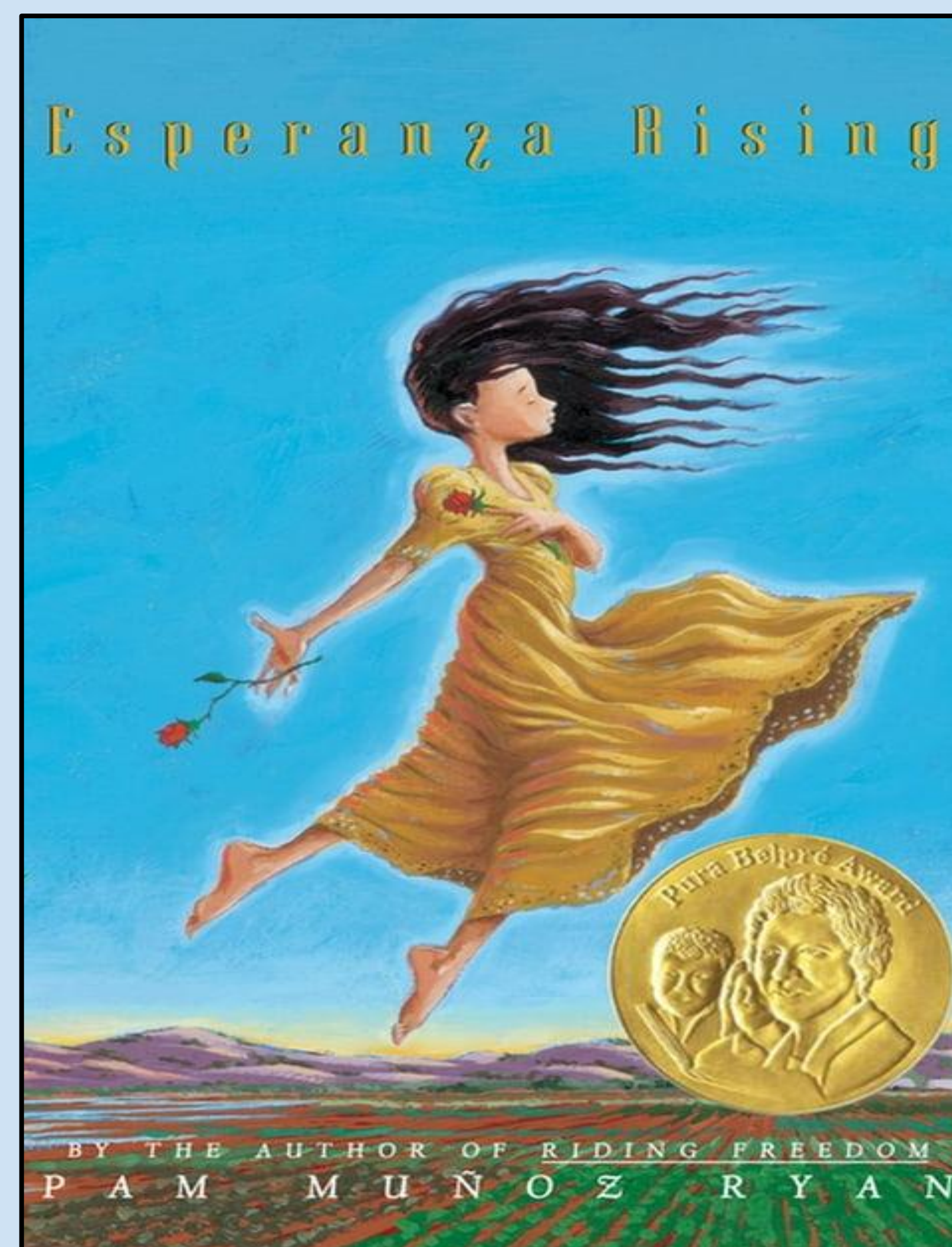
ARCHIVE

American Dirt by Jeanine Cummins
- A novel about Lydia, the widowed mother of her autistic son Luca, and their journey of escape from Mexico to America after a drug cartel brutally murdered their family. The novel follows their journey on *La Bestia*, a dangerous network of trains, to safety.

Esperanza Rising by Pam Munoz Ryan
- Follows Esperanza, a young Mexican immigrant, as she grows from a spoiled and ignorant, to a mature, hardworking young woman who works to support and reunite her family.

Presenter: Faiqa Ali

"Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel [...]"

– James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel"

ARGUMENT

- Immigrants are often depicted in contemporary literature, as stereotypically ideal victims, and reduce them to their "victimhood". These misrepresentations fail to garner empathy, providing a way for readers to pity the character, but distance themselves from the suffering that they read about rather than understand it in all its complexity.
  - This critique of pity finds inspiration in Stefan Zweig's contention against it, calling pity a means of distracting readers from the difficulty of the character's pain.
- Sentimentalism also strips the immigrant narrative of its human complexity and creates a distance between readers and immigrant characters. Lilie Chouliaraki and Tijana Stolic explain that such reductive tropes fail to humanize real migrants and refugees and spark empathy for them and achieves the media's "substantive responsibility" to these immigrants.
  - For example, *American Dirt* reduces Mexican immigrants to their struggles and exploits their victimhood rather than establishing Lydia as a multifaceted, complex human with a life and character beyond her struggle.
  - By contrast, Esperanza's character develops as she overcomes the struggles of adapting to a new environment and working to reunite her family and help her sick mother. This novel provides a truthful and complex depiction of a genuine human being.

"The really flat character can be expressed in one sentence [....] The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way."

E M Forster on **flat vs round characters**, *Aspects of the Novel* (1927)