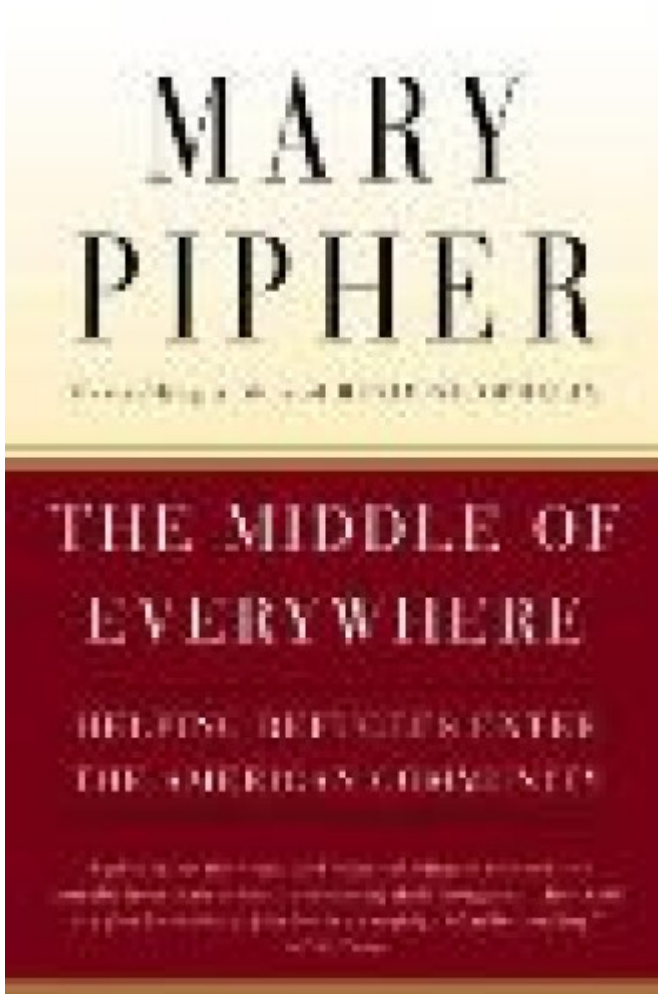


The Middle of Everywhere/Living on The Borders

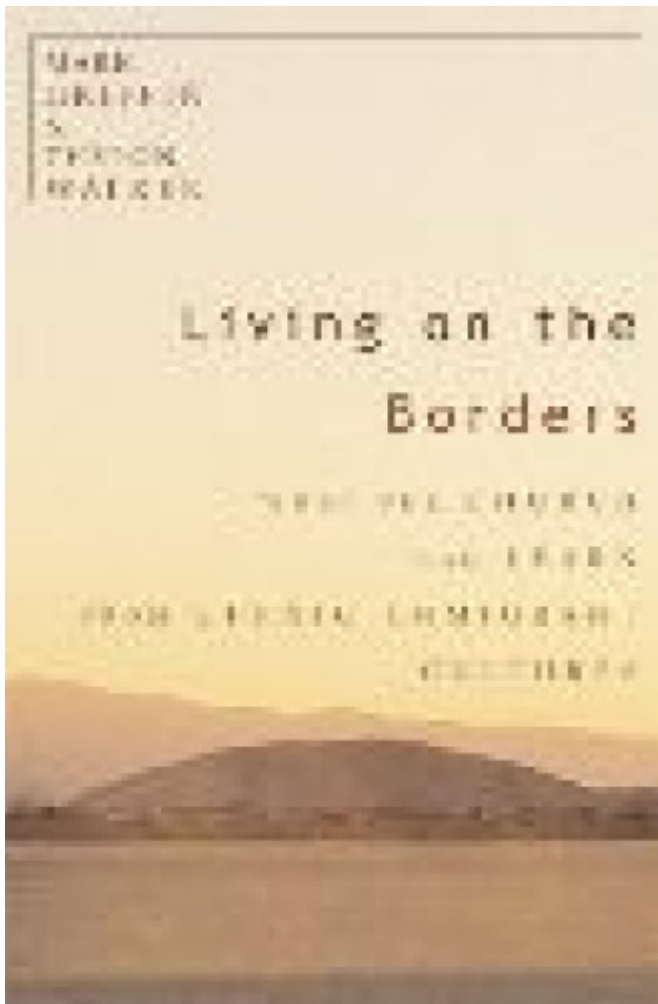
reviewed by [Helene Slessarev-Jamir](#) in the [April 5, 2005](#) issue

