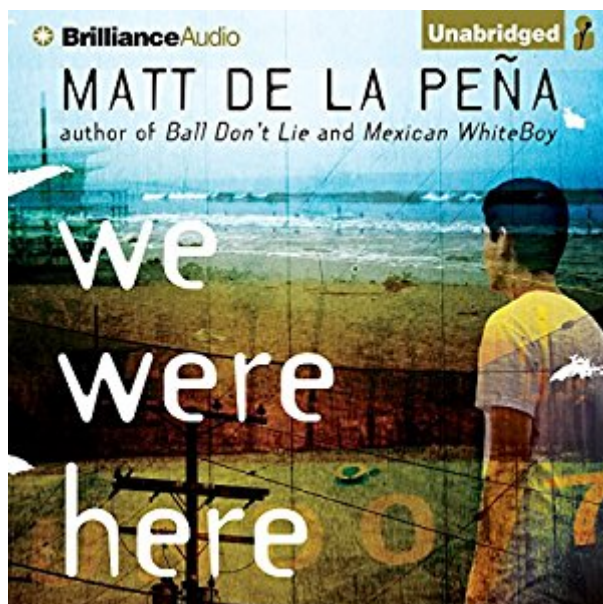


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# We Were Here



## Synopsis

When it happened Miguel was sent to Juvi. The judge only gave him a year in a group home - said he had to write in a journal so some counselor could try to figure out how he thinks. The judge had no idea that he'd actually done Miguel a favor. Ever since it happened Miguel's mom can't even look him in the eye. Any home besides his would be a better place to live. But Miguel didn't bet on meeting Rondell or Mong or on any of what happened after they broke out. He only thought about Mexico and getting across the border to where he could start over. Forget his mom. Forget his brother. Forget himself. Life usually doesn't work out how you think it will, though. And most of the time, running away is the quickest path right back to what you're running from. From the streets of Stockton to the beaches of Venice, all the way down to the Mexican border, *We Were Here* follows a journey of self-discovery by a boy who is trying to forgive himself in an unforgiving world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

*We Were Here* deserves any and all awards and accolades coming to it, and probably many that haven't been thought of. Not since I've read Pete Hautman's books have I been so taken by a book written for teens. I teach young adult literature in a middle school and come across HUNDREDS of books each year, and most of them, frankly, are not all that terrific; worse, I know my students won't like them. Unfortunately, I can't recommend this book to my students (6th graders) because the content and language is much more suitable for high school students. I do, however, urge everyone else to pick up this book. De La Pena is a gifted and natural storyteller who knows how to capture an audience and keep them up long after darkness has fallen. This is the kind of book that will keep

students up with the flashlight long after the lights have gone out. Borrowing themes from *Of Mice and Men* and *Catcher in the Rye* - which Miguel, the main character, is reading - Pena takes Miguel, the main character, on a gritty adventure of heartbreak, hope, mystery, tragedy, and redemption. If this all seems too clichéd, it is not; in Pena's yarn, it is a true original. Some more conservative readers might not want to read this book because of the urban slang and the theme of being a minority in this country. But Pena doesn't beat you on the head with it: the true gift is the story itself; the rest is just *The Way It Is*. The last YAL book I read that I was so taken with was *Godless* by Pete Hautman, which won the National Book Award; if there is any justice in this world, De La Pena will soon be crafting his acceptance speech. Quick p.s. - I met Matt at this year's NCTE conference...super nice guy; doesn't seem to realize his genius!

Reading outside my favorite genres is something that is sometimes difficult for me to do... but I try to when I can so that I can recommend books to lots of different readers. This effort on my part is sweetly rewarded when I find books like *We Were Here*. This is a story of a boy who must face his past and deal with the fact that he is not the only person on the planet who wasn't given an easy life. In fact Miguel finds out that his is just one story among many. After being sent to a boys home Miguel meets Rondell and Mong. Despite barely knowing each other they decide to runaway and go to Mexico where Mong supposedly has some connections that will lead them all to a better life. What they really find is friendship, hard times and the knowledge that in order to move on to the future you have to face your past. This is a really great book...the story is honest and straight forward but not overwhelming. The author does a great job of giving us all the details without being overly emotional or going for the shock factor. This book made me want to read all of Matt de la Pena's books, he is a great writer!

