

# ORDINARY GIRLS

A MEMOIR

JACQUIRA  
DIAZ

BOOK  
CLUB KIT



Winner  
OF THE  
Whiting  
AWARD

Dear Reader,

*Ordinary Girls* is about my childhood and adolescence in Puerto Rico and Miami Beach, about surviving depression and violence. It's also about love and friendship, about our parents and how their actions shape us, about finding ourselves, even as we're losing the people we love, about how we are not defined by the worst thing we've ever done.

Growing up, I was a juvenile delinquent who spent most of her time on the streets, a high school dropout. At eleven, I attempted suicide for the first time. Then a few months after that, I ran away from home for the first time. And then I started getting arrested. I was a repeat offender who kept running away, kept getting arrested, kept fighting in the streets. I was also in the middle of a sexual awakening, what my friends would call "catching feelings" for boys and girls. But I couldn't talk about that, not to anyone, not in the early nineties, and certainly not in my neighborhood.

I spent much of my childhood and adolescence pretending to be someone else, especially when it seemed like the whole world was trying to erase us. I spent a lot of that time hiding in books, looking for myself in stories, and after I became a writer, I decided that I would write about people like me, girls and women who were black and brown and poor and queer, or like my mother, a white woman who didn't know how to raise or protect her brown children, who would spend her entire life struggling with mental illness and addiction. I wanted to create a home for people who rarely had a home in the literary landscape.

More importantly, I wanted to write about my community without losing sight of what mattered most: that the people I was writing about were real. That they existed, even if the rest of the world didn't see them. And that they loved each other.

Thank you for reading,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jaquira Díaz". The signature is stylized and cursive, with a large, looping initial "J" and "D".

Jaquira Díaz

## ORDINARY GIRLS: Questions for Discussion

1. Often, the parts of our lives that are exceptionally traumatic tend to impress themselves most on our memories. On page 15, Jaquira Díaz says she is both “determined to remember” and “prohibido olvidar (forbidden to forget).” Do you find yourself more capable of remembering the exceedingly bad times in your life? What about the exceedingly good? Why is Jaquira forbidden to forget?
2. Most of the memoir is centralized in the spaces where Díaz is with her family and the friends that become like family to her. When she joins the navy, Díaz, and the story itself, is uprooted from this sense of place. In what ways, and why, was this time a turning point for her? What new difficulties did her time in the navy present?
3. Think about the image of the mouse that Jaquira and Anthony encounter in Abuela’s house. Why does Jaquira say she is “part monster, part mouse”? What does she mean by this? Does she think her act is forgivable? Do you?
4. At the beginning of *Ordinary Girls*, Díaz grapples with the question of whether home is a place. In the section titled “Regresando,” Díaz continues to come back to Miami Beach. What are the different occasions that cause her to return? Do you think she sees Miami Beach as a place she can call home, or not, and why? How are her feelings about Puerto Rico different from those about Miami? Is home a place, and what else do you think home could be, if not a place?
5. Abuela and Grandma Mercy are set in contrast to each other throughout Díaz’s account of her childhood and young adult life. In what ways do each of her grandmothers inform Díaz’s perception of herself, her heritage, and her worth?
6. Consider the two settings of Puerto Rico and Miami Beach. How does the author characterize the two differently? How do these differences reflect the changes in the family’s dynamic over time?
7. Violence seeps into much of Jaquira’s experiences. As a result, the parts of her life associated with love and community are also intermingled with fear and pain. What are some examples of these instances?
8. What are some of the “monster stories” told in *Ordinary Girls*, both in Díaz’s own life and in the media that she is consuming? What is the scariest part about La Llorona, according to Díaz? What is her biggest fear regarding her relationship to her mother?
9. Cheito reminds Jaquira of Puerto Rico and Boricua culture. Despite the comfort this brings her, she is also acutely aware of the ways that his family is far different from hers. Does her experience with Cheito give her motivation to change her future or cause her to resent her own family?
10. Music is a crucial part of the lives of Jaquira and her friends. Pick one of the songs she names in the memoir and listen to it. What was happening to Jaquira at the time in her life that she listened to this song? What parts of it do you think resonated with her? Why is music so important?
11. Díaz compares herself to Holden Caulfield. Compare the lives and characteristics of the two. Why do you think she identifies with him?
12. The chapter titled “Secrets” recounts Díaz’s experiences from a young age involving violence against women. Discuss the parts of this chapter that shocked you or impressed upon you most. Then discuss the line “It will be a long time before you buy another pair of strappy sandals. But you will.” Why is this statement so powerful?
13. Consider the quote, “I know something about the in-between, of being seen but not really seen” (p. 291). Compare Jaquira to the character she creates of Puerto Rico. Discuss why, at the end of the memoir, she delves into the topic of injustice in Puerto Rico, including Oscar López Rivera and Hurricane María.
14. What is an ordinary girl? Whom is Díaz addressing and what message does she want to send to them?



