

The Aguero Sisters Study Guide

The Aguero Sisters by Cristina Garcia

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Introduction

In 1997, when *The Agüero Sisters* was published, Cristina Garcia confirmed that her literary subject was multi-generational Cuban-American families with all their conflicts, emotional complexity, and belief in magic and miracles. By the time this novel was published, Garcia was already well known for her first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, which received outstanding reviews when it was published in 1992

The Agüero Sisters is clearly the work of the same author as *Dreaming in Cuban*. Not only do the two share a preoccupation with family dynamics, but both novels have justifiably been praised for their unusual and poetic use of language. Garcia wrote poetry before she began her first novel. In an interview in *Newsday*, Garcia said: "Language is what drives a narrative. If I'm reading a novel and it doesn't engage me sentence by sentence, I won't finish it." She said that she stopped being a journalist because of her love of poetry: "I first started reading poetry in a serious way when I was about thirty. After that, there was no turning back. It was just this explosion of language and possibility that I hadn't known existed." Throughout *The Agüero Sisters* her love of language comes through in unforgettable images. Reina recalls her dead mother's throat as "an estuary of color and disorder." She describes a "sky collapsing with stars," a refrigerator that coughs "like a four-pack-a-day smoker," and rain that's "hard, linear and relentless, like self-important men."

Author Biography

The challenges and opportunities of exile are a subject that Garcia explores in *The Agüero Sisters* and one that has played an ongoing role in her own life. Born in Havana, Cuba, on July 4th, 1958, Garcia moved to the U.S. with her parents when she was two years old. Growing up in New York with a younger sister and brother, she recalls having been raised in mostly Jewish neighborhoods, where few Latinos lived. Her parents worked in a drug store and a card shop, and later owned a restaurant in Brooklyn, where Garcia herself sometimes worked. Garcia spoke "kitchen Spanish" at home and told an interviewer for *Newsday* that even now her Spanish vocabulary isn't broad and probably makes her "sound like a twelve-year-old." As a teenager, Garcia and her younger sister were sent to Switzerland to study French during summer vacations. She attended Barnard College in New York City and received her master's degree from Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in 1981. Garcia then became a cultural and political reporter for *Time* magazine, where she worked from 1983 until 1988.

Garcia did not return to Cuba until 1984, when she was an adult. After the trip, she told an interviewer at *Newsday* that she "became incorrigibly Cuban. . . . It sort of hit me retroactively, this identity thing." She did not, however, feel comfortable among the Cuban immigrants in Florida. Recalling her stint at the Miami bureau of *Time*, she told a writer for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, "I expected to feel at home there, but I never felt more alienated." In that same article, Garcia discussed the difficulty that she and other first-generation Americans encounter when it comes to claiming the freedom to write fiction: "It's like a friend of mine, Victor Suarez (author of the novel *Latin Jazz*), said children of immigrants have a hard time with the idea of becoming an artist or poet because it is still threatening and ephemeral to our parents."

In 1992, Garcia's first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, was published to much acclaim and was nominated for a National Book Award. Garcia's second novel, *The Agüero Sisters*, was published in 1997 and was also well-received. Garcia now lives with her daughter, Pilar, in Los Angeles.



Plot Summary

Prologue

Set in the Zapata Swamp in Cuba, more than three decades before the main drama of Garcia's *The Agüero Sisters* unfolds, the prologue lets the reader in on the family secret that informs the main action of the novel. Ignacio and Blanca Agüero, husband-and-wife naturalists, are on the first collecting trip they've undertaken together in nine years. They're hunting ruddy ducks for a new museum collection in Boston. The trip takes on a slightly unreal aspect because of the unsparing sunlight: "*On cloudless days like this, the light in the Zapata was so fierce that even the most experienced travelers were deceived, made to consider all manner of ruinous delusions.*" When Blanca spots a rare type of bee hummingbird, she turns to alert her husband only to find he's pointing a double-barreled gun at her. With no explanation, he shoots her and then carries her body seventeen miles to the nearest village, and lies about the deed.

Part I: Tropical Disturbances

Garcia tells the intertwined stories of the Agüero family, and although each person's individual story is intricately connected to the stories of all the other characters, they are also essentially separate. This section opens with Reina Agüero climbing a telephone pole as she repairs a high-voltage cable outside El Cobre, a town in eastern Cuba. While fixing a water pump there, Reina is in a freak accident and is pinioned in the highest branches of a large tree that's hit by lightning. She receives skin grafts from loved ones and her scars become a symbol of family solidarity. Her daughter, Dulce, now has a missing strip of thigh and her scar "reminds Reina of the purplish burns on her own mother's forearms. Blanca Mestre Agüero had started as a chemist and bore the telltale signs of her profession's serious demands." After Reina recovers, she decides to visit Constanca in Miami and make peace with her own history.

Constancia is also undergoing changes. Her husband, Heberto Cruz, is determined to leave his successful tobacco business in New York and has purchased a condominium on Key Biscayne, Florida, where they'll retire together. Once the couple arrives in Florida, Heberto begins spending time with his brother, Gonzalo, and soon goes off on a counterrevolutionary mission, against Constanca's wishes. One night, Constanca dreams that her face is being operated upon by a plastic surgeon, and the next day she wakes to find that her face has been replaced by that of her mother. Around the same time, she goes into business for herself, marketing creams and lotions to women with a nostalgia for Cuba.

Interspersed throughout the present-day story are excerpts from Ignacio's diary. He tells of his own father, Reinaldo Agüero, whose job it was to read to the cigar workers in their factory, and of his own birth, which is brought on by his mother's sighting of a *siguapa stygian owl*, a bird that brings bad luck and that carries away his mother's placenta and



rains blood on the town's parade. Constanica and Reina both muse on their pasts; when Constanica was a baby, her mother left home and returned years later nearly eight months pregnant. Although neither know that their father killed their mother, both are uncomfortable with the version of events they've been told.

Part II: A Common Affliction

Ignacio's own story continues, with his being appointed a full professor of general science and biology at the University of Havana. He falls in love and marries the beautiful and mysterious Blanca Mestre.

Constancia's business, *Cuerpo de Cuba*, takes off, and she spends her days listening to a radio program called "La Hora de los Milagros," or "The Miracle Hour." She is wildly successful: "Each item in her *Cuerpo de Cuba* line will embody the exalted image Cuban women have of themselves: as passionate, self-sacrificing, and deserving of every luxury." As Heberto fights his counterrevolutionary battle in the Florida Everglades, his brother Gonzalo, Constanica's first husband, lies dying in the hospital.

Reina's arrival in Florida is soon followed by the appearance of Constanica's two children and her own daughter, Dulce. Reina gets a job restoring vintage cars. Isabel, nearly nine months pregnant and abandoned by her longtime boyfriend, gives birth to a son whom she names Raku. Silvestre returns to see his father, Gonzalo, and upon seeing him for the first time, smothers the dying man with a pillow. When Constanica is told by a santero (a religious man) that the sisters must go to Cuba, the two set off in a boat. On the trip, Reina tells Constanica that Papá killed their mother: "He shot her like one of his birds, and then he watched her die." The two fight at sea, and each comes to her own peace with what happened in their youth.

Coda: A Root in the Dark

Constancia learns that Heberto is dead, and she continues on her voyage to Cuba by boat. She wants to pick up Heberto's body, have him cremated, and then carry the ashes with her as she goes to Camagüey, where her father's papers are buried. In the meantime, Dulce returns to Miami, where she reunites with her mother and gets a job in a sandwich shop. In the final scenes, Reina becomes pregnant, creating a link to the future. And Constanica plumbs the past, returning to her mother's family farmhouse and finding her father's diary. There, she reads his story. The novel ends with the last installment of Ignacio's diary. He says that the murder of his wife was unplanned, and that after her death, he held her body and heard "Blanca's voice in the stirring of grasses and reeds, in the crisscrossing cranes overhead, in the swaying clumps of cowlily leaves."



Prologue

Prologue Summary

Zapata Swamp. September 8, 1948. Naturalists Ignacio and Blanca Agüero are riding on horseback through the Zapata Swamp. They are hunting the elusive ruddy ducks for a new museum collection in Boston. Years earlier, before Blanca had fallen ill, the Agüeros gathered many specimens in the Zapata Swamps.

It was noon when the couple stopped to rest. As Blanca stood wiping the sweat from her brow, she felt a light feathery wind on the nape of her neck. As she turned to look, she caught sight of a rare bee hummingbird. Blanca turned to alert her husband only to find Ignacio with his shotgun pointed straight at her. A shot rang out. The horses bolted. Blanca Agüero collapsed to the ground. Ignacio Agüero sat on the ground holding his wife's body. When nightfall approached, he carried his wife's body seventeen miles to the nearest village where he began to tell his lies.

Prologue Analysis

"The quest for truth is far more glorious than the quest for power." These were the final words written by Ignacio Agüero before he committed suicide. They also serve as the foundation for *The Agüero Sisters*. *The Agüero Sisters* represents a quest for the truth. Not only is it a quest to uncover the reasons why Ignacio killed his wife, but a journey of self-awareness and discovery for two sisters. Two sisters who fail to understand the impact their mother's death has had on shaping their lives. *The Agüero Sisters* is a journey of realization for Constanica and Reina. They must come to understand that they are unable to move forward with their lives until they find and accept the truth of their mother's death. When they can accept that each generation is connected and bound together by the memories, events and circumstances of the generation that came before them, they will then be able to move forward with their own lives.

In the prologue, the reader is introduced to Ignacio and Blanca Agüero. They are a husband and wife naturalist team traveling deep in Cuba's largest swampland. The prologue provides readers with the question that forms the foundation of the story. Why did Ignacio kill his wife and then lie about why he did it?

Throughout the novel, Christina García effectively uses first person narratives by the main characters to tell the family's story. These narratives assist the reader in easily shifting perspective from one character to another and from one generation to the next. The reader is able to view the events that unfold through the eyes of the narrator and to access information not immediately known to the other characters. For example, the reader learns the true circumstances surrounding Blanca's death in the prologue. Constanica and Reina will not find out until much later in the story.



Part 1, Acts of God

Part 1, Acts of God Summary

El Cobre. December 1990. Electrician Reina Agüero is in the copper-mining town of El Cobre to repair the high-voltage telephone cables knocked out by a recent storm. Reina is a forty-eight year old, five foot eleven beauty with a large flawless mouth. She towers over her fellow male electricians by a good four inches. The most daring of her colleagues call her *Compañera Amazona*, a nickname she secretly enjoys. Often, for fun, when visiting small towns, Reina will select the smallest, shyest electrician in town to receive her sexual favors.

Reina suffers from insomnia. Not even rigorous lovemaking with Pepín Beltrán, her lover of twenty-four years, can exhaust her enough to sleep. Pepín blames her inability to sleep on the three thousand volumes of books she keeps in her apartment. He begs her to get rid of the books, but she can not bear to part with many of the books which were written by her father. She has changed nothing in the apartment since her father's death over forty years ago.

Reina stops at the Basilica del Cobre on her way back to the hotel. She has heard of the curative powers of the La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, the island's patron saint. Hopeful, the patron saint can help her sleep; she kneels before the altar to pray. When finished, Reina offers a wrench from her tool belt as an offering to La Virgen.

Reina remembers that her father suffered from incurable insomnia after her mother's death. His insomnia was so complete that it had driven him to suicide two years after her death. Ignacio had shot himself with his double-barreled, twelve-gauge shotgun after writing, "The quest for truth is far more glorious than the quest for power."

The following morning Reina rises before dawn. She has one more job in El Cobre before she can return home to Havana and begin a two-week vacation. The recent non-stop rains have flooded the copper mine. The electric water pump in the copper mine has already electrocuted two men. No one is willing to go near it. Reina, several fellow electricians and a parade of villagers journey up the mountain to the copper mine. The pump sits in water and must be moved before the electricians can repair it. Reina motions for the other electricians to assist her in moving the pump, but they will not touch it. Reina begins to move the machine herself as the rain continues to roar down.

After moving the pump, she takes out a screw driver and begins removing the side panel. The rest becomes a blur as the ground shudders and the pump begins to move. Reina jumps on to the pump as it begins to race down the hillside. The pump crashes into a large mahogany tree. The impact breaks Reina's nose, both thumbs and loosens a back molar. A large tangle of her hair has been pulled out by the roots. Reina is pinned forty feet high in the tree's branches. Her body is sticky with blood. Then, an unexpected blindness and an intense feeling of heat envelops her. She passes out.