'People always think there's this huge hundred-foot-high barrier that separates doing good from doing bad. But there's not. There's nothing. There's not even a little anthill. You just take one baby step in any direction and you're already there. You've done something awful. And your life is changed forever.' ~ Matt de la Peña, *We Were Here* This is one of the best young adult books I have ever read. Scratch that. This is one of the best books I have ever read. At the onset of *We Were Here*, we get acquainted with Miguel, the narrator of the story as he is transferred from juvi to a halfway house. Miguel has a mindset that he has absolutely nothing to lose, and that he will never again have anything to gain. We are aware that he has done a bad thing--a terrible thing--but we are not quite sure what it is. We only know that he never wants to forget the burden of his guilt...that he

wants to carry it with him forever and feel the extreme pain of his suffering. This is the story of three troubled teens. Miguel, Rondell and Mong are a very unlikely trio. Miguel's first encounter with the other two boys are violent. There is spitting and punching and a painful pinning to the ground. All of these things make the reader think Rondell and Mong will both soon be left in the dust of the story. But they would be wrong. The three eventually devise a plan to escape the halfway house together and make a run for freedom in Mexico. Once they are out in the wilds of California, and heading for the ocean so they can travel south to Mexico, the story really takes off! Along the way, the reader is treated to a wealth of self-reflection from Miguel's ongoing journal writing. We discover that he is a compassionate, thoughtful and intelligent young man. And we get to find out the back-stories of each of his traveling companions as Miguel sets off one night by himself to read the boys' files, which he stole while preparing to leave the halfway house behind him. It is also Miguel who allows the reader to see the good in the other two boys. Rondell, we are quick to learn, is not a bad kid...but a simple one. He believes in Jesus Christ and puts all his faith into a bible he cannot read but carries around with him all the same. Mong, who appears to be a psychotic hopelessly lost soul, turns out to be an overwhelmingly sad case. Nobody should endure the heartache and soul-breaking that Mong has been through in his young life. When he declares Miguel his best friend, it will baffle both Miguel and the reader...but it is such a pivotal moment in the story. Heartrending. I love when authors namedrop books. I always have. In *We Were Here*, Miguel has a penchant for reading. Throughout the course of the story, he spends time with Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* and Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. The reader cannot help but see Miguel as a modern day Holden, and Rondell as a modern day Lennie. At one point I found myself thinking, 'Oh please, please, please...mention Camus's *The Stranger*. You have to!' And sure enough, the name was eventually dropped. Miguel's second travel companion, Mong, is without a doubt Camus's Meursault! This book is an homage to all three of these wonderful stories, but it is also SO much more than that. It is a story that, in itself, will definitely become a classic. The potential reader of *We Were Here* will just have to take my word for it when I say this is one of the best books I have ever read. I don't want to give away too much of it here. I can only say that it unfolds with a beauty I have not seen in a while. The reader will grow so close to these three boys, they will want to protect them from both themselves and the world around them as they set out on the journey of their lives. The journey they take makes men of boys, and makes each of them realize the wealth they carry inside. Your heart will break and strengthen and break again as you take every step alongside Miguel and his broken friends. And when you hope beyond hope that they do the right thing, they might even hear you. This was a beautiful story. Be prepared to feel all of the emotions you carry...and some

you didn't know you had. I will be re-reading this every now and again...it's one of those books you want to hug close to you when you're finished.

I'm a big fan of de la Pena's writing and in this latest book he delivers a deeply moving, highly literary, and incredibly engaging novel that both teens and adults can thoroughly enjoy. De la Pena nails the urban language and voice of his young protagonist, Miguel, and his two unlikely friends, delivering a powerful character study of three boys who are of different races, religions, and are all overcoming deep personal tragedy. It is a book that takes you on a journey through the eyes of these teens who are struggling to find their way in life. This book will move you, entertain you, and break your heart. And if you don't believe me, just look at what the "experts" have to say:". . . fast, funny, smart, and heartbreaking." - Booklist "A story of friendship that will appeal to teens and will engage the most reluctant readers." - Kirkus Reviews I must admit that I couldn't say it better myself. Read this book.

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