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Is It a Good Book?

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Is it a good book?

They say don't judge a book by its cover, but that is exactly what I did. When I met my roommate: Tall, blonde, beautiful and young, I thought, 'we probably won't get along very well.' I am short, dark and older (and you probably thought I'd say ugly too! 😊). You see, the night I met her, she went out and came in late and drunk. "Oh, no! my roommate is a party girl...got drunk on the first night of the term—on a Monday!" I told my kids on the phone. Since I don't drink, I really did not want to have to deal with this, but my son kindly reminded me to let her enjoy her college life.

During our time together, we stayed out of each other's way. We talked minimally and tried to be respectful of each other. I turned my lights off when she went to bed. When I got up earlier, I was very quiet so as not to disturb her. She studied film and watched her movies with headphones, and so did I. She even asked me if I'd mind it when she blow-dried her hair, which was very thoughtful—sweet.

As the days went by, I got to know her a little bit more. I noticed she went home on Friday mornings because she had to work and came back Monday evenings. She did all her homework before going home or going to hang out with her friends. I realized she was quite responsible. I wanted to get to know her a little better, so I decided to interview her for this assignment.

I asked her about her childhood, school, family, holidays, traditions, memories... As it turns out, we have a lot in common. We both grew up in traditional Catholic households, full of love, food and, yes, drinks! Extended family gatherings are important and common. But I am not talking about the traditional American family as I am Latina. Dinner time in my family is sacred—we all eat together. Holiday celebrations are all about sharing, the more the merrier. Disciplining is also similar for us—lovingly, or tough love when needed, including an occasional spanking.

We talked about our cultures in general. Irish and Guatemalan families tend to be large, contrary to American families. Irish and Guatemalans are mostly catholic. In Ireland the drinking age is 18, while the United States is 21, and Guatemala really has none. In an Irish or Guatemalan wedding, the groom's family is responsible for covering all costs whereas in the United States that responsibility goes to the bride's family. Irish and Guatemalan cultures are more collectivists while American culture is more individualistic.

However, education in these countries is different. The length of the school day in Ireland is about the same as in the United States, but longer than in Guatemala. In Guatemala and in the US, students learn the four core subjects and some electives. In Ireland, learning focuses on math, English and Irish. Students learn very little science and history. Sports are very popular after school in all countries, whether organized or casual. Regarding postsecondary education, college in the United States is the most expensive. In Ireland, college tuition plus room and board cost about \$10,000 a year, and the government pays part of it. Students must accrue points in secondary school to be eligible for college. If they don't meet the eligibility, then they can take a remedial year of learning to increase their points. In Guatemala, the public university is free, but the cost of living for those moving away for college might be too much for a family to provide.

Thanks to the interview, I got to learn to see my roommate in a different light. Even if we did not interact more, our similarities allowed me to understand her and appreciate her more. There are many benefits to comparing our little worlds and learning to be more open-minded is one of the greatest of this experience, which reinforces my belief that even though we look different, we have so much in common. This goes beyond the way we live and into our values, aspirations, and interactions. What truly matters in a human being goes much deeper than the front cover or physical appearance for which I initially judged my roommate. I need to remind myself of that when I catch myself judging others, otherwise I might close a door to being part of a beautiful story, an amazing learning experience, or a life-long friendship.