Part 1, Acts of God Analysis

Reina narrates this chapter which serves as an introduction to her life in Cuba. Woven throughout the current events of the story are various flashbacks to her childhood and her parents. The reader learns that Reina appears to be a strong-minded woman possessing a healthy self-esteem and a strong sexual appetite. She relishes the nickname of Amazona Compañera given to her by the other male electricians. While she has a steady lover of twenty-four years, Reina enjoys taking lovers in the towns she is sent for work. Through her actions, she broadcasts a clear message to the world that she is independent, self-sufficient and competent to care for herself.



Part 1, New York City

Part 1, New York City Summary

Constancia Agüero Cruz works a cosmetic counter at an upscale Manhattan department store. Constancia is a petite, well-dressed, fifty-one year old woman with dark hair and soft white skin. Her precise manners and foreign accent intimidate clients into buying whatever she suggests. Constancia's sales break all company records. Recently, she won a powder-pink Cadillac convertible for being the top sales person in North America. She does not care about commissions. Her only motivation is the gratification of slowing down the aging process for women.

Soon, Constancia will leave her life in New York. Her husband Herberto is determined to retire to Key Biscayne, Florida. She does not know whether she wants to leave New York, but Herberto is determined to retire. Constancia does not know if she can remain idle. She enjoys working too much.

At the end of the day, Constancia arrives at Herberto's shop to pick him up. As they walk home, Constancia thinks of her deaf son, Silvestre. Although grown and on his own, she does not look forward to moving and leaving him behind. Silvestre's father was Gonzalo Cruz, Herberto's brother. Gonzalo now lives in Miami with his sixth wife. Gonzalo is another reason why Constancia does not want to move to Miami.

As they eat dinner that evening, Constancia listens to her favorite radio show, *La Hora de los Milagros*. Herberto is impatient with Constancia's obsession with miracles. He believes miracles are nothing more than freakish incidents that have logical explanations. Constancia dismisses his skepticism. She has witnessed miracles happen every day. After all, Constancia's mother had disappeared without a word when Constancia was only five months old, only to return to them two and a half years later.

Part 1, New York City Analysis

Constancia narrates this chapter and introduces the reader to her life in New York. Life for Constancia is very different from her sister's life in Cuba. Reina's life is marked by routine food and fuel shortages. She has grown accustomed to the poverty and hardship that surrounds her. Constancia and Herberto, on the other hand, are living the American Dream. They have worked hard their entire life and are now reaping the benefits. Constancia is to receive a pink Cadillac in recognition of achieving the highest sales for the company. Her husband Herberto, another Cuban-exile and successful business owner, is able to retire early and purchase a Condo in Miami.

Constancia's obsession with miracles provides readers with a glimpse of what is a recurrent theme of magic and superstition woven throughout the story. Constancia steadfastly believes in the existence of miracles in every day life. She does not question

whether it is logical or not. Instead, she accepts them as a common reality existing in every day life.



Part 1, A Siguapa Stygian

Part 1, A Siguapa Stygian Summary

Ignacio Agüero narrates. He was born on October 4, 1904. The same day the first president of the Republic, Estrada Palma arrived in Pinar del Río for a parade and banquet. His mother, Soledad was preparing for the festivities when she felt the first contraction. As Soledad lay on her bed giving birth, she spotted a siguapa stygian owl outside her window. She knew the bird was a bad omen and tried to throw a lamp at it, but it remained. The bird remained throughout the child birth until the placenta came out. Then, the bird swooped into the room, grabbed the placenta and flew out the window. Later, Ignacio's mother learned that the bird had flown over the parade crowd dropping the birthing blood on several people. Word of the incident spread throughout Cuba. Everyone interpreted the event to mean that the island was headed for doom.

Ignacio tells of his father, Reinaldo Agüero. Reinaldo was a lector who read to the cigar workers at the El Cid Cigar Manufacturers Company. He was revered for his intelligence and splendid readings. For twenty-one years, Reinaldo stood at his lectern reading to the hundred or so workers who gathered to listen to him. Reinaldo was also a superb violinist. The violin reminded Reinaldo of his own father who had carved violins in the hills of Galicia, Spain.

Part 1, A Siguapa Stygian Analysis

The reader is also able to experience a first-hand account of Ignacio's childhood as told by Ignacio. His first person narratives, woven throughout the story, are a result of a diary he kept for many years. With great detail and insight, Ignacio offers various accounts of his own existence: what he yearned for, what he noticed and what disappeared. The reader can only assume that the retelling of these events is a true one and not the later version of lies told to his children.

It seems almost fitting that the English translation of agüero is "omen." In this chapter, Soledad Agüero views the presence of the Siguapa Stygian owl during her childbirth as an omen. Many agreed that when the owl drops the birthing placenta on the president's delegation that Cuba is headed for doom. This event serves as another example of the role magic and superstition plays in the story. It illustrates how deeply held some of these superstitions are within the Cuban community.



Part 1, Conditions of Survival

Part 1, Conditions of Survival Summary

Santiago de Cuba. January, 1991. Reina is in the hospital recovering from her injuries. The doctors tell her that she is lucky to be alive. Few people survive a direct hit of lightning. The doctors have scraped the burnt flesh from her back many times. Imprints from her tools were branded into her hips. Her hoop earrings had burned holes in her neck. For weeks, her pores had oozed water and blood. Loved ones, friends and neighbors, including Pepín Beltran and her daughter Dulce had donated skin for skin grafts. Miraculously the skin grafts had taken, but Reina believed it may have been better to have died.

Pepín arrived from Havana with her father's books and ancient binoculars. Her thirty-two year old daughter, Dulce also visits. Dulce announces that she will marry and leave the country with a sixty-four year old airline reservation clerk from Spain. Reina does not have the strength to argue with her daughter.

At dawn, Pepín returns to the hospital with a rooster. He believes that there is a persistent evil interfering with Reina's ability to heal. The rooster will trace the evil, absorb it and fling it back into its dark origins. After taking the rooster around the room and through each corner, it squawks and flies out the window.

Part 1, Conditions of Survival Analysis

Symbolism can be found in the donated skin graft treatments that Reina received while in the hospital. Her daughter, lover, family and friends all contribute skin for her skin grafts. Reina's skin, in essence, is a patchwork reminder of how all these people are connected. It further serves to illustrate what can be accomplished when a community of people bond together. In this case, a life is saved.

Pepín's use of the rooster to dispel the evil in Reina's hospital room provides readers with another example of the magical, superstitious realm co-existing along side the more mundane everyday events. It is hard to imagine that any American hospital would allow a visitor to bring a rooster into a hospital to dispel evil spirits. Yet, in Cuba, it appears to be a somewhat accepted occurrence.



Part 1, Key Biscayne, Florida

Part 1, Key Biscayne, Florida Summary

Herberto's father, Arturo Cruz is dead. Constanica attends the funeral with her husband. Herberto has been unapproachable for weeks. It has gotten progressively worse since his father's death. At the funeral, she catches sight of her first husband, Gonzalo Cruz. Relatives have told her that Gonzalo is slowly dying.

Constancia and Herberto moved to Key Biscayne shortly after the New Year. Constanica does not like Miami. Miami reminds her of life in Cuba. She hates being so idle and wants to work. Herberto discourages her from getting a job. He wants her to wait until they are more settled.

As she sits in the funeral service, Constanica remembers how her mother abandoned her when she was five months old. Shortly before Constanica turned three, her mother returned eight months pregnant, battered and bruised. Constanica did not want her mother to stay and tried to cast a spell to get her to leave. But, her mother stayed and gave birth to her sister, Reina. Constanica resented her sister and the attention their mother gave Reina. Constanica tried to hurt her sister by making her eat dirt and by putting venomous spiders in her crib. When her mother found out, she threatened to leave again unless her father sent Constanica away. Constanica was sent to her grandfather's ranch for the next six years. Her father would visit frequently. As Constanica grew older, she accompanied her father on his collecting expeditions. Constanica never shared a home with both parents again.

Reina still lives in the old family apartment in Havana. Her presence in the apartment bothers Constanica. Reina inherited all their father's things while Constanica did not even have a photograph. Reina writes to Constanica now and then, but the news of life in Cuba is always depressing. Constanica was glad she left Cuba thirty years ago. She had divorced Gonzalo and married Herberto determined to leave Cuba and provide her children with a better life.

The evening after the funeral, Herberto announces he is going fishing in Biscayne Bay. Constanica knows he will return without a single fish. At four in the morning, she awakens distressed. She changes her clothes, jumps into her pink Cadillac and heads to the yacht club where Herberto's boat is docked. Constanica sees Herberto's boat, but no sign of Herberto. She sees Herberto's car in the storage warehouse. Herberto lies naked, bound and unconscious in the back seat of the car. Constanica climbs on top her husband and begins pounding on his chest until she successfully resuscitates him.

Part 1, Key Biscayne, Florida Analysis

A theme of memory and remembrance is explored in greater detail in this chapter. Author Christina García suggests that a family's history can not be forgotten or ignored.



Constancia tries to block out and reject the painful childhood memories of her mother's rejection, but is unsuccessful. For Constancia, she would rather forget memories of her childhood in Cuba. On the other hand, Reina appears to embrace and live with the past. She resides in the family apartment surrounded by childhood memories and old relics. She plays the role of guardian for her parent's memory, keeping all of her father's books, papers, stuffed birds and even the shotgun he used to kill her mother and then himself. Reina chooses to remember and embrace her memories.



Part 1, Dulce Fuerte

Part 1, Dulce Fuerte Summary

Havana, Cuba. Dulce narrates. Dulce argues that sex is the only thing the government can not ration is Cuba. It is the next best thing to currency. Many people, including herself, have turned a trick once in a while to make their life better. Today, Dulce works the streets to earn money until her visa to Spain is approved. Last month, Dulce was fired from her job as the volleyball coach at the Jose Marti High School for fraternizing with a foreigner. Since then, she has had to work the streets to survive. Her mother does not know.

Dulce met her current boyfriend, Abelardo, at the foreigner-only hotel, Habana Libre Hotel. He talked of his apartment in Madrid and his widowed sister. Abelardo tells Dulce that she is the most beautiful woman he has seen. Would she do him the honor of becoming his wife? His behavior scared Dulce. She rose to leave, but he quickly apologized and began to cry. He cried so loudly that hotel security came to question Dulce. When she was unable to produce a foreign passport, she was arrested and booked for prostitution. As a result of the arrest, she lost her job. Dulce tried working in a cement plant. After two hours, she walked out and decided to marry Abelardo.

Part 1, Dulce Fuerte Analysis

Like her mother, sex plays a prominent role in Dulce's live. For Reina, sex feeds her healthy self-esteem. She does it because she enjoys it. Reina embraces her sexuality and takes pleasure in her active sex life. For Dulce, it is not an enjoyable pleasure, but a necessity for survival. Without a job, Dulce has no money. Sex has become a simple means to an end for Dulce.



Part 1, Tree Ducks

Part 1, Tree Ducks Summary

Ignacio Agüero narrates. He tells how his father came to Cuba from Spain as a young man. Reinaldo met Ignacio's mother, Soledad Varela, a local flutist, at a concert. The couple were married after a three day courtship. While both his parents were musical in nature, Ignacio was not. Ignacio's parents encouraged his passion for ornithology and nature from an early age. In the winter of 1914, his father was struck with yellow fever and jaundice. Ignacio and his mother slowly nursed him back to health. Though his physical health improved, Ignacio noted that his father was never the same again.

Part 1, Tree Ducks Analysis

This chapter continues the important theme of family. It shows the sense of responsibility that Ignacio feels in caring for his sick father. It also assists in balancing the image the reader has formed of Ignacio as a cold-blooded murderer. The image of Ignacio as a caring son looking after his father humanizes him to the reader.



Part 1, Spring Migration

Part 1, Spring Migration Summary

Havana, Cuba. March, 1991. Reina slowly recovers from her injuries at her home. She still suffers from insomnia. When Reina had returned from the hospital, the local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution had insisted she volunteer for night duty since she was awake most nights. She refused. She no longer believed in the revolution and wanted nothing to do with its cause.

Each night, Reina roams through the rooms of her apartment reliving the days after her mother's death. She remembers accompanying her father to the funeral home with a small prized snakeskin to place in his mother's coffin. Her father would not let her near her mother's coffin. When he was not looking, Reina snuck into the embalming chamber. She saw her mother, with a gaping wound in her throat, lying on the table. Reina tried to force herself to remember how her mother use to look. She quickly kissed her mother's cheek and left. When she was outside, Reina released the dried snakeskin into the wind.