**What Is  
Hip-Hop if  
Not Poetry:  
An Interview  
with  
Jaquira Díaz**

**Rebecca Godfrey:** In *Ordinary Girls*, your depiction of coming-of-age in Miami is so vivid and rich. The book is full of specific details—dancing to “Pop that Pussy,” drinking orange sodas at Miami Subs, wearing oversized T-shirts over bikinis, listening to Bone Thugs-N-Harmony. How did you excavate that? Was it from memory? Or did you draw on journals and other sources from the time?

Jaquira Díaz: I’m still friends with all the girls in the book, the ones who survived, and we often talked about these things. I was part of a group of girls that took lots of pictures. My friend Flaca took photography in high school, and worked in a photo lab, so she always had a camera, and later a camcorder. So much of our adolescence was recorded because of her. But we were all kind of obsessed with documenting our lives. We all had diaries, slam books, scrapbooks. We had a huge shared diary we passed to each other where we wrote entries, and we’d keep it for a few days, then pass it on. I also wrote so many letters to my friends. I was always writing, taking notes. I already believed myself a writer, and was always sketching out ideas. I thought I would write about my life, even though I didn’t even know what memoir was.

**RG:** Why did it feel important to you to portray the music and style of your friends? Why was it important for you to include details of youth culture, of style and music that are so often absent from “literary” work?

JD: *Ordinary Girls* is in some ways about navigating a certain kind of black and brown girlhood. So many of the details that were present during our girlhood are erased or disparaged in our literary culture. The details of my life are the details of a working-class life, of growing up in poverty in Miami Beach and in the Puerto Rican housing projects. The music I reference, the music that was the soundtrack to my life, was music of the streets. Hood culture is not considered high art, but what is hip-hop if not poetry? 2Pac was a poet. So was Nas. The old salsa I grew up on was made up of storytelling and myth and poetry. Héc-

tor Lavoe and Willie Colón and Lucecita Benítez were storytellers and poets as well as singers. Music taught me to write sentences. I learned more about writing from *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* than I ever learned from Hemingway.

**RG: The writing about style and clothing is not purely descriptive. The details reveal so much about how femininity is exaggerated, celebrated, rejected. You capture how girls use style as armor, as code, whether it's the innocent "red hearts on the bodice" of your little sister's bathing suit, or the swagger of your friend Boogie in her "skintight Brazilian jeans," or you and your friend Shorty about to cause mayhem in "Daisy Dukes and chancletas."**

JD: When I think of the details of style, of clothing, I think about how much of those years were performance. The way we dressed was as much about expression as it was about resistance. We were not the girls people wanted us to be, as I write in the book. We wanted to control at least what we wore, since we didn't feel we had control of much else. But we were definitely performing. Or at least I was. I wore boys' clothes—baggy jeans, basketball jerseys—because I was hiding. I'd started getting all this unwanted attention from men, and I wanted none of it. I dressed like a boy because I wanted to hide my body, but also, I wanted to seem much tougher than I was. I wanted to feel safe in my own body, which was often impossible.

**RG: Suicidal young women occupy this very romantic place in white literary culture, from *The Bell Jar* to *The Virgin Suicides*, which you reference directly. In your community, there's nothing romantic about death. "We were trying to live, but the world**

**was doing its best to kill us." How does your own experience inform or challenge that "sad girl" archetype that's so prevalent in our culture?**

JD: In parts of the book when I talk openly about suicide, I try to speak to something larger, to say something about mental illness and its effect on me, on us. I was a girl suffering from depression. I was later diagnosed with major depressive disorder, anxiety, and insomnia, all of which I've struggled with my entire life. I also write about my mother's mental illness. She was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia when I was a girl. Years after my mother's diagnosis, it became clear to me that my mother went undiagnosed and untreated for years. But even after she started getting treatment, I realized she never really got adequate mental health care because we were poor. This is a problem and a reality for many communities, for so many people across the US who don't have health insurance or access to health care, or who simply can't afford adequate mental health care because even with insurance, they can't make ends meet.

I wasn't sad—I was ill. I was in so much pain I wanted to die. And there was such a stigma around depression that I couldn't really talk about anything I was feeling. I was so alienated that I thought dying would be easier. My story wasn't, and isn't, unique. So many of us go through this, suffering in silence. And then, when I was finally ready to talk openly, I could only see a therapist a handful of times in a year, because that's all that my father's insurance would cover.

