

Book Review

Sonia Sotomayor, *My Beloved World*, New York: Knopf, 2013, pp. 336, \$27.95 (cloth), \$16.99 (paper).

Reviewed by Lisa Marshall Manheim and Elizabeth G. Porter

In her memoir *My Beloved World*, Sonia Sotomayor describes reading *Pride and Prejudice* and *Alice in Wonderland* for the first time as a Princeton college student. “The agenda for self-cultivation that had been set for my classmates by their teachers and parents,” she realized, “was something I’d have to develop for myself” (135). This description of a late literary flowering seems incongruous not only in juxtaposition to the Justice’s extraordinary accomplishments, but also in light of the deep, sophisticated literary sensibility running through Sotomayor’s memoir. Throughout the book, Sotomayor downplays her natural abilities as a student, and particularly as a writer, attributing her success to hard work (133-34). Yet *My Beloved World* undermines that self-critique: With a skill that far transcends what work alone could accomplish (at least for most of us), Sotomayor delivers not a fleeting memoir, but a lasting contribution to American letters. For the most part, it is a terrific read. Simultaneously, it is a deeply affecting legal brief, arguing for Sotomayor’s worldview. Finally, *My Beloved World* is an excellent lens through which to teach fundamental legal concepts, particularly to undergraduates interested in a career in law.

On the surface, *My Beloved World* seems intended as an inspirational, accessible rejoinder to those who criticized Sotomayor during her confirmation process for what became the most controversial statement from her past: that “a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who hasn’t lived that life.”¹ And the memoir, authored by this most accomplished lawyer, makes progress toward that goal. In simple but evocative language, Sotomayor describes countless examples where a background filled with adverse life experiences—her father’s terminal alcoholism (62-63); her struggle with written English (263); the needles and muggings in her housing project (19); her mother’s punishing work schedule (13-14); and her decision to complain about a recruiting law

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1. Sonia Sotomayor, *A Latina Judge’s Voice*, 13 BERKELEY LA RAZA L.J. 87, 92 (2002) (reprinting then-Judge Sonia Sotomayor’s Judge Mario G. Olmos Memorial Lecture, delivered at the University of California, Berkeley in 2001).

firm's discrimination against her (189-91), among other challenges—might reasonably set her apart from the vast majority of Justices who have served on the Court. Together these stories are persuasive evidence of Sotomayor's hard-earned wisdom, and of the potential impact of that wisdom on a practicing lawyer and judge. As a brief in book form, *My Beloved World* is astute, and it is effective.

Yet the first two-thirds of *My Beloved World* accomplishes more than that. Sotomayor's story of the smells, the people, and the drama of her childhood opens with an unforgettable scene—one in which seven-year-old Sonia learns to give herself insulin shots after sterilizing a well-used needle over a gas stove (3-4). Subsequent chapters describe with vibrant detail a large and caring extended family, gathered together for parties filled with dancing, cooking, gossip, and the occasional séance (20-25). These vivid scenes transcend the context of a Supreme Court Justice's memoir, becoming a universal story of childhood and America. In one such scene, Sotomayor takes her best elementary-school friend on a goodbye tour of their neighborhood before he moves to Los Angeles, a place that seemed impossibly and irrevocably far away (27-31). In another, she and her mother shop for Sonia's dream raincoat to take to Princeton—a costly, fashionable piece of armor that she will need as she navigates the complex, privileged terrain outside the Bronx (124-26). From sipping milk straight from the coconut just outside the airport in San Juan (33), to buying freshly slaughtered chicken in New York with her grandmother (16-17), Sotomayor conveys the beauty and pain of her early life in a way that causes readers to reimagine their own.

Unfortunately, the last portion of the book—roughly after she graduates from Princeton—does not reach the same quality of universal storytelling. This transition tracks a drop in what is otherwise a remarkable level of candor for a sitting Justice. In these later parts, Sotomayor shrouds fundamental relationships in terse, distant language (relying, for example, on a bloodless description of her marriage and divorce that would not survive *Iqbal* pleading standards (220-24)) and recounts certain failures without the compelling emotional descriptions that characterize the text as a whole (as when she explains, tersely, a decision by the law firm Paul, Weiss not to extend her an offer as a summer associate (182-83)). Sotomayor's pulling back may be part of her advocacy: Like any conscientious attorney, she cites these negative emotional precedents but spends little time on them, focusing instead on her affirmative argument that perseverance and familial love can overcome even the highest obstacles and transform hardship into a rich tapestry of experience. Alternatively, this veiled approach may be a mark of diplomacy. Whatever the reason, the result is that the emotional power of the book diminishes as it reaches its conclusion.