Reina pulls her father's twelve-gauge shotgun from its case. She has kept it for many years, but now can not bear to look at it. Reina quickly dresses and leaves the apartment. When she reaches the seawall of the Malecón, she stops. Taking a deep breath of the cleansing air, she hurdles the gun into the deep sea.

Part 1, Spring Migration Analysis

While not an active supporter of the Revolution before her accident, Reina did learn to tolerate it. In order for her to stay in her family home, she was willing to accept the principles of the Revolution. However after returning home from the hospital, she finds that she can no longer live under the suffocating regime and more importantly, in the family apartment. While her life in Cuba houses many memories for Reina, it also holds many lies and unanswered questions. Reina comes to the realization that her parents will live on as long as there is someone there to remember them. She believes that it is only when they are forgotten that death will become a finality. Once she has accepted this, she knows she is no longer bound to Cuba and the apartment in order to remember her parents.



Part 1, Miami

Part 1, Miami Summary

Gonzalo Cruz tells Constanica that the attack on Herberto was carried out by a fanatical exile group who disapproved of Herberto selling contraband Cuban cigars in New York. Constanica does not believe him. She believes a woman must have lured Herberto into the back of his car. How else would he have ended up naked? Gonzalo and Herberto know more than they are telling her, but she can not prove it.

Herberto decided to join Gonzalo's underground exile group, La Brigada Caimán. The group stages military rehearsals in the Everglades in preparation of a final takeover of Cuba. Herberto tells Constanica he is leaving soon, but will not tell her where he is going. She knows it is to join La Brigada Caimán in the Everglades. Constanica tells her husband that it is ridiculous to try and takeover Cuba at this point. "There is nothing left to inherit in Cuba, nothing left to divide."

The next morning Constanica follows Herberto as he drives to Hialeah Park. As she walks through the horse paddocks looking for him she remembers her mother. Her mother died with the horses that day. Constanica's father said that Mama had drowned after the couple had separated in hopes of improving their odds of catching the ruddy ducks. Papa said Mama slipped, hit her temple on a log and drowned in the swamp.

After her death, Reina had told Constanica she had seen Mama at the funeral home with a shattered throat. Papa denied this was possible. A year later, Papa finally confided to Constanica that what Reina had witnessed was not a lie. Their mother had shot herself in the Zapata Swamp. Papa made Constanica promise never to tell Reina because it would only reopen old wounds.

Part 1, Miami Summary Analysis

Another theme highlighted is that of truth and deception. From the opening pages of the book, the reader discovers that Ignacio Agüero lied about how his wife died. Ignacio tells his children that it was an accident. Even when confronted by what Reina viewed in the funeral home, he still chooses to lie. He tells Constanica that her mother killed herself and instructs her not to tell Reina. Ignacio claims it would only open old wounds for Reina if she were to find out the "truth."

As a result of not knowing the truth, the sisters continue to resent and distrust each other. Each holds various pieces to the puzzle, but because of their distrust for one another, can not come together to find the truth. Constanica does not believe what Reina saw at the funeral home. Instead, she chooses to believe her father. This creates a greater rift between the two sisters. Constanica is jealous of her sister's ability to grieve for their mother as deeply as she does. Constanica feels nothing for a woman that abandoned her as an infant and exiled her as a toddler to live with her grandfather.

Reina resents Constanica because she does not believe her. Constanica chooses to believe a man that always held Reina at a distance. A man she called father, but who never held her or hugged her. The two sisters are stuck at a crossroads unable to move forward with their lives because they have not found the truth.



Part 1, Miami Analysis

Part 1, The Leatherback, Travel in the Family and Miami Summary

Ignacio Agüero narrates. He remembers his thirteenth birthday. For his birthday, he received a spectacular gift of a full-color encyclopedia called *Birds of the World*. A gift he cherished well into his adult years. Ignacio remembers spending the summer on wildlife expeditions to the Cuban coast. One of the highlights of his trips was finding a rare leatherback turtle's nest. To protect it from predators, Ignacio sat on the eggs for two days and nights.

Havana, Cuba. April, 1991. Reina realizes that all she has left in Cuba are memories. She can no longer stay in Cuba. Reina goes to the visa headquarters to petition the Cuban government to leave the country. They tell her that it will take three months before they will give her an answer. Reina tells them she will wait in their office until she receives her answer. After five days and nights, word comes from El Comandante himself, who ordered, "Let the old mare go to America if it pleases her. What use is she to us now?"

Constancia believes her face is transforming into her mother's. She does not recognize herself when she stares into the mirror. When she drives to the yacht club for lunch, she cannot understand why her Cuban friends do not wave to her. Constancia walks to their table but they stare blankly at her. Upset that her friends do not recognize her, she quickly leaves.

Constancia drives to the house of the santero Oscar Piñango. He tells Constancia that her luck is not good. Constancia has power but no strength. She grows tired from too much useless vigilance. Oscar prays to his gods, but they can find no solution to Constancia's situation.

Part 1, The Leatherback, Travel in the Family and Miami Analysis

Reina accepts that the only thing keeping her in Cuba is her memories. With that knowledge in hand, she attempts to apply for a visa to leave the country. At first denied, word comes that Castro himself has approved her visa to leave. His answer is harsh considering that for over thirty years Reina devoted her life to the Revolution. The scene provides the author with an opportunity to illustrate the harshness of the Cuban political system and why so many Cubans are willing to risk death to achieve freedom.

Constancia is forced to confront her past and acknowledge her connection to her mother. She finds her physical transformation into her mother so upsetting she consults a santero, or Cuban priest. Oscar Piñango tells Constancia that her luck is not good. He

instructs her on how she must pay homage and pray to the gods for the answers. Again, Constanca returns to the magic and superstitious practices for guidance and explanation.



Part 1, The Leatherback, Travel in the Family and Miami

Part 1, The Nature of Parasites Summary

Ignacio narrates. He recounts working his way through college. In his freshman year, he applies for the position of assistant to the renowned biologist Dr. Samuel Forrest. During the interview, Dr. Forrest asks Ignacio which animal Ignacio admires the most. Ignacio responds that it was the parasite. Intrigued, Dr. Forrest asks why. Ignacio explains that it is the most original of all animals. A good parasite must exploit its much larger, stronger and faster host to survive. After his explanation, Dr. Forrest offers him the job. From that day forward, Dr. Forrest becomes a friend and colleague to Ignacio.

Part 1, The Nature of Parasites Analysis

Dr. Forrest offers him a job after seeing his passion and personal understanding of parasites.



Part 1, The Nature of Parasites

Part 2, Original Geography and Key Biscayne Summary

Herberto Cruz trains for the great invasion of Cuba. He feels young and alive. Herberto recalls how he wanted to join his father and exiled brothers in the Bay of Pigs invasion many years ago. But, he had not when Constanica threatened to leave him. His older brother, Leopold, died a hero at the Bay of Pigs. His youngest brother, Gonzalo, was shot in the leg. For years, Herberto's father treated him coolly. Herberto had known shame. He had loved Constanica at one time in his life, but could not shake the feeling that he inherited his brother's spoils. Herberto had performed his duty by raising his brother's child, Silvestre and by caring for Constanica and their daughter, Isabel. Now, for once in his life, Herberto wanted something that was entirely his. He was looking forward to the upcoming invasion.

Constanica starts her own cosmetic business from her home. She makes daily deliveries to upscale clients who wait impatiently for her highly demanded products. One day on impulse, she drives to the hospital to see her ex-husband, Gonzalo. She tells herself she will make Gonzalo tell her where Herberto has gone. Constanica is afraid to see Gonzalo fearing he will reignite the old passion she had for him once. Constanica demands that Gonzalo tell her where Herberto has gone. Gonzalo only tells her that by summer her husband will be a hero.

Part 2, Original Geography and Key Biscayne Analysis

Mild-mannered Herberto's reason for joining the exiled guerrilla group was wholly his own. Up to this point in his life, Herberto had devoted his life to taking care of other people, including his brother's son. He obediently did what was expected of him with little complaint. Now, for once, he believes his path in life is clearly lit. His decision to join the guerrilla group is symbolic of his desire to reassert authority over the direction of his life. In his words, he is ready "to break free from his leashed life." Herberto believes that even death would be a more welcomed alternative to returning to life the way it was.

Family is a central theme. This time it is Herberto who feels a strong obligation to live up to the expectation of his family. He feels guilty over not participating with his father and brothers in the Bay of Pigs. Herberto believes that participating in this guerrilla operation to overthrow Castro will redeem him in the eyes of Cruz family.

On the home front, Constanica wants to find out what has happened to Herberto, but is afraid to approach her ex-husband and Herberto's brother, Gonzalo. She is concerned that the sexual attraction they once shared would be reignited. Much to her dismay, the old passions flare when she visits Gonzalo in the hospital. He is unwilling to tell her

where her husband is; only that she will be thanking Gonzalo for making her husband a hero. Constanica leaves Gonazalo's hospital room frustrated in more ways than one. She chooses to channel her frustrations into her business. Constanica focuses all of her attentions on making it a resounding success.



Part 2, Original Geography and Key Biscayne

Part 2, Dulce Fuerte Summary

Madrid, Spain. After two weeks of living with Abelardo and his widowed sister, Dulce leaves. When she leaves, she steals everything including the widowed sister's cash and jewelry. Dulce finds a job as a nanny for a wealthy family. On an outing to a museum, she meets a visiting foreigner named Bengt. She agrees to meet him at his hotel later that night. At the hotel, he feeds her lavishly and offers her dessert. Bengt has her lie down on the bed and spoon feeds her twelve sugared egg yolks. Dulce is sick to her stomach and wonders how she can have sex with Bengt after eating so much. When he is done feeding her, he simply lies down on the bed beside her and falls asleep, seemingly satisfied by the experience.

Part 2, Dulce Fuerte Analysis

Dulce's attempt at married life with the elderly Abelardo fails miserably. Abelardo's widowed sister immediately pegs Dulce as a money-hungry whore out to use her brother. Abelardo did not defend his wife to his sister. This causes a final rift in an already sham of a marriage. Dulce leaves and secures another job as a nanny for a wealthy family. She does not like children and finds the job to be stifling, but is trapped by the limited options available to her. Disillusioned that her life in Spain is not the new beginning she envisioned, she reverts back to her old lifestyle of prostitution. By again seeking out foreign tourists, she is hopeful that they will provide her with a way out similar to what Abelardo had provided.

Part 2, Dulce Fuerte

Part 2, Rarae Aves Summary

Ignacio narrates. He recalls his father being diagnosed with throat cancer when Ignacio was in the last year of studies at the University of Havana. While the doctors only gave him a year to live, his father defied all expectations and lived nearly three years more. Ignacio took a part-time job to help his parents pay for their living expenses during that time. His mother pleaded for him to return to the university and his studies, but he refused to leave his father's side. His father died and then his mother, a few years later. He sold his parent's house and with the money published his first book, *Cuba's Dying Birds*. Ignacio sent the book abroad where it was admired in certain academic circles.

Part 2, Rarae Aves Analysis

Through Ignacio's narrative, the reader is provided with glimpses of Ignacio's life leading up to the tragic events of the Zapata Swamp. These flashbacks attempt to further humanize Ignacio in the eyes of the reader. It becomes difficult to focus on Ignacio as a cold-blooded murderer, when presented with images of a hard working, learned man of science. A man committed to preserving the natural history of Cuba. He is a devoted son willing to sacrifice his own plans of completing college in order to care for his ailing father and mother. Family continues to be the focal point of the Agüero family.



Part 2, Rarae Aves

Part 2, A Matter of Gifts and Miami Summary

Reina arrives in Miami. She grows accustomed to living with Constanica and with life in Florida. Reina is stunned to see that Constanica looks so much like their mother. Reina helps her sister with her growing cosmetic business. Constanica enjoys her sister's company particularly since there has still been no word from Herberto for many months. In the evening hours, Reina enjoys taking Herberto's fishing boat out for trips that last well into the early morning hours.

Constancia prepares to open her new factory, Cuerpo de Cuba, to manufacture her cosmetics. Reina helps her with the electrical wiring in the factory. Constanica wants to hire her sister to supervise the factory, but her sister is content with the forty dollar a week allowance that Reina gives her. Reina does not feel comfortable working in a factory surrounded by the face of their mother. A face that is being used as a product labels for Constanica's cosmetics.

