

My Beloved World, by Sonia Sotomayor

reviewed by [Shirley Hershey Showalter](#) in the [May 1, 2013](#) issue

In Review



My Beloved World

by Sonia Sotomayor

Knopf

Celebrity memoirs often appeal to readers' basest motives. They hope to discover some secret formula for success. Or they want to know whether the author took revenge on enemies or intimates. If the author is a public figure, readers are on the

lookout for clues to an ideological bent or personal grievances that will make the author's future decisions predictable.

If you're expecting to find such revelations in the memoir of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, you will be disappointed.

If, however, you are intrigued by the question of how a little girl from the projects in the Bronx grew up to be one of the most influential people in the country, you will enjoy this narrative. And if you love to listen to a powerful story told with passion and compassion, simply yet lyrically, as though you were sitting across from the author in a café in New York City, you will turn each page of this book with pleasure.

Here are some of the essential facts of Sotomayor's life: Her doting father, Juan, was an alcoholic and died when she was nine years old. Her mother, Celina, escaped poverty in Puerto Rico by joining the Women's Army Corps during World War II. Both parents left some relatives behind when they moved to New York City from the island. The title of the book pays homage to the family's island roots through the words of the poet José Gautier Benítez: "I return to my beloved world, / In love with the land where I was born."

From birth, Sotomayor lived in two worlds, and she has straddled many others throughout her lifetime. At first she was considered a difficult child; she earned the nickname *Ají*, meaning hot pepper, because of her curiosity and exuberance. She was loved by both parents and especially by her paternal grandmother, whom she calls *Abuelita*.

The book opens dramatically as we meet eight-year-old Sonia, who has just been diagnosed with diabetes. From now on, her life will depend on injections of insulin. Her alcoholic father's trembling hands prevent him from being a reliable caretaker. Her mother, a nurse, needs to work outside the home so the family can survive. Her parents' arguments drive young Sonia to learn how to ignite the gas stove, sterilize the needle and inject the proper amount of insulin at the right time—by herself.

So the young girl with huge obstacles to health and well-being grows up early, tolerates and shepherds her younger brother, and carries her parents' sadness as a hidden burden. After her father's death, her mother barricades herself in the bedroom, and the psychological pressure becomes even harsher. Sonia finally screams at her mother, demanding that she pay attention to the family she has—her children—rather than succumb to depression over the sad ending to her marriage.

The Catholic Church played a significant role in Sonia's advancement and that of her brother, Junior. They both graduated from Blessed Sacrament School and then Cardinal Spellman High School, thanks to the sacrifice of their mother, who believed that a Catholic education was the best way to ensure that her children would excel in life. Sotomayor concludes that as a whole Catholic education was good for her, but she reveres only one of her teachers. Most of them filled her with "more or less a continuous state of dread."

During her elementary school years, Sonia learned to love gold stars and asked the best student in the class to teach her how to get more of them. Thus she began a lifetime habit of seeking mentorship from anyone around her who seemed to know more than she did.

Reading Nancy Drew books and watching Perry Mason on TV first drew young Sonia into the world of law and the courts. Experience in the forensic club in high school taught her many skills of argumentation, including the necessity of appealing to emotion as well as reason.

Admission to Princeton was a turning point for Sonia. There she began to see and to compensate for deficiencies in her education. When a more privileged friend compared Sonia's experience at Princeton to that of Alice in Wonderland, Sonia's response was "Alice who?" Again, with the help of friends and mentors, Sonia plunged into a summer reading program that included classics she had missed in her home reading program based on *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

After Princeton, Sotomayor married her high school sweetheart, Kevin Noonan. She graduated from Yale Law School, then started her career as an assistant district attorney in New York. Soon thereafter her marriage ended—a story the author handles with great understanding and compassion, in the same way she treats her parents' marital strife.

By the time Sotomayor reaches her goal of becoming a U.S. District Court judge and then far exceeds any of her goals by being selected as a Supreme Court justice, her story loses some of its energy. Achievement is not as compelling to readers as obstacles attacked and overcome.

The genius of this book derives from its author's huge heart, magnanimous spirit and beautiful language. Serious difficulties never douse her joy. The memoir can best be described as a love song to every person the author has ever met. Since one

of her strongest animating desires is to learn, she wrestles with every memory until she wrings a blessing out of it. She also uses imagery, verbs and occasional Spanish quotations with the fluidity of a poet.

Having received the benediction of her beloved Abuelita, who believed in both the older spiritualist traditions of the island she left and the rites and rituals of Catholicism in New York City, Sotomayor crafted her own theology of love and forgiveness. If this book predicts anything about her positions as a judge, it is this: she will look for ways to build bridges rather than walls between any two antagonists, whether they be relatives, friends, enemies or whole cultures.