I wish this were what we were all talking about in our current literary culture—our experiences with mental illness and the

ways it affects our communities—rather than romanticizing “sad girl” narratives. I think we’re moving in that direction. In the past year alone we’ve had the work of Esmé Weijun Wang’s *The Collected Schizophrenias* and Bassegy Ikpi’s *I’m Telling the Truth, but I’m Lying*, both necessary and beautifully written.

**RG: There’s been a lot of interest in playing with linearity in memoir recently. Your book shifts between place and time. Part of this feels formally innovative, but it also feels necessary to capture the dislocating nature of your life. You were, as a young girl and then as a young woman, constantly moving between homes, countries, races—nothing felt particularly permanent. Your book artfully examines how colonialism and poverty and other factors create this destabilizing current. Did you purposely avoid a more traditional chronological structure?**

JD: I gave up the idea of writing a memoir that was strictly chronological because that felt forced, like I was fabricating a sense of chronology. It felt like lying. So instead, I let things emerge organically. I wanted the book to feel similar to the way we experience memory, which is often in flashes, linked by association or sensory details or images. But I also wanted there to be an arc in each chapter, a theme, a relationship explored. And I wanted each chapter to speak to a larger story, not just my personal story, but to say something meaningful about the larger world, about girlhood, about race, about colonialism, about sexual violence and who is silenced. There were times when I needed to slow something down, because I wanted the readers to spend more time in a certain place, to think about a certain character and what that character meant to the overall theme. Such as in “La Otra,” when

I focus on my mother, and her fight with our neighbor, and the neighbor’s daughter, Jesenia. I took this moment, carried it with me my whole life, so much so that I keep returning to it. So I slowed the narrative down, then flashed forward.

But there were also moments when I needed to speed things up, when I wanted the reader to get a sense of the chaos, of the disorder, of a life like mine, when everything seemed to move faster, when everything seemed to be headed toward disaster. I needed the reader to feel a sense of discomfort. Trying to tidy that up, to make it cleaner somehow, also felt like I was fabricating a sense of stability.

**RG: Your book veers away from the traditional coming-of-age memoir, the ones in which the pivotal experiences in a young girl’s life are usually related to love and sex. For you, violence, not love, was transformative. “Learn to fight dirty, to bite the soft spots on the neck and inner thigh, to pull off earrings and hair weaves.” I haven’t read such a nonchalant, candid portrayal of a young girl’s rage, power, and physical anger. This is so rarely discussed or portrayed when it comes to young women. Can you talk about the process of writing these scenes? Did you ever feel you were in new territory, that there would be unease or discomfort from readers?**

JD: Writing the scenes themselves didn’t feel new to me, because I spent so many years being that person, living that life. I did sometimes stop and marvel at the fact that I’m alive, still here, still breathing, and that I was ever that person, that I was in such a state of rage.

But I did feel shame when I thought about

readers who didn't live in neighborhoods like mine, who didn't grow up in poverty, who didn't live this kind of life. In order to keep writing this book, I had to stop thinking about readers outside my community, about how they might judge me or perceive people like me. What got me through was to keep looking back toward home, to remember that the people I was writing about were the same people I was writing for, and that those people, my people, they saw me, they knew me. It was important to show them that our stories, our neighborhoods, and the ways we live and love are just as important as those that get much more attention. I wanted to show that my voice, and this book, is made up of the places that made me, the people who brought me up.

**RG: At one of your readings, a woman asked you something to the effect of, "How did you get out of the Miami world you depict, how did you get better?" The implication being that becoming part of an academic or literary community was superior. And you replied, "I'm not better." Your book also avoids a redemptive ending. Instead, you remain loyal to and fiercely aware of the struggles of your friends, of a demonized murderer, of Puerto Rico's history. Was there any pressure—internal or external—to provide readers with the more traditional ending of an individual's triumph?**

JD: The truth is I'm not better, and I'm not sure I ever will be. Even though I've had access to education, to a graduate writing program, to a literary community, to the publishing world, even though I've been a professor and writer, I will always feel like I'm that same poor girl. Growing up poor means that we learn—we're taught—that the ways we live and love and work and speak and think are wrong, that we're not

good enough. We're expected to perform for those in power, and often that means performing a certain kind of redemption story. We're expected to perform survival and resilience and overcoming obstacles. There has been pressure to provide that kind of traditional ending, but my life has never been like that.

People keep asking, "What was the one moment or event that turned your life around?" But the truth is there wasn't a single event or a single moment or a single person that turned my life around, and there was no Aristotelian reversal because this is not a novel. Real life doesn't work like that. I'm still living my real life, and I'm still struggling. Puerto Rico is still in crisis. Black Puerto Ricans have always been in crisis. Every day is a struggle. But also, every day is a blessing.

**Rebecca Godfrey is the author of *Under the Bridge: The True Story of the Murder of Rena Virk*. This interview was first published in the *Paris Review Daily* on December 12, 2019.**