Part 2, A Matter of Gifts and Miami Analysis

Constancia and Reina are so divided by time and events that it appears that little common ground remains between them. However, they are able to unite to help one another achieve their goals. Reina provides Constanica with companionship and assistance in setting up her new factory. Constanica provides Reina with a place to live and a weekly allowance. Constanica would like to hire Reina as a factory supervisor, but Reina can not come to terms with working in a factory surrounded by her mother's image. She is reminded of her mother every time she looks at Constanica and at the labels on the product bottles. Reina does not approve of Constanica using their mother's image to make a profit. Reina has difficulty reconciling her childhood memories of a caring, nurturing mother with the images staring back at her in the factory. Constanica knows that Reina would make an excellent supervisor but has difficulty pinpointing Reina's motives. Constanica finds it difficult to trust someone that claims not to care about money.

The element of satire is found in the author's naming of Constanica's factory and product lines. The translation for Cuerpo de Cuba is Body of Cuba. Body of Cuba produces a full line of cosmetics catering to the aging Cuban baby-boomers who are obsessed with their youth. The product line includes special creams called Cuello de Cuba (Neck of Cuba), Rodillas de Cuba (Knees of Cuba) and Muslos de Duba (Thighs of Cuba). The author uses satire, in a creative way, to exemplify the obsession that Constanica and other aging Cuban baby-boomers have with maintaining their youth.



Part 2, A Matter of Gifts and Miami

Part 2, The World's Smallest Frog Summary

Ignacio narrates. Ignacio Agüero met Blanca Mestre as a student in his biology class at the University of Havana. He found her to be illuminating and intelligent. Blanca was delicately boned with blue-black hair that fell past her shoulders. Men of all types became wildly infatuated with her. Ignacio invited Blanca to become his research assistant though many of his colleagues were suspicious of his motives. Blanca and Ignacio traveled extensively, documenting the wildlife of Cuba. Blanca grew particularly fond of the world's tiniest frog which was native to Cuba.

Blanca rarely spoke to anyone in her family. Ignacio learned that she grew up on a pig ranch in Camagüey. She was the youngest and only girl of seven children. Blanca's mother died in a freak accident on the ranch when Blanca was five years old. Eugenia Mestre's pistol had discharged in its holster, injuring her horse and inciting a stampede of pigs, which trampled her to death. Their grief stricken father single-handedly slit the throats of the six hundred and nine pigs that had taken part in the stampede. All the workers and villagers who ate the slaughtered pork vomited savagely for three days and nights. Several people died, including a twelve-year old boy. Others woke up on the fourth morning cured of all minor maladies.

One evening, while on an expedition, Ignacio worked up his courage to approach Blanca and ask her to marry him. As he walked toward her, he saw a queer apparition. Her hands were soaked with blood. Later, he realized he should have taken a closer look for she had spelled out her grief for him to see. Without preamble, he asked Blanca to marry him. She said yes.

Part 2, The World's Smallest Frog Analysis

There are additional examples of the magic and superstition theme. The circumstances surrounding Grandmother Mestre's death are cloaked in superstition. Legend has a man single-handedly slaughtering six hundred and nine pigs. People became violently ill after eating the cursed pigs. Two people die from eating the pigs. Miraculously on the fourth day, the rest of the villagers awake cured of their ailments. Ignacio Aügero sees an apparition of blood on Blanca's hands the night he proposes to her. Was it foreshadowing the grief that was to come?



Part 2, The World's Smallest Frog

Part 2, Polishing Bones Summary

Miami, Florida. July, 1991. Reina asks Constanica about their mother. Reina wants to know if Constanica remembers a pouch with a bone in it that their mother used to carry with her. Their mother promised to give it to Reina when she grew up. Reina looked for the bone after Blanca's death, but could not find it. Constanica answers that she knows nothing about a bone. Mama never showed her anything like that.

Reina tells Constanica about the man that she met at their mother's grave many years ago. He was tall with flawless black skin. He told Constanica she was beautiful and called her "his daughter." Though she had returned to the grave often, she never saw the man again. Constanica does not respond.

Reina tells her sister that their father looked too good after their mother died. Reina remembers how their father's appearance actually seemed to improve. Constanica believes it was as if he had stolen Blanca's life to replenish his own. Upset by Reina's comments, Constanica tells her sister that she does not want to talk about the past any longer.

Reina leaves and goes to the yacht club. She is now a familiar figure at the club. Reina has seduced a number of its male members, both single and married. Each day, bouquets of red roses arrive at Constanica's condominium for her. She laughs at their gestures. She is immune to their silly flirtations. Reina takes Herberto's boat out to sea and drifts off to sleep under the stars. Reina awakens cold and damp surrounded in darkness. A huge yacht pulls up beside her boat. A voice calls to her through the fog. A man throws her a blanket which she uses to cover herself.

Part 2, Polishing Bones Analysis

The sisters tentatively begin to put the pieces of the puzzle together surrounding their mother's death. Unfortunately, they remain distrustful of each other. Reina tells Constanica about the man who called her "my child," but still hesitates to come out and say that she does not believe Ignacio Agüero was not her father. Reina drops hints to her sister that she believes Ignacio killed their mother, but Constanica still refuses to confront that possibility. Constanica still chooses to believe that her father was incapable of killing their mother. Constanica remains in denial. She refuses to discuss the matter with Reina and blocks her out every time she brings the matter up for discussion.

Reina continues to flaunt her sexual power over the men at the yacht club. She sleeps with young and old, married and single. Many are enamored with her. Reina is pleased that, even at her age, men still flock to her finding her sexually desirable. Reina believes that an aging woman never harmed a man's desire. Ironically, this is a belief that runs

counter to Constancia's commitment to turning back time with her beauty products. Constancia believes that woman must look youthful and attractive in order to spark a man's sexual desire. It goes against her beliefs that a man could be attracted to an aging woman.



Part 2, Polishing Bones

Part 2, Dulce Fuerte and Miami Summary

Dulce explains that she has not seen Bengt in months, but continues to receive calls from every Swedish pervert on vacation in Spain. Dulce's boss intercepted one of the perverted calls and immediately fires Dulce. For days, Dulce lives in a movie theatre eating stale popcorn, licorice and orange soda. She is eventually found and thrown out. With no home, no job, no friends or family, Dulce decides to return to Abelardo's apartment to steal food. After breaking into the apartment, she eats their food and steals his sister's money. As she leaves, she sees a letter addressed from her mother and takes it. In the letter, her mother begs Dulce to come to Miami.

Isabel has left her boyfriend. She arrives in Miami, nine months pregnant, with nothing to her name. She sold everything before she left Hawaii. Isabel goes into labor shortly after arriving. Her son Raku is born the day after. Reina arrives in the hospital to visit her nephew. She brings gifts for Isabel and Raku. For Isabel, she brings a headdress of peacock feathers, an ancient chronometer that keeps perfect time and a bagful of lemons for juice. Raku receives a pint-sized starter hammer and a tiny gold-and-onyx bracelet to keep away the evil eye.

Constancia spends the night at the hospital with her daughter and grandson. She recalls the first days with her own son and how quickly he grew up. After her son moved out of their house in New York, she saw Silvestre everywhere. He was usually accompanied by men that he did not want his mother to meet.

Part 2, Dulce Fuerte and Miami Analysis

The third generation of Agüero children tries to find their way. Dulce is alone and homeless. At the end of her rope, she continues to prostitute herself and steal in order to survive. Just when all hope seems to be lost, she receives a letter from her mother. The letter hints at the possibility of a new beginning. It represents a chance for a better life.

Isabel returns to her mother's home to have her baby out of wedlock. She appears lost and alone when she arrives in Miami. Yet, Isabel continues to maintain a quite defiance. She has become resolute to having and raising the child by herself. The birth of Raku, Constancia's grandchild, helps in renewing the bond between mother and daughter. Raku comes to represent a new hope for the future. For the first time in a long time, Constancia feels a strong urge to protect someone. She understands what it means to lay one's life on the line to protect someone you love.



Part 2, Dulce Fuerte and Miami

Part 2, The Andaraz Summary

Ignacio narrates. Ignacio recounts marrying Blanca and their honeymoon to the Isle of Pines. When they returned to Havana from their honeymoon, Blanca lost interest in carnal pleasures. She succumbed to her husband's desires infrequently and only in fresh running water. Fresh water was a handicap in Havana. The only river in Havana was severely polluted and offered no privacy. Ignacio wanted to insist that she sleep with him, but found that he could not. He would indulge Blanca anything.

Blanca became pregnant. She demanded that she continue as Ignacio's research assistant and that he pay her a salary. He refused since he had not paid her a salary since they married. Blanca told him she would find employment elsewhere, but no one would hire her because of her pregnancy. Finally, Ignacio relented.

Blanca wanted go to America. She grew restless and cross. Her behavior became erratic. Blanca slept fitfully often waking with imagined fevers. Ignacio would give her sponge baths to settle her nerves. It was clear that she resented the life inside her. Blanca decided to move all her things into a separate bedroom in her sixth month of pregnancy.

She furnished her room with nineteen discarded chairs she found in garbage heaps and a musty feather mattress which lay on the floor. For days on end, she stayed in the room. She would just sit in one chair after another frantically checking her watch. Blanca insisted it was always raining in her room. She asked Ignacio to bring more umbrellas.

Toward the end of the pregnancy, Ignacio encouraged Blanca to visit her family. They made the trip to her father's farm. They were greeted by Blanca's father Ramon Mestre and his six sons. It was obvious to Ignacio, that except for her brother Dámaso, the relationship with her family was strained. Ignacio would not see the men again until three and half years later when he brought Constanica to live with her grandfather.

After Constanica's birth, Blanca would rock her daughter in the nursery around the clock. Blanca remained oblivious to everything else around her. Doctors were called in to help her. They tried everything including vitamin shots, metallic medicines and electric shock therapy, but nothing seemed to break Blanca's spell. Five months after Constanica was born, Blanca disappeared. She left no note or clue as to where she went.

Part 2, The Andaraz Analysis

It becomes apparent that Blanca is suffering from some form of mental illness. Although he tries, Ignacio is unable to comfort his wife. The reader is able to sympathize with his sense of despair and helplessness. By using the techniques of foreshadowing and

flashback, the reader is already aware of the fact that Blanca will eventually leave Ignacio.



Part 2, The Andaraz

Part 2, A Natural History Summary

Key Biscayne, Florida. August, 1991. Reina opens a restoration garage and begins restoring vintage cars. She enjoys the work. No one bothers her. She is under no pressure and can work at all hours of the day or night.

Reina thinks about her current lover. Russ Hicks is a self-made millionaire who is writing an autobiography about his life. He represents the closest thing to a hero that Reina knows. He rescued her that night she fell asleep on Herberto's boat. Russ carried her to his cabin where he made love to her repeatedly. He offers to pay her whatever she wants, but only if she stays close to him.

As she works, Reina reflects on her father. As a child, Reina accepted everything her father told her without question. That changed when her mother died. Reina did not think her father loved her. When she was little, he never held her or touched her. One day, she asked him if he was her real father. He ignored her question. Reina never received an answer.

She is pulled back to the present by a radio news bulletin. A third-rate invasion of Cuba was under way. A hundred or so exiles were attacking Varadero Beach. Reina laughs at the notion. Did these exiles really think that the people of Cuba would welcome them with open arms? No matter how dissatisfied the people of Cuba were, the exiles were the last individuals the Cuban people wanted to take over.

Part 2, A Natural History Analysis

The theme of starting over continues. This time it is Reina's turn. She works to build a new life for herself. She is happy restoring old cars and spending time with her new boyfriend, Russ. However, she is still haunted by memories of the past. Reina always believed everything her father told her as a child. She never questioned him. That trust was broken after her mother's death. Deep in her heart, Reina knows that Ignacio Agüero was not her father. His inability to acknowledge her as his child when Reina asks him directly only confirms what Reina always suspected. The question becomes why Ignacio chose to remain silent about Reina parentage after Blanca died. Ignacio could have told Reina that she was not his own, yet he did not. Blanca was dead and could no longer threaten to leave him. Why did he choose not to tell her the truth?



Part 2, A Natural History

Part 2, Silvestre Cruz Summary

Miami, Florida. Silvestre Cruz arrives in Miami unannounced. His mother has written him repeatedly that his father is dying. Since his childhood, his mother felt she needed to protect Silvestre from his father. As a result, Silvestre has never met his father. Silvestre goes straight to the hospital from the airport. When he arrives, Gonzalo is sleeping. Quietly, Silvestre pulls back the hospital sheet and stares at his father's shriveled and broken body. Silvestre thinks to himself that this is what he has to look forward to when he grows older. Gonzalo begins to absently stroke himself. Silvestre leans down to smell Gonzalo. Gonzalo awakens and stares straight into the eyes of Silvestre. Gonzalo confronts a younger version of himself staring back at him. Silvestre places the pillow over his father's face and suffocates him.