Yet by this point, Sotomayor has made her case. And to the extent that the story now becomes less compelling—to the extent that the latter portions of the memoir are more predictable and less gripping—that narrative arc is entirely consistent with her central theme, which emphasizes the lasting effects

of one's formative experiences. It indeed may be more inspirational to think of a girl standing up for herself after she gets a perfect score on New York's Regents exam and her teacher promptly accuses her of cheating (90-91) than to think of a Princeton degree leading to a Yale legal education. And it in fact may be more provocative to imagine a student without extensive support systems beginning to excel after asking a more privileged classmate how to study (72) than to imagine a successful New York prosecutor being considered for the bench. But, if so, that might be precisely the Justice's point.

Our own experience with *My Beloved World* began in autumn of 2013, when Justice Sotomayor agreed to visit the University of Washington as part of her nationwide book tour. In response, the University organized several undergraduate seminars to help students gain as much as possible from the Justice's presence on campus. The seminars were varied; each was organized by a different department, and each took a different academic approach. But all took *My Beloved World* as a departure point and primary text.

For our seminar, which UW Law sponsored, we found it easy to agree on the themes we most wanted to explore. With vivid memories of the Justice's "wise Latina" remark, we prepared a syllabus tackling the question of diversity on the Supreme Court. We assigned texts on the definitions of diversity, on Supreme Court decision-making, on the nomination process, and on the Constitution. We lined up speakers: a Supreme Court practitioner, a professor of critical race theory, and a jailhouse lawyer-turned-law student (Shon Hopwood, the author of his own memoir, *Law Man*²). And we anchored the class in Justice Sotomayor's memoir. We didn't know what to expect. New preps are always unpredictable, and this time, we were not only teaching undergraduates; we were doing so out of a memoir. It turned out to be ideal.

The qualities of *My Beloved World* that make it such a success as both a memoir and a piece of advocacy translate as well into an outstanding teaching text, particularly for undergraduates exploring the possibility of a career in law. The excitement and novelty of Sotomayor's path to Princeton was gripping for our students, who were quick to acknowledge that they, like Sotomayor, have felt an uneasy combination of alienation and belonging in their college communities. The vividness and specificity with which Sotomayor describes her upbringing, coupled with her implicit arguments about the value of varied experience, resonated deeply with our students. They repeatedly referred back to certain characters (especially Sonia's talented cousin Nelson—who took the wrong turn she managed to avoid (253-54)—and her mother, whom several compared with their own) or events (such as the casual corruption of a local policeman (95)) when grappling with the role that diversity of life experience does or should play in our justice system. Perhaps above all, it was the memoir's insistence on the value of grit, of resilience, and of optimistic struggle in the face of hardship that seemed to speak to the students. How are these valuable traits developed? Are they largely innate? Or based on social support systems?

2. SHON HOPWOOD, *LAW MAN: MY STORY OF ROBBING BANKS, WINNING SUPREME COURT CASES, AND FINDING REDEMPTION* (2012).

How might this all relate to the role and the work of the Supreme Court, and to questions of diversity on the bench and in other areas?

The course was a success on numerous grounds. Throughout, we emphasized the complexity of what we were studying: how what the Justices do is not susceptible to simple explanation; how the Court has a unique and challenging role in our government; and how the background and “wisdom” of the Justices, however defined, affects the Court’s outcomes and legitimacy. Our goal was for students to come away with an appreciation for that complexity and a resistance to overly simplistic views of the Court, its decisions, and of law more generally. Together with our students, we subjected *My Beloved World* to close scrutiny and critical analysis, and the text held up.

When she arrived on campus, Justice Sotomayor spoke to a rapt audience of over a thousand undergraduates. One of our students was able to ask a question: What advice would the Justice give to herself as a college student? In response, the Justice smiled, and paused. Then she responded: “It’s hard to answer that question. Because, you know, you live your life with experiences, learning from them, and I don’t know that anything but the school of hard knocks ever gets you to the place to appreciate advice.” While the Justice nevertheless fulfilled the student’s request—providing guidance on how to take full advantage of campus communities—she continued to resist the idea that the student would follow it. Far from taking this personally, the “People’s Justice”³ instead asked our student to write her a letter, at graduation, describing her college experience and the extent to which she had followed the Justice’s advice. This exchange was formative for our student, and it also provided insight into how the Justice truly feels about the sort of “agenda for self-cultivation” that reappears in various forms throughout *My Beloved World*. Ultimately, it is not something that can be transferred mechanically through access, mentorship, education, or privilege. Like Sonia, this student would have to develop it for herself.

3. See generally David Fontana, *The People’s Justice?*, 123 YALE L.J. FORUM 447 (2014), <http://www.yalelawjournal.org/forum/the-peoples-justice> (discussing Justice Sotomayor’s potential to become the “People’s Justice” rather than the “Academic’s Justice”).