

THE SECRET SIDE OF EMPTY, MARCH, 2014

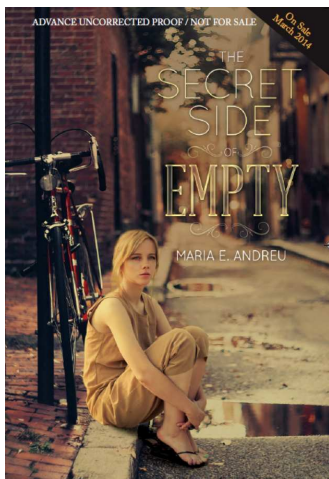
MARIA E. ANDREU

Q&A WITH THE AUTHOR

This book feels pretty personal.

What part of it is fiction and what part of it is based on your own experiences?

This is a very personal book. M.T.'s experiences are fiction, but her feelings are very close to my own. I grew up feeling like I had my nose pressed up against the windowpanes of a great party, a party I hadn't been invited to. She feels that way too. She sees her friends and peers planning things like college and drivers' licenses, and she knows her life will have to take a different turn. It's isolating.



We hear a lot about “illegal immigrants” in the news. What are you hoping readers will learn about illegal immigrants in this book?

I always remember the Elie Weisel quote: “No human being is illegal.” M.T. is undocumented. It is an immigration status that

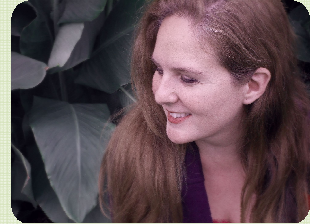
“THIS BOOK REALLY IS A COMING OF AGE STORY. IT JUST SO HAPPENS THAT THE PROTAGONIST IS UNDOCUMENTED.”

causes her a lot of hardship, but one that she had no hand in creating. It

makes her feel isolated and not good enough, but, more importantly, it severely restricts her options for the future. If there is one thing I hope people take away from this book it's the ability to understand the human side of the current situation.

What's the “secret” in the Secret Side of Empty?

Well, the obvious one is the secret that M.T. hides – no one knows she is undocumented. She is so ashamed of that. But there are other secrets too, the way she doesn't want to share her full



To write her debut YA novel, **Maria E. Andreu** tapped into her past as an undocumented immigrant – a past she had worked hard to forget. *The Secret Side of Empty*, due from Running Press Teens in March, 2014, chronicles the story of high school senior M.T. – she hates her full Spanish name, so she goes by her initials – who is American in every way but one important one: on paper. Brought over as a baby by parents who overstay their visa, M.T. is undocumented lacks a social security number. Without it, she watches her friends plan their futures... and wonders what her own uncertain future will bring.

name with people, the fact that she is always trying to hide her feelings and her true self. But as the book goes on you find that other characters have secrets

too. The story is meant to be a commentary on the many secrets that people hold inside and what they do to us.

Educators and YA fiction-watchers often comment on the lack of diversity in YA fiction. Was that on your mind as you wrote *The Secret Side of Empty*?

Yes and no. Most importantly I set off to write a story I thought a lot of YA-lovers could relate to: one of a girl trying to figure out what her life as an adult will look like, how to manage the feelings of falling in love, all those things we all go through.

As a lover of YA fiction, of course I'm aware that we need more multicultural characters. But in some ways, M.T. is an anti-multicultural character. She isn't

proud of her heritage – all she wants is to be “American.” In some ways she's the product of the lack of multicultural mirrors in her world. All she can see as admirable role models are the ones that make her want to turn away from her heritage. What I love about books – be they YA or adult – is that they let us live in the skin of someone else for a while. So that was on my mind while writing TSSoE, that maybe if people could see the experience of being undocumented from the inside, maybe we could start to approach that conversation in a new way.

Would you consider this a political story?

It's actually not a very political story. It's the story of a girl who is

a senior in high school, who falls in love, who is thinking about her future, except she's doing all that against the backdrop of these very tough circumstances. Someone asked me at a reading the other day if I had to research a lot of immigration law for it. I actually didn't. I had to research the name of the law that got me my own amnesty when I was a teenager for the Acknowledgements. That's about it. This book is really a coming of age story. It just so happens that the protagonist is undocumented while she's figuring out who she is in the world.

Contact: Valerie Howlett, Running Press Teens Publicity



(215) 567-5373



valerie.howlett@perseusbooks.com