Part 2, Silvestre Cruz Analysis

Examples of the memory and remembrance theme are found in Silvestre's meeting with his father. Silvestre never met his father before his visit to the hospital. But, for some unknown reason, he now feels an overwhelming urge to meet him. Once Silvestre sees his father, he knows that he is forever linked to him. His memory of his father will always be indelibly connected to the strong physical resemblance he bears to him. Like his mother, Silvestre is forced to accept who he is and where he comes from because of the likeness staring back at him in the mirror. Silvestre's fear of what he could become was to horrifying to accept. In denial, Silvestre kills his father as if to erase any remembrance or connection between the two.



Part 2, Silvestre Cruz

Part 2, Coral Gables and Owls of Oriente Summary

Constancia sits at the funeral mass of Gonzalo Cruz with Gonzalo's four other wives. She had sent Silvestre a telegram to let him know his father had died, but Silvestre did not respond. Gonzalo died the day after his long-planned invasion of Cuba was launched. The invasion resulted in Herberto's death. Constancia learned that forty-four men in guerrilla fatigues died storming the Hotel Bellamar on Varadero Beach in Cuba. Seventeen guerillas were captured. Herberto was among the twenty-nine missing, presumably hiding, or dead.

Several days after the funeral of Gonzalo, a man with a thick Camagüey accent appears at Constancia's door. His name is Evaristo Leal and he claims to have worked on the Mestres' pig ranch. He knew Constancia's Tio Dámaso. He gives her a letter that Dámaso had written her in 1984. Dámaso had given him the letter after the man had decided to move to America. Evaristo's departure had been inexplicably delayed for six years, but now he was here delivering the letter as promised.

Constancia read the letter immediately. Her uncle wrote that he continued to live on the ranch after 1950 when he was paralyzed from the waist down by a freak horse riding accident. After his father and brothers died, he donated the family property to the revolution with the agreement that he'd always have a place to stay. Tio Dámaso buried Papa's last papers there, near the site of the monument to Eugenia Mestre. Tio Dámaso said he could not trust himself to stay silent, as her father had asked, so he had to stop writing her. Constancia reads the letter over and over again.

Constancia waits up for her sister Reina to come home. When Reina arrives, Constancia tells her that Ignacio Agüero was not her father. Reina looks at her sister sadly and responds that she already knew that. She continues on to bed without a backward glance at her sister.

The next day Constancia seeks the advice of Oscar Piñango. Oscar tells Constancia that she must return to Cuba. He tells her that she and her sister must go to the sacred tree by the river before Constancia starts her journey to Cuba. He tells her that secrets lie buried in their original grave. After giving her detailed instructions, that were not to be changed, he reminds her that people die many times, but never forever.

Ignacio recalls the two and a half year period when Blanca had disappeared. He searched for her, hired a private investigator to search and even consulted a santera. The santera told him there was nothing he could do to bring his wife back. Blanca would return of her own accord, bearing a child for the god Chango. Ignacio tried to continue his life as usual. He doted on his daughter, Constancia. He even had a brief affair with an American biologist whom he credits with saving his life.



In May 1942, Blanca returned beaten and eight months pregnant. Ignacio took her in and cared for her. The next month, she gave birth to another man's baby, twelve pounds, with nutmeg brown skin and hands. Blanca never became Ignacio's wife again. For many nights, Ignacio questioned why he allowed his heart to be pillaged and used by Blanca. Then, he simply stopped questioning. He just accepted that he had a rich, blinding, orphaned love for Blanca.

After the baby was born, Blanca ordered Constanca and her nanny from the home. At first, Ignacio resisted. But when Constanca was found force-feeding the baby mud and dropping venomous spiders in to Reina's crib, Blanca gave Ignacio an ultimatum. Either Constanca was to leave, or Blanca would leave. Ignacio took Constanca to her Grandfather Mestre's ranch. Secretly, over the years, Ignacio would visit Constanca. She begged him to take her home. He always promised that it would be soon, but the time never came. As she grew older, Constanca accompanied her father on his field trips, proving to be an exceptional companion and assistant.

In 1948, Blanca unexpectedly decided to throw a carnival party. As the night progressed, Blanca danced with a near-naked man who later took her to her bedroom. After the guests left, Ignacio forced open her door finding only his wife wrapped in a mantilla. He escorted her to the bed and began to make love to her. Blanca did not resist him. She only whispered to him, in Spanish, "In the land of the blind, the one-eyed men are kings."

Part 2, Coral Gables and Owls of Oriente Analysis

Reina's birth and Blanca's subsequent parenting style, illustrates the impact a mother's love can have on a child. Reina basked in her mother's love and attention. Reina resembled her mother's lover. Reina was nurtured, cherished and held close to Blanca. As a result, Reina grows up to be self-assured and confident in whom she is as a woman. Her self-esteem and drive are internal. Reina grows up not caring what other people think of her. Their opinions do not matter. She views the need for money or material things as unimportant.

Constancia was unwanted and abandoned by her mother at birth. Later, she was rejected by her mother and forced to leave her home. Raised mostly by male relatives in a male dominated environment, Constanca equates who she is as a person with her external appearance, social connections and conventional trappings. She lacks the strong internal self-esteem and self-confidence her sister exhibits. She is obsessed with how other people view her and with maintaining her youth.

Examples of magic and superstition are evident. Constanca receives the letter from her uncle and does not know how to proceed. She turns to the santero, Oscar Piñago, for guidance. After consulting the gods, he provides Reina with a set of specific instructions which she and her sister must follow down to the tiniest detail. When Blanca disappears, Ignacio also consults a santera to find answers. Here a rational man, of scientific means, desperate for answers, finds himself willing to consult local superstition

for the answers. Both Constanica and Ignacio turn to their religion, santeria, to guide them.



Part 2, Coral Gables and Owls of Oriente

Part 2, Flowers of Exile Summary

Miami, Florida. September, 1991. Constanica and Reina visit the sacred zone of trees by the river to pay homage as the santero had directed. After they completed the offering, Reina and Constanica take Herberto's boat out to sea. Despite reservations, Constanica followed the santero's instructions and allowed Reina to accompany her on the first part of her journey. While on the boat, Constanica asked her sister what they were suppose to remember. Reina told her they were to remember what happened. After some thought, Constanica announced that Mama had not drowned. Reina snaps at her telling her she told Constanica what she had seen at the funeral home years ago. Constanica never believed her. Reina tells her that there was no physical way Mama could have put the shot-gun to her throat and pulled the trigger. Reina tells her sister that Papa killed Mama and left her to die in the swamp. Constanica explodes with rage and grief. The two sisters fight. Constanica hits Reina in the head with the oar and she falls overboard. Constanica tells Reina she needed to believe what their father had told her. She sits down in the boat and watches her sister drown for a few minutes. Then, she fishes her out of the sea and resuscitates her.

Part 2, Flowers of Exile Analysis

The story reaches its climax in this chapter. After several failed attempts to reach the truth surrounding their mother's death, the sisters finally come together and accept a common truth. The break through occurs in Herberto's small boat in the middle of the sea. The pent up rage and frustration that both daughters experienced over the years violently erupt as the sister's fight. Constanica knocks Reina overboard. Reina begins to lose consciousness. At first, Constanica is slow to save her sister. It takes a moment for Constanica to accept the truth. She questions what truth could subdue that regret already has not. Constanica then pulls her sister from the sea and breathes life into her lungs. Life now starts anew for the sisters.



Part 2, Flowers of Exile

Coda, Constanica, Dulce and Constanica Summary

Constancia continues her journey to Cuba on a fishing boat. Yesterday, she received news that Herberto was confirmed dead. She plans to land at Varadero Beach, collect his remains and have them burnt into a portable ash. However, she does not know what she will do with his remains as she travels to reach Camagüey. As they near the Cuban coast, Constanica changes into a wet suit, grabs her waterproof satchel and swims the remaining three miles to the Cuban coast.

Dulce finally arrives in Miami. She worked as a prostitute for three long days to raise the money for the airfare. Dulce is staying with her mother at Constanica's apartment. She is eager to start her new life in Miami and has even found a job working in the sandwich shop of a Cuban exile. Reina wants her daughter to have a baby. Dulce does not want to have any children. Reina tells her that she would take care of the baby, but Dulce tells her mother she would rather be struck by lightning than to have a child.

Constancia has been traveling across Cuba for four days to reach Camagüey. After landing on the beach, she claims her husband's body from the morgue and cremates him. Now, she carries him in an empty lotion jar. When she reaches Camagüey, she rents a hotel room for the evening. In the room, she empties Herberto's ashes onto the bed sheets. She tastes his ashes, optimistic that it would reveal something profound and significant to her. But, as in life, Herberto remains stubbornly lifeless.

Coda, Constanica, Dulce and Constanica Analysis

The Agüero women begin to move toward closure and a new beginning. Constanica arrives in Cuba, locates Herberto's remains and has them cremated. She continues her journey for answers. Dulce uses sex one last time in order to close the chapter on her life in Spain and begin anew in America. She is eager to start a new life and put the old one behind her. Reina wants her daughter to have a baby. To Reina, having a baby represents a new beginning, a fresh start.



Coda, Constanica, Dulce and Constanica

Coda, Reina and Constanica Summary

Reina enjoys an evening with Russ. She sees herself naked, willful and four times her normal size. She knows that in another month, the bit of flesh in her stomach will grow into a delicate skeleton the size of a hummingbird. She feels it fluttering already.

Constancia secures an old black Packard and drives to the Mestre ranch. Tio Dámaso had described how she could find the ranch. Unfortunately, Eugenia Mestre's tomb was no longer there. It had been taken apart by pilgrims and miracle seekers each taking a piece until nothing was left. No one knows what became of her remains.

Constancia reaches the old abandoned farmhouse. With a farmer's spade in hand, she begins to dig at the rotting floorboards until she uncovers the copper box. Inside the box is a paring knife, a box of matches, a faded flannel pouch containing a worn bit of bone and a stack of her father's last papers. Constanica begins to read her father's diary. She reads the words carefully over and over. She decides to give the little bone to her sister.

Coda, Reina and Constanica Analysis

Reina is content with her life. She has her daughter, Dulce, her lover, Russ and a new life growing within her. Reina's unborn child is her chance at a new beginning.

Constancia achieves closure when she finds the copper box containing her father's last papers and reads her father's diary. His diary ends where the story began, with the murder of Blanca. She is now provided with undisputable proof that her father killed her mother. However, the diary does not provide any answers as to why he killed her. By the end, it seems irrelevant as to why he killed her.

Coda, Reina and Constanca

Coda, The Hummingbird Summary

Ignacio Agüero narrates. He did not plan what happened in the Zapata Swamp. He does not remember taking aim at the hummingbird that glittered above Blanca's head, or pulling the trigger on the gun. Ignacio held her for hours in the swamp after she had died. When dusk broke, he carried her the seventeen miles to the nearest village and told his lies.

Coda, The Hummingbird Analysis

Ultimately, the *Agüero Sisters* is a story of courage. It is the courage of two sisters to reconcile with their past and to find the truth. By the end of the story, the sisters have found closure and are able to move on with their life. It does not come from finding out the reasons why their father murdered their mother. The reader never discovers the true reason why Ignacio committed such a heinous crime or why he lied to his daughters. Instead, it comes from the sisters' ability to understand and embrace their past.



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Characters

Constancia Agüero Cruz

One of the sisters of the title, Constancia is petite, feminine, and proper, and these traits stand in stark contrast to her sister Reina, whose Amazonian figure suits her larger-than-life personality. When the novel opens, Constancia is fifty-one years old and living in New York with her husband, Heberto Cruz. She's a successful businesswoman who sells makeup out of a deep conviction of its importance. She's "motivated not by commissions, only by the satisfaction of staving off women's little everyday deaths." The way Constancia sees herself is shaped by and reflected in her external appearance. Rejecting "the modern ethos of comfort before style," she wears high-heeled shoes and color-coordinated outfits to perform the routine tasks of her work day. Constancia sees her own appearance as a selling tool. She's "partial to Adolfo suits, which set off her petite figure, and she completes every ensemble with a short strand of pearls. Her foreign accent and precise manner intimidate clients into buying whatever she suggests." When the couple retire to Key Biscayne, Florida, Constancia opens her own business - *Cuerpo de Cuba* - and creates a line of natural body and face creams. She's a brilliant marketer and soon becomes a very successful entrepreneur. One morning, Constancia wakes to find her face has been replaced by that of her long-dead mother, Blanca Mestre Agüero, who abandoned her as a young child. In many ways, Constancia has resolutely put her family history behind her. Yet of all the characters she's the most susceptible to superstition and magic. Constancia's favorite radio show is *La Hora de Los Milagros*, or "the miracle hour," and she "knows in her heart that miracles arrive every day from the succulent edge of disaster, defying nature, impossible to resist."