In Review



The Middle of Everywhere: Helping Refugees Enter the American Community

Mary Pipher
Harvest



Living on the Borders: What the Church Can Learn from Ethnic Immigrant Cultures

Mark Griffin and Theron Walker
Brazos

My father arrived in the early 1950s as a refugee from Eastern Europe, one of only two members of his family to escape the turmoil there. His possessions were contained in a shoebox. All ties to his past were completely severed, and he never saw his homeland again.

Like other children of immigrants, I was left to navigate my way through American schools with little guidance from my parents, who had spent their youth in war-torn Europe. My brother and I, raised bilingual, grew up with our feet planted in two cultures, not knowing where we belonged. Not until age 12 did I decide that I was an American.

New immigrants and their children now make up 20 percent of America's population, and they are transforming the ethnic and racial fabric of our nation. People from all parts of the world are moving into our neighborhoods, bringing their cultural and religious traditions with them. While native-born Americans often focus on how we are affected by these new arrivals, two recent books offer insights into the tension new immigrants experience as they navigate between their traditional communal societies and America's increasingly homogenized consumerist one. *The Middle of Everywhere*, by the author of the best-seller *Reviving Ophelia*, is a practical guide to working with refugees. *Living on the Borders* is a fascinating comparison of the challenges faced by immigrants and their children and by American Christians as they live within the tension between ghettoization and globalization. Both books are critical of the "melting pot" metaphor of assimilation, according to which immigrants were expected to shed their communal bonds in order to gain access to the full benefits of American liberal democracy.

Mary Pipher provides a passionate look at her experiences as a "cultural broker" for refugees in her hometown of Lincoln, Nebraska. As my father's experience attests, leaving home is far more traumatic for refugees than for voluntary immigrants. Refugees are not practically or emotionally prepared to leave home, but are forced to do so in order to survive. Pipher eloquently tells the stories of refugee families she has befriended, recounting the tremendous hardships they underwent as they fled their homelands and then spent years in refugee camps or third countries while awaiting permanent resettlement. Many of the children have witnessed violence and death.

Pipher's stories also exude the optimism and gratitude refugees feel when they have finally arrived in a safe place where they can begin anew. Yet people from traditional communal cultures face many challenges in settling into America's highly individualistic, consumption-driven society. A lack of English skills forces many to do low-paid menial work. Exposed to consumer culture by the ever-present TV, many new arrivals quickly go into debt for the first time in their lives in order to buy cars, clothes and other items. At the same time, they may be sending money to family left behind, while also paying back the U.S. government for the cost of their airfare to this country.

The central part of the book is devoted to a detailed account of Pipher's interactions with a small group of refugee children enrolled in an English as a Second Language class. Her background as a psychologist comes to the fore as she analyzes the

children's emotional resilience. Studies have found that immigrant children who grow up within the context of extended families and coethnic communities are more successful in negotiating life in the U.S., yet it is these bonds that are absent for many refugee children, who often experience profound isolation both at home, where they may speak a different language from their parents, and in dealings with Americans.

Living on the Borders also discusses the borderland between traditional particularistic communities and America's homogenized consumer society, which the authors call McWorld. In a larger sense the book critiques the American version of the Enlightenment project, in which all traditional forms of authority are seen as impediments to individual freedom. The authors recognize that "traditional communities can be profoundly life-giving as well as abusive. Our autonomous culture can be profoundly emancipating and lonely."

The book is structured around discussions of the work of some well-known Latino and Jewish writers and artists—including Richard Rodriguez, Chaim Potok, Desi Arnaz, Gloria Estefan, Virgilio Elizondo and Sandra Cisneros—who are torn between maintaining their ethnic identities and embracing the American ideal of individualism and freedom from all forms of traditional authority.

Griffin and Walker believe that the church has much to learn from immigrants about being sojourners in American society. They call on the church to acknowledge its status as a cultural minority and to embrace its borderlands location. This is a place where power is held in check and where communal celebrations and the values of all diasporas are honored, not just the ideal of the self-made individual. Perhaps all of us ought to live in the tension between two divergent cultures that so many immigrants and their children experience.