

Author shares story of woman's difficult quest across the border

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Author Aaron Bobrow Strain discusses his book “The Death and Life of Aida Hernandez a Border Story” at the Copper Queen Library Wednesday.

Lyda Longa/Herald/Review

BISBEE — The story of one undocumented woman's struggle to forge a life for herself and her only child in the United States after suffering years of abuse, deportation, and imprisonment, was shared Wednesday at the Copper Queen Library.

Author Aaron Bobrow-Strain wrote the searing saga titled, "The Death and Life of Aida Hernandez: A Border Story." The book centers on the life of Hernandez, a native of Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico, who grew up in Douglas in the 1990s and 2000s amid the town's prominence in the U.S. as a sort of ground zero for immigration policies.

But the book also trains a spotlight on the treatment of undocumented people and the U.S. policies set in place aimed at deterring migrants from crossing the border.

The book follows Hernandez through her turbulent childhood marked by family violence, Bobrow-Strain said. But he also called it a childhood filled with optimism. The book also shows how Douglas became what Bobrow-Strain called a "sacrifice zone."

It is also a book about the abuses against migrant women as told through the eyes of Hernandez, Bobrow-Strain said.

"It's a tough story full of a lot of pain for Aida and for this region," said Bobrow-Strain, referring to the Douglas-Agua Prieta border. "This region has been set up as a sacrifice zone. Douglas has experienced decades of 'disinvestment' since the Reagan era anti-union organizing and plant closures laid waste to what was once a vibrant Mexican-American working class."

Bobrow-Strain said Hernandez suffered "many deaths" as she was growing up, hence the title of the book. She grows up in Douglas at a time when the city becomes one of the most "heavily policed in the United States," the author said.

"Aida is an active member of her community...." Bobrow Strain told the audience at the library. "But she is a citizen without citizenship and this is what causes her first death. Sociologists call this a 'social death.'

"The larger journey at the heart of the book is about a young woman risking everything to try to see if she can climb from that place of social death to a place where she isn't just surviving on the border, but where she is thriving, she is truly alive."

Bobrow-Strain, who lives in eastern Washington state, said he first came to this area in 1993 as an activist in the sanctuary movement. He met his wife here and his daughter was born here as well. He returned in January 2014 and learned of Hernandez's odyssey through another activist. He was introduced to Hernandez — which is not her real name — and the two finally met "on a wintery day at the 10th Street Park in Douglas."

He was transfixed by the young woman's journey.

"Aida's story left me shaking that day in 2014," Bobrow-Strain said. "There is so much pain and so much suffering in her story. But the thing that left me in tears that day that blew me away, was the pride with which she told her story, the kind of sense of audacity and wit and brio and the kind of pride that having survived by the seat of her pants in the world we have made at the Mexican border."

Bobrow-Strain said Hernandez, now 32 and living in New York with her 15-year-old son, struggled against "high odds" for a place for herself and her child in the United States.

“The sheer act of surviving the world we have created on the Mexico-U.S. is itself a form of dignity and worth,” the author said.

Alison Williams, program coordinator at the Copper Queen Library, introduced Bobrow-Strain to the mostly-female audience at the library, calling the work, “an activist book, an activist project.”

“We’ve been following these sad series of events for decades now and this is the only one that really centers on a woman,” Williams said. “The woman’s experience is so frequently overlooked. It’s actually a book that’s full of hope.”

Bisbee-based filmmaker and photographer Bijoyini Chatterjee, was a member of the audience who said she “devoured the book.”

“I thought this was extremely eye opening,” she said. “It was a tough story to tell.”