Ignacio Agüero

Ignacio is the patriarch of the Agüero family, but his character isn't well understood by either Reina or Constancia, who don't know that he has committed a shocking act. He shot and killed Blanca Mestre Agüero, his wife and the mother of both sisters, in the Zapata Swamp many years before the main action of the novel occurs. After this terrible deed, he leaves the swamp and "began to tell his lies." Two years later, he commits suicide. As the novel progresses, Ignacio is seen as an increasingly sympathetic character, thanks to his first-person diary account of his life. Ignacio writes his own story, and in doing so, he provides a partial history of Cuba. Born in 1904, two years after Cuba got its independence, Ignacio becomes a renowned naturalist who publishes many books, the most famous of which is entitled *Cuba: Flora and Fauna*. In his youth, Ignacio read to the workers in his father's cigar factory and he pursued the beautiful chemist Blanca Mestre, who later became his wife. It was the explicit goal of his career to catalog "every one of Cuba's nearly extinct birds." His diary staves off his own extinction by letting his daughters learn the truth about him long after his death. This novel is so concerned with what things mean that the family name Agüero is translated as "omen" or "augury."



Reina Agüero

Reina, one of the two sisters in the title of the novel, is tall (5'11"), voluptuous, romantic, and irresistible to men. Reina's daughter, Dulce, describes her mother as a woman who "puts her faith in electricity and sex." In many ways, Reina is the opposite of her practical and petite older sister. When the novel opens, Reina is forty-eight and is living in Havana, Cuba, in the apartment where she was raised. She's suffering from a bad case of insomnia and in her sleeplessness she endlessly wrestles with the family's past. Reina is a skilled, traveling electrician - a profession that suits her. It allows her to meet and make love to men from all over the country. "The most daring of her colleagues call her Compañera Amazona, a moniker she secretly relishes." Both Constanica and Reina undergo physical transformations. Constanica wakes up to find she has taken her mother's face, and Reina is hit by lightning when she's working as an electrician in El Cobre, a town in eastern Cuba. Reina's skin is so badly burned that it's stitched back together with donations from friends, family members, and lovers. "Most of Reina's nutmeg color is gone, replaced by a confusion of shades and textures. A few patches of her skin are so pink and elastic, so perfectly hairless, they look like a newborn pig's." Reina is emotional - she cherishes the memory of her mother's having breast-fed her until she was five, and she lives among the papers and debris of Ignacio's past - but she has trouble connecting to Constanica. In the years after their mother's death, Reina "wishes her sister could have given her something vital then, something to ease her grief. But all that was essential collapsed between them in those years, collapsed but did not die."

Pepín Beltrán

Reina's lover of twenty-four years, Beltrán is married, wears orthopedic shoes, and is an official in the Ministry of Agriculture. When Reina is hit by lightning, he is one of the people who contributes some of his own skin for her skin graft. He is loyal to the ideals of the revolution and remains in Cuba after Reina departs for Miami.

Gonzalo Cruz

Gonzalo Cruz was Constanica's first husband and her love for him stays with her, despite her marriage to his brother, Heberto. Gonzalo and Constanica were only married for four months; Gonzalo left her when he found out that she was pregnant and he never made any effort to meet their son, Silvestre. Gonzalo seems legendary. He marries six times, is known for being an unforgettable lover, and has a war wound - a shortened leg - from the Bay of Pigs. Gonzalo takes pride in his own outrageousness and in his injury: "Gonzalo could have fixed his leg years ago, but he prefers it damaged, the pretext it gives him to boast of his valor." Throughout most of the novel, Gonzalo is in the hospital, sick and dying.



Heberto Cruz

Constancia's husband, Heberto, is a stable, successful businessperson, a man with a "steady mercantile drive" who owns a tobacco shop on Sixth Avenue in Manhattan and then undergoes a dramatic personality change in retirement. After urging Constancia to move to Key Biscayne, Florida, Heberto is convinced by his older brother, Gonzalo, to become a counterrevolutionary. He becomes involved in a plot to overthrow the Cuban government. "Years ago, Heberto had wanted to join his father and exiled brothers in the Bay of Pigs invasion, longed to commandeer one of the Cruzes' secretly donated ships. But Constancia threatened to leave him and move to Spain." Heberto departs for the Florida Everglades and is killed in action.

Isabel Cruz

The artist in the family, Constancia's daughter, Isabel, has received some family traits that link her to her mother, her aunt, and her grandmother. When the novel opens, Isabel is a potter, living in Oahu and pregnant with her first child. Isabel's work is free-form - "odd shards of clay and other materials combined to suggest something recycled, something tampered with or incomplete." Isabel is described as having a "quiet defiance." After she gives birth to her son, Raku, her former boyfriend Austin sends a money order for two hundred dollars, but Isabel tears up the check and Constancia is frightened by her "daughter's resoluteness."

Silvestre Cruz

When most of the action of the novel takes place, Silvestre is thirty-three, a homosexual, and working at a library clipping articles for a news magazine. Silvestre is Constancia's son by her first husband, Gonzalo Cruz. When Silvestre was a child, Constancia sent him to an orphanage in Colorado because she was frightened by rumors that Cuban children would be rounded up and sent to boarding school in the Ukraine. At the orphanage, he contracted a 107-degree fever that left him permanently deaf. "Silvestre desperately attempted to conquer the damage, to discipline his other senses to make up for the unyielding silence. He strengthened his eyesight, his senses of smell and touch and taste, to fatiguing degrees."

Dulce Fuerte

Reina's daughter represents the younger generation in Cuba. She's the daughter of a well-known revolutionary, José Luís Fuerte, and she worked as a volleyball coach at José Martí High School before she became a prostitute. For Dulce, her personal history is a burden and she is very bitter. She says, "I spent practically my whole childhood in boarding schools, wearing navy-blue uniforms, picking lettuce or lemons or yams and reciting useless facts." She used to joke with Che Guevara's son about their "respective



revolutionary burdens." In order to leave Cuba, she marries an older man and flees to Madrid.

Blanca Mestre Agüero

Murdered in the opening pages of the novel, Blanca is a compelling but enigmatic character, one who's seen almost exclusively through the memories of her daughters and her husband. She's important because it is her face that Constanca later assumes in one of the novel's strange touches, and it is the memory of her nurturing (she breast-fed Reina until her younger daughter was five years old) that haunts Reina throughout her life. Slight in stature, Blanca is described as being a beauty, "delicately boned as certain birds." Like her husband, Blanca was a famous naturalist. She's also characterized by her fierce independence. Blanca abandons her five-month-old daughter, Constanca, and when she returns to her husband and child, she is pregnant with another man's child. As befits a character who haunts the living, Blanca seems spooky and slightly unreal. She has strange eating habits, drinking milk all day and eating her sole meal of steak, fried eggs over rice, and a ripe mango each day at four a.m. This is how Ignacio describes his first impressions of his future wife: "*Her gifts had nothing to do with intelligence, which she displayed in impressive abundance, but were born of qualities much less tangible. Instinct. Intuition. An uncanny sense for the aberrational.*"



Themes

American Dream

Constancia represents the American Dream. Her success selling lotions and creams to Cuban- American women shows how well she understands the market she's pursuing. Her fervor for selling products is so intense that she even paints Heberto's motorboat in a floral motif to promote her new perfume—lower of Exile. Reina is uncomfortable with Constancia's preoccupation with making money and sees the boat as a "gliding advertisement for her sister." By the time Constancia returns to Cuba, she is so thoroughly Americanized that she sees the rough skin of her countrywomen as an entrepreneurial opportunity. "When El Commandant kicks the bucket, Constancia speculates, just imagine all the lotions and creams she could sell!" In this novel, the comforts of the American Dream can come at the cost of exploiting the culture of one's childhood and one's family members.

Change and Transformation

Throughout this novel, the characters go through physical changes that reflect their spiritual states of being. Reina's accident is one example. After she's struck by lightning, she receives skin grafts from various lovers and relatives, and she becomes a walking symbol of the different people in her life. Perhaps the most dramatic instance of transformation is Constancia's face turning into that of her mother. Before her face changes, Constancia dreams that she's undergone plastic surgery and then awakens to find her face appears to have been "rearranged in the night. . . . Then it hits her with the force of a slap. This is her mother's face." Her changed appearance has various consequences. It connects Constancia to a woman and a past she sometimes despises and it makes her business a wild success because her youthful appearance helps her sell products.

Memory and Reminiscence

In *The Agüero Sisters*, family history must be faced up to—literally and figuratively. Silvestre, who never knew his father, and Constancia, who hates her mother, are doomed to remember their parents because their own faces manifest their connection to the previous generation. Reina, on the other hand, willingly accepts the role of guardian of her parents' personal histories. She is grateful to have insomnia because it gives her the chance to sort through her father's books, papers, and bird remains. "The past she combs through is long dead, sloughed off from Papá's life like the desiccated skin of a snake." As long as an individual is remembered in this novel, he or she has not really died. "To be forgotten," Reina decides, "is the final death."



Sex

Reina expresses herself through her sexuality. Her lovemaking is a gift she bestows on men all over Cuba. "Often, Reina selects the smallest, shyest electrician in a given town for her special favors, leaving him weak and inconsolable for months." She enjoys a healthy sense of self-esteem; she argues that the signs of aging never harmed a man's desire—a belief that runs directly counter to Constanica's professional commitment to supplying women with creams to help them make themselves more youthful and attractive. At one point, Reina says to Constanica, "Oye, *chica*, since when did cellulite ever deter passion?" At another moment, she says, "Por favor, mere creams and lotions won't make a woman desirable. The confidence in her walk is what gives birth to lust." Although Reina's self-confidence is appealing, she finds that same strutting sexuality unattractive in the men she encounters. "They are all much too sure of their allure. This is a problem in Cuba. Even the most gnarled, toothless, scabrous, sclerotic, pigeon-toed, dyspeptic, pestilential men on the island believe themselves irresistible to women. Reina has pondered this incongruity. Too much mother coddling is her theory. After the love and embraces of a Cuban *mami*, what man wouldn't think he was the center of the universe?"

Truth and Falsehood

In the opening scene at the Zapata Swamp, Ignacio Agüero shoots his wife, carries her body seventeen miles to the nearest village, then "began to tell his lies." For his daughters, who are told that their mother has drowned, Ignacio's deception will be a disaster, one that literally fractures their sense of how they look at all aspects of the world. Constanica later believes another lie: that her mother has killed herself. The lies result in violence between the sisters. Reina "lifts her sister by the throat. To choke out the final lies. Papá's lies. Constanica's willful, stone-blind lies." It is only after that confrontation, which takes place in a boat hovering between the U.S. and Cuban coasts, that both women can move forward in their lives.

Style

Setting

The Cubans in this novel live side by side with the past. In Havana, Reina lives in the apartment where she was raised. Dangling from the chandelier in her father's study is a bird's nest; Reina lives "amidst the debris of her childhood." To Ignacio and Blanca Agüero, the natural world of Cuba is like the Garden of Eden. "The Agüeros often imagined what Cuba must have been like before the arrival of the Spaniards, whose dogs, cats, and rats multiplied prodigiously and ultimately wreaked havoc with the island's indigenous creatures. Long ago, Cuba had been a naturalist's dream." In an interview in the *Santa Fe New Mexican* in 1997, Garcia said, "Cuba has always lived in my imagination. I have only spent a half of a month in Cuba since I was 2 1/2, so I don't have much to go on in that sense . . . to me, Cuba is on the page. In an odd sense, it is what I create for myself. I don't think I fit in Cuba, I don't fit in the exile community in Miami. So in many ways, it is the search for home. The search for Cuba begins on the page."

The settings in the United States reflect the longings of the Cuban-American community for home. Little Havana in Miami is like a museum of the Cuban past. In the U.S., at "the best *bodega* in Little Havana, two dozen varieties of bananas are sold. There are pyramids of juicy mangoes, soursops, custard apples, and papayas. In a flash, they'll make her a milk shake that tastes of her past. Every Friday, Constanica loads up her pink Cadillac convertible with fresh fruit to purée and cries all the way home." But the Cuban-Americans living in Miami and Key Biscayne are replicating a Cuba that no longer exists. Reina and the other Cubans in this novel live modestly and are accustomed to food shortages. Reina's longtime lover, Pepín, believes that it's the *gusanos* (a derogatory name for those Cubans who left for the U.S., which literally means "worm") who undid the accomplishments of the revolution. The wealth they brought back—even extra-strength aspirin—made citizens start skipping the May Day parade and begin refusing to cut their quota of sugarcane. Reina writes Constanica "with news of successive deprivations. Reina says it's sad to see the near-empty baskets and shelves of the markets in Cuba, the withered vegetables, the chickens too scraggly even for soup." In Garcia's world, each culture is longing for the perceived comforts of the other.

