

Erin Van Rheenen, Author and Soccer Enthusiast, Says World Cup Unity Is Under Strain Amid U.S. Immigration Policies

The World Cup was meant to unite the world; so why does it feel divided?

LOS ANGELES, CA, UNITED STATES, June 15, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- As the 2026 FIFA World Cup draws billions of viewers worldwide, author [Erin Van Rheenen](#) says U.S. immigration policies are clashing with the tournament's founding promise of global unity.

Van Rheenen says current immigration restrictions involving multiple participating nations risk turning one of the world's most unifying sporting events into a moment defined less by connection and more by division.

"I've lived abroad in six countries since I was four years old," says Van Rheenen. "Traveling and living outside the US broke me out of the prison of thinking my own culture trumped all others. I also realized that Americans enjoy freedom of movement across borders that people from less powerful countries can only dream of. But an event like the World Cup should be one place where we can level that playing field."

Co-hosted by the United States, Mexico, and Canada, the World Cup has expanded to 48 teams and is expected to reach a global audience in the billions. But recent U.S. immigration policies affecting multiple qualifying nations have raised questions about access for athletes, officials, support staff, and fans.

Van Rheenen says the issue highlights a deeper contradiction in what the tournament represents.

"This should be a moment of global celebration," she states. "Instead, policies are complicating



Erin Van Rheenen

what is supposed to be the most inclusive sporting event in the world. Mexico and Canada are embracing that spirit. The United States is sending a more complicated message.”

She points to the experience of Somali referee Omar Abdulkadir Artan, appointed by FIFA to referee the World Cup but denied entry to the US. In addition, Iraqi player Aymen Hussein was reportedly questioned for seven hours at Chicago’s O’Hare Airport before being allowed in, while the Iraqi team photographer was denied entry.

“These stories matter,” says Van Rheenen, “because they show inconsistent treatment depending on country of origin. When athletes and staff from some countries move freely while others face barriers, it sends a message about who is welcome, and who is not.”

A lifelong soccer fan who played in her youth and college years, Van Rheenen says the sport itself affirms what is at stake.

“Soccer is built on connection: assists, trust, and teamwork,” she argues. “The World Cup should reflect that. Instead, we’re watching real-world politics pull in the opposite direction.”

Her latest novel, [You Could Be Happy Here](#), set in Costa Rica, was shaped by years of living in various countries.

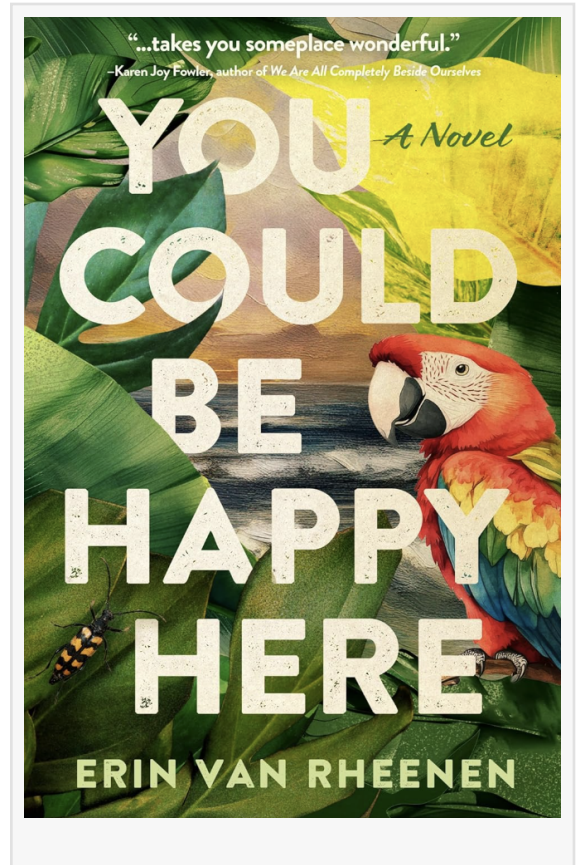
“Stories have the power to expand who we think belongs,” she says. “When you live in different cultures, you realize identity isn’t fixed by borders, it’s shaped by experience and shared humanity.”

That’s why she says the current moment feels bigger than sport.

“What’s happening around the World Cup feels like a warning sign,” Van Rheenen concludes. “This may be the beginning of something larger, where global events designed to unite us start becoming mirrors of division instead.”

About Erin Van Rheenen

Erin Van Rheenen is an author and journalist whose work explores identity, belonging, and life across cultures. She has lived in Nigeria, Ireland, Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, and Costa Rica, experiences that deeply inform her writing on immigration and the meaning of home. Her



essays and travel writing have appeared in publications including BBC Travel, Atlas Obscura, and The Sun. She is the author of *You Could Be Happy Here*, a novel about displacement, connection, and belonging.

Van Rheenen holds degrees from UC Santa Cruz and the City University of New York and has worked as a teacher, a staff writer at non-profits, and a science writer at the Exploratorium museum.

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