Point of View

One of the most complicated and intriguing aspects of Garcia's novel is its shifting perspectives. Although Reina and Constanica are at the heart of the novel, these two protagonists (the central characters who serve as a focus for the themes and incidents of the novel) don't tell their stories in their own voices. Ignacio Agüero has left behind a diary, in which he narrates the events of his life in the first person, telling his own story and offering opinions about the various actions and characters. Presumably, this story is



the true one, the one he knows in his heart and not the one he tells his daughters after he began lying. Reina's daughter, Dulce, also tells her own story in the first person. In this way, Garcia brackets the main action of the sisters' stories with the highly personal opinions of both the older and younger generations. The first-person sections allow us to view the main events with distance. For someone like Reina's daughter, Dulce, the revolution feels different than it does for the older generation. Dulce says: "I used to be friends with Che Guevara's son in high school. We used to joke about our respective revolutionary burdens. Last I heard, he was a heavy-metal musician, pierced everywhere and trying to leave the country."

By interspersing different points of view, Garcia gives the reader information that her characters don't possess. For instance, the reader knows from the opening pages that Ignacio murdered his wife, but neither Constanca nor Reina knows this until the very end of the novel.



Historical Context

The Revolution of Fidel Castro

Although *The Agüero Sisters* takes place more than thirty years after Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba, many of the economic and social situations that the characters wrestle with date back to the revolution. For instance, it is for primarily political reasons that huge numbers of Cubans like Heberto Cruz and Constanacia Agüero Cruz left Cuba once Castro was in power.

Castro, then a young lawyer, took control of Cuba in February 1959 by initiating guerrilla warfare against Fulgencio Batista, the dictator who had seized power in 1952 and who was known for his arrogance and corruption. Although Batista enjoyed the support of the United States for much of his rule, by the time that Castro defeated him Batista had begun to alienate his American supporters, so Castro's takeover was not met with too much resistance by the U.S. government. Although at first Castro was very popular in Cuba, American officials during the administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower soon realized that the new government was not going to allow the U.S. to dictate terms as it had for many years. (The U.S. had established strong economic ties in Cuba in the early 1900s and played a significant role in developing Cuba's economy.) Castro also pushed for a radical restructuring of the economy, and the Soviet Union supported him.

Cuban-American Migration

Although *The Agüero Sisters* takes place in the early '90s, many of the events were shaped by Cuban-American migration patterns. Between 1959 and 1962, more than 155,000 Cubans left the island. Of the close to one million Cubans living in the United States today, more than half arrived here after 1959. Between December 1965 and December 1972, 257,000 Cubans came to the United States. The American policy of welcoming refugees was a strategy for destabilizing the Castro government because it deprived Cuba of many of its merchants and professionals. The U.S. saw the flight of refugees as harmful to Cuba's economic future and as a symbolic victory against Communism. Most of these immigrants were fiercely opposed to Castro and his regime, but they were also proud of their Cuban identity and had a strong desire to return to their homelands.

The majority of the first wave of Cuban immigrants after the Castro revolution went to Miami, where they were close to Cuba and could enjoy a climate very similar to that at home. This is clearly seen in *The Agüero Sisters*; those who live in Miami have created a Little Havana to replicate the foods of their homeland. When Constanacia moves to Florida, she is both thrilled and disturbed by the similarities to her childhood: "Everywhere, there is a mass of disquieting details. The deep-fried croquettes for sale on the corner. The accent of the valet who parks her car. Her seamstress's old fashioned stitching. And the songs, slow as regret, on the afternoon radio."



When Constanca sends Silvestre to an orphanage in Colorado, the motivation also dates back to the revolution. Like other parents at the time, she fears that her child will be shipped off to boarding school in the Ukraine, so she voluntarily sends him away instead. Wild rumors circulated in Cuba - rumors that were fanned by U.S. officials - that children would be forcibly taken from their homes and sent to the Soviet Union and educated as Communists. Within three years' time, 14,048 children, mostly males, left Cuba and were cared for by various groups, including the Catholic Church. Today, there are many well-educated, middle-class Cuban Americans who did not rejoin their families until they were adults, if they ever went home again at all.

The Agüero family also reflects some demographic trends in Cuban immigrants. Unlike other Hispanic groups in the U.S., professionals and semiprofessionals are overrepresented in the Cuban population here. In addition, Cuban Americans tend to be older than other Hispanic groups. Currently, ten percent of Cubans in the United States are over sixty-five years of age.

Literary Heritage

The influence of magical realism, a literary style common in Latin America in which fantastic or dreamlike events happen alongside more conventionally realistic ones, is clearly felt in *The Agüero Sisters*. Garcia mentions a man who was hit by lightning and reads everything backward, and a woman who swallows silver dust to stop hallucinating. Fantastic events are, as Michiko Kakutani said in a 1997 *New York Times* review, "a symptom both of the natural world's surpassing strangeness and the bizarre predicaments the human species likes to invent for itself." Some of the events Kakutani cited are the man who's saved from his angry workers by a flock of tree ducks, the man who's killed in a hurricane by "a high velocity avocado," and the fact that Reina and Constanca's grandmother dies in a pig stampede.

Garcia herself believes that second-generation Cuban immigrants are in a particularly good position to transform their experiences into art. "They're very close to these roots but not scarred by them, or at least not directly scarred," Garcia said in an interview published in the *Phoenix Gazette*. "They had a chance to be educated in this country. It's the best of both worlds." She continued, "I think another point is that a couple of generations ago, assimilation was considered a key to success and parents didn't speak to their kids in their native language. . . . Now, being bilingual or multilingual is looked at as an asset, not something you have to bury."



Critical Overview

The Agüero Sisters received far less critical attention than Garcia's universally praised first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*. Some seemed to prefer the early novel, although almost all felt that her second novel confirmed Garcia's place as an important talent. In the *New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani said, "Although *The Agüero Sisters* lacks the compelling organic unity of Ms. Garcia's remarkable debut novel, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), it should ratify Ms. Garcia's reputation as a highly original, highly gifted young writer. It also attests, like that earlier book, to Ms. Garcia's intuitive understanding of families and the fierce, enduring connections that bind one generation to another."

The reviews for her second novel were, with a few exceptions, favorable. Pico Iyer, writing in *Time*, called *The Agüero Sisters* a "beautifully rounded work of art, as warm and wry and sensuous as the island [Garcia] so clearly loves." Lloyd Sachs, writing in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, praised her for her "storyteller's love of irony and the unexpected with a modern poet's love of oblique language and heated logic. On the surface, she deals with the splintering of generations of Cuban families by Castro's revolution and the inseparability of the personal from the political. Deep down, she deals in strange destiny and the blackest magic." And Dan Cryer of *Newsday* was convinced that *The Agüero Sisters* is the better novel of the two, describing it as "a deeper, more profound plunge into the mysteries of loyalty, love and identity (national, familial and otherwise)."

Garcia earned praise for her oblique approach to storytelling. In her *New York Times* review, Deirdre McNamer said, "Ms. Garcia is a strikingly deft and supple writer, both in her sensibilities and her language. She has a talent for the oblique that allows her to write what amounts to a family saga by focusing not on the strict beat that constitutes conventional plot development but on seemingly offhand memories and exchanges. The large events in the book—a lightning strike, a patricide, a guerrilla attack on Cuba—occur in the wings, so to speak. They are not what Ms. Garcia's characters choose to tell us much about. The important stories occur in the interstices between these dramatic events."

Other reviewers pointed out that Garcia has been somewhat misclassified and her ties to the magical realists exaggerated. Dan Cryer noted: "Some critics have mistakenly labeled Garcia as a magical realist in the Gabriel García Márquez mode. This characterization is silly and misleading. She does not make characters fly, birds talk or time twist backward. Still, hers is a prose, like the Colombian Nobel Prize winner's, rich with the delights of the senses. Her essentially realist vision overflows with warmth and brio."

Critics were quick to notice and speculate about the similarities between *The Agüero Sisters* and *Dreaming in Cuban*. A few critics faulted Garcia for revisiting old material in her second novel. Ilan Stavans, writing in the *Nation*, said *The Agüero Sisters* reads "like a hand-me-down," and lamented that "with only a slight difference in approach, Garcia already gave her readers this material." Although he praised her writing, he



concluded that "Garcia has written, in many ways, the same book twice." And yet even after leveling this serious criticism, Stavans emphasized: "Don't get me wrong: Garcia is an immensely talented writer whose work, like that of Jessica Hagedorn, Sherman Alexie and David Foster Wallace, is renewing American fiction."

Others noted the family resemblance but, like Cryer, felt that *The Agüero Sisters* was the better book. Nina King, writing in the *Washington Post*, said, "The many parallels in theme and technique between Garcia's two novels might suggest a failure of authorial imagination. But *The Agüero Sisters* is undoubtedly the better novel of the two: denser, more focused, with a greater richness of language and of comic invention. To my mind, it's a case of practice making perfect." And in discussing the two books, Ruth Behar wrote in the *Chicago Tribune* that *The Agüero Sisters* is "an even more gorgeously written, even more flamboyantly feminist vision of Cuban and Cuban-American history, women's lives, memory and desire."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Elizabeth Judd is a freelance writer and book reviewer with an M.F.A. in English from the University of Michigan and a B.A. from Yale. In this essay, she discusses Garcia's exploration of how personal and national histories shape the characters' destinies in The Agüero Sisters.

For Constanca and Reina Agüero, two sisters struggling to come to terms with the histories of their countries and their families, the truth is slippery, something that's been fractured by lies. History is in the eye of the teller, and facts are far from stable. Like other Cuban Americans, Garcia herself is used to radically different interpretations of the same event. In the *Los Angeles Times*, she said, "All of my mother's family stayed in Cuba by choice. My mother was the only one who came. All of my father's family decided to come to the United States. My mother joined my father's camp. So we were politically polarized. My mother's family was very pro-Castro, pro-revolution - many of them still are. My father's side is virulently anti-astro, anti-Communist. I grew up in the middle of this black and white extreme situation." And in an interview in *Newsweek*, Garcia enlarged upon this point: "in my family, and I see it in other Cuban families as well, there's this fierce struggle over family myth and history. People have political agendas and axes to grind. Everyone's version is competing with everybody else's, and who can tell where the truth really is?"

One aspect of Cuban history is, of course, politics. Garcia points out that for many, politics is an excuse for posturing. When Reina arrives in Miami, she knows that revolutionary rhetoric will no longer fly, and she usually remembers to play her role perfectly. When she forgets, trouble breaks out: *Little Havana, Miami*. "The other day, Reina's vernacular slipped, and she called the Winn-Dixie cashier *compañera* by mistake. Well, all hell broke loose on the checkout line, and a dozen people nearly came to blows!" Here, political talk is a prelude to a slapstick brawl and is tinged with farce. While the Winn-Dixie customers overreact, thirty-one-year-old Dulce is so worn out by politics that her opinion of the revolution is comically understated: "At minimum, it can make a person permanently irritable."

What makes politics comical is the human dimension, the warring personalities involved. When Constanca's mild-mannered husband, Heberto Cruz, joins his brother Gonzalo's underground exile group, La Brigada Caimán, for him, the goal of the enterprise is personal, "to break free from his leashed life." Not only is he absolutely clear-sighted on this point, but so is Constanca. She sees that what attracts Heberto to "a quasi-historical calling" is the grandeur of it, the opportunities for fulfilling his own inner possibilities. "'Men always confuse patriotism with self-love!' Constanca hisses between bites of fried plantains. It's a perverse form of idealism. Why else all the primping and medals, all the oiled and spit-shined leathers? In her opinion, war should be strictly personal, like philosophy or sexual preference." Politics is akin to sexual attraction in this novel. Heberto tacks the Cuban flag to his and Constanca's bedroom wall, and Gonzalo woos Heberto to his cause much as he romantically won Constanca in their youth. Constanca "knows firsthand how persuasive a salesman her ex-husband



can be. Thirty-five years ago, Gonzalo came courting her, ferocious with dreams. He cut open a vein in his leg to impress her, brought her a wreath of dead bees. . . .
Constancia considered him a hazard, like languor or sunstroke. . . ."

One's relationship to one's country is similar to the relationships in a family. Dulce makes this explicit when she compares Cuba to "an evil stepmother, abusive and unrewarding of effort. More, more, and more for more nothing." However, one's role in history can also be a way of escaping one's family responsibilities. When Dulce thinks of her father, a well-known revolutionary, his exalted reputation makes his personal shortcomings that much harder to bear.

Reina knows that Dulcita resents her father, the veneration he still receives as a Hero of the Revolution.

As her daughter grew older, his picture stared back at her from her history books, his slogans were extolled while she endlessly harvested lemons or yams. All Dulcita's life, it was José Luís Fuerte this, José Luís Fuerte that, until it made her ill. *If he was so great, why didn't he ever see me?*

Dulcita was six years old when she asked Reina this.

One counterbalance to political pain is humor. Garcia mocks revolutionary fervor: "In recent years, small propeller planes buzzed over Havana like persistent insects, dropping leaflets urging a mass uprising. If these pilots were truly interested in building solidarity with their *hermanos* in Cuba (who, incidentally, were already gagging on propaganda), they would have dropped more useful items: sewing kits or instant soup, bars of soap, even decent novels, for that matter. The leaflets, Reina remembers, were barely suitable for toilet paper. They left tenacious exclamation points on her buttocks, which, despite vigorous scrubbing, took many days to fade." The exclamation points on Reina's flesh give an absurd twist to what otherwise would be a serious message. Throughout, a sense of practicality deflates the romanticism of the revolutionary cause. If the revolutionaries are play-acting, driven by their own personal needs to generate propaganda, then the proper response is a reality check, someone asking for instant soup instead of yet another pamphlet.

Subjectivity can be a balm, too. It's Constancia's unique talent to invent products that elicit nostalgia in a generic enough way so that each user will take from the product what she needs. "Already, Constancia has received dozens of letters from women who confess that they feel more *cubana* after using her products, that they recall long-forgotten details of their childhoods in Sagua la Grande, Remedios, Media Luna, or Santa Cruz del Sur. . . . Politics may have betrayed Constancia's customers, geography overlooked them, but Cuerpo de Cuba products still manage to touch the pink roots of their sadness." Here, the same object is rich in meaning for many different women, but what the creams and lotions mean depends upon the individual and her own unique situation and set of memories.



Subjectivity becomes harmful when the same object is interpreted so differently that it drives a wedge between family members or lovers. Ignacio Agüero's lies about his wife's death rob his daughters of their ability to perceive reality and communicate about it meaningfully. Constanica and Reina are so divided that little common ground remains. "Reina remembers how, after her mother's death, everyone's vision splintered. There was a bird that hovered over Mami's burial plot at the Colón Cemetery. Her father pronounced it a common crow. Constanica, fresh from the farm in Camagüey, insisted it was electric blue. Reina wanted to believe her sister, but *she* saw a bird on fire, tiny and bathed in violent light. It broke the air around them, invited an early dusk. Reina recalls how the emptiness seemed to surround them then, a sad bewilderment that has never lifted." This is a poetic evocation of how small differences can be magnified until nothing is perceived the same way. Although Reina wants to believe her sister's version of events, she can't. She literally sees a different reality, a bird on fire where her sister sees electric blue. Those differences persist, keeping them apart.

Humor isn't Garcia's only solution to the various rifts Cuban Americans experience. For the greater differences - such as the family feud between the sisters - much more than humor is required. Here, Garcia turns to magic and religion. "When logic fails, when reason betrays, there is only the tenuous solace of magic, of ritual and lamentation." The book's final scene, in which the two sisters fight with one another and Reina nearly drowns before they reach some sort of unspoken resolution, is propelled by Constanica's visit to the santero. In a 1997 *Chicago Tribune* article, Ruth Behar wrote: "In the midst of such confusion and moral crisis, Santeria, the Afro-Cuban religion that survived slavery and the revolution, offers perhaps the only source of spiritual solace for Cubans here and there, or so at least suggests Garcia, whose novel is anchored in the clairvoyance of this enduring faith."

In Garcia's world, magic and religion are manifestations of the deep connections people share, those connections that reach well beyond language. The members of the Agüero family, no matter where they live, no matter who's alive and who's dead, share a physical bond that keeps recurring in mysterious ways. Blanca Agüero is left with a mark on her heel while swimming on her honeymoon; Constanica marks Isabel on the foot while trying to revive her from heatstroke; and Isabel's son, Rakus, is born with a red birthmark on his foot. Nina King, writing in the *Washington Post Book World*, commented: "Though they have been separated for 30 years, the two sisters' experiences sometimes involve a mysterious parallelism." The example she gives is Constanica's having woken up with her mother's face and Reina's having been struck by lightning and given skin grafts from family and friends. In Garcia's world, people are an amalgamation of their loved ones. Even emotional memories are handed down from generation to generation. Ignacio recalls that his mother's out-of-wedlock daughter was drowned in September, and even though that sad event occurred before his birth, each year, in September, he feels sad.

In the end, history is an illusion, or, in Reina's words, "It's all a mock history." Magic and religion help point us in the right direction, but what seems to matter most is simple things, such as the shrimp-and-watercress omelet that the sisters share in a boat halfway between Florida and Cuba. The history that counts is that one that's lived on a



daily basis. "There's no substitute," wrote Garcia, "for the quiet culture of a life together, the endless days commemorating nothing, amassing history bit by bit."

Source: Elizabeth Judd, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.



Critical Essay #2

In the following brief essay, Ana Maria Hernandez describes The Agüero Sisters, Garcia's second novel, as a "whydunit" using satire, metaphor, and a variety of character narrations (the Aguero sisters, their daughters, and a third person narrator) to unfold the mystery of a family murder/ suicide.

Cristina Garcia's second novel opens in the mystical Zapata Swamp on the southern coast of Cuba, a place long imbued with mystery and magic in Cuban folklore and Afro-Cuban ritual. It is there that Ignacio Aguero, a renowned naturalist, murders the mysterious Blanca, his wife and research associate. Two years later, he commits suicide, leaving no explanatory note. The novel thus becomes a whydunit, as in the case of Garcia Marquez's *Cronica de una muerte anunciada*. The reader approaches the story from multiple points of view, attempting to elucidate the reasons for the murder/suicide and its effect on the surviving Aguero daughters and their own progeny.

The novel is masterfully structured with a mosaic of narrations from the Aguero sisters, heir daughters Dulce and Isabel, Ignacio Aguero, and a third-person narrator who localizes each sister alternately. The diminutive Constanica, unwanted by her mother and virtually abandoned by the latter after the birth of her half-sister Reina, relies on appearance (she is a cosmetologist), social connections, and the conventional trappings of success: a sizable income, a well-placed condo, a boat, a (pink!) Cadillac. Reina, resembling her mother's mulatto lover, basks in her mother's love and solicitous attention (she is breastfed until she is five), and grows up self-assured, androgynous, and libidinous - perhaps excessively so. The forty- eight- year old Reina's animal magnetism and endless conquests seem a bit hyperbolic even by the standards of magic realism, to which Garcia subscribes in a subdued manner. Constanica embodies the traditional values of Cuban middle-class exiles, whereas Reina, a master electrician by training and profession and a solid supporter of the revolution until the job-related accident that results in her defection to Miami, represents the blue-collar outlook of the supposedly classless society in which she grew up and the survival skills of the last wave of exiles.

Garcia meticulously researches every aspect of her novel - from ornithology to cosmetology by way of electrical engineering and antique-car repair - and conveys her findings with an admirable command of language and a gift for metaphor. Her careful reconstructions of habitats long destroyed and traditions long abandoned inspire Cubans to remember and non-Cubans to discover; especially noteworthy is her evocation of the lectores, cigar factory employees whose function it was to entertain cigar rollers with readings from the classics, hoping to improve the quality of their product by improving the minds of its makers. The descriptions of the Cuban landscape around the beginning of this century provided by the naturalist Aguero are particularly lyrical and almost mystical, even though we suspect that some of the species described are figments of the author's imagination. At one point she places a leatherback turtle - whose usual habitat excludes the Caribbean - in the waters around the (former) Isle of Pines to the south of Cuba. Aguero spots the gigantic turtle as she digs her nest on the



black volcanic sands of the isle and lays her eggs at midnight. He then watches in dread as predatory seagulls and stray dogs threaten the nest: "What choice did I have? I sat on the leatherback's nest all that day and all the next night, guarding her eggs from predators, guarding the eggs for her." Immediately following an episode in which Ignacio's first love goes sour after his beloved asks him to exterminate a colony of bats that had infested her attic, the landscape and its creatures become a metaphor for the subjectivity of the character and an affirmation of the eternal laws of nature over the vicissitudes of human life and love. Such juxtapositions abound throughout the novel.

Satire is an important element in *The Aguero Sisters* - specifically about the exile community in Miami, with the usual planned invasions of Cuba and the sacralization of everything pre-Castro. Most amusing is the mushrooming of Constancia's line of cosmetics, "Cuerpo de Cuba," which caters to aging Cuban baby-boomers by offering a special emollient for every sagging part of their anatomy ("Cuello de Cuba," "Rodillas de Cuba," "Muslos de Cuba"). This is a humorous, well-written, most enjoyable work from the author of *Dreaming in Cuban*.

Source: Ana Maria Hernandez, "The Aguero Sisters," (Book review) in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 72, No. 1, Winter, 1998, p. 134.



Critical Essay #3

In her brief essay on Garcia's The Agüero Sisters, Rachel Campbell-Johnston describes a loose, sometimes even nebulous, emotionally based plot-line driven by the lives of the Agüero sisters and using Cuban political and cultural history as its bedrock.

Cuba, the outpost of a decayed ideal, nurtures a distinctive temperament. The giddy hedonism of an island which surely senses it cannot barricade itself much longer against the modern world mingles with disappointment of a shattered dream. This novel by Cuban emigree Cristina Garcia captures both these moods, distilling them into the twinned themes of sex and death.

The Agüero Sisters is the interleaving narrative of two daughters, Reina and Constanca. Reina, the younger, works as an electrician in Cuba. Statuesque and sensual, with thighs strengthened by shinning up telegraph poles, her body is an open invitation to pleasure. "If she could grasp nothing in its entirety then why not celebrate what she could grasp with her own senses." She luxuriates in a power to reduce men to a state of helplessness. But when she is struck by lightning (the improbable becomes the norm in this novel) she begins to think it would be better if she were dead. Her grafted skin, mismatched and scratchy, smells to her of blood and sour milk. It ruins her familiar pleasures - "her rapture and her hot black scent." Until suddenly, at precisely 5:13 one morning, she suddenly knows one thing for certain: that she can no longer stay in Cuba. She illicitly escapes to join her sister Constanca in Miami.

Constanca, her elder sister, is petite with lacquered nails, carnelian lips and a firm belief that comfort should never be placed before style. Owner of a successful company manufacturing beauty products, her chief concern is to stave off women's "little everyday deaths." "If politics have betrayed the Cubans and geography overlooked them, her *Cuerpo de Cuba* products still manage to touch the pink roots of their sadness."

Though the two sisters seem so different, they are rooted in a Cuban past which draws them together. The voices of their parents - two biologists whose life of shared passion ended in sudden and violent death - provides a context for their daughters' voices. Together they shape a mesmerizing - if bewildering - portrait of a family whose lives reflect the mood and history of Cuba.

This is a loose, drifting novel. Curiously, and often irritatingly, nebulous, the plot hinges on memories and emotions, magic and impossible turns of fate. To try to pin it down is to lose it. "You don't know how much of what you see, *mi hija*, you never see at all," Reina's mother says. But always a stringent sense of reality twists through the dreams. History forms a harsh bedrock to this tale.

Source: Rachel Campbell-Johnston, "The Familial Crises of Two Cuban Misses," in *The Times*, August 21, 1997, p. 34.



Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Deidre McNamer describes Garcia's The Agüero Sisters as a meditation on the juxtaposition of past and present Cuba through the personal lives of the Agüero sisters. McNamer stresses Garcia's ability to highlight the critical elements of "evolution, exile and extinction" within the confines of personal relationships and reflection.

In a certain way, extinction and augury are intertwined. The lineaments of the future can be divined by what the present refuses to support - an idea that is at the heart of The Agüero Sisters, Cristina Garcia's exhilarating meditation on Cubans and Cuba in the early 1990s.

As she did five years ago in her acclaimed first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, Ms. Garcia uses a divided family - some of the members remained in Cuba after the revolution, others made lives in America - as a way to talk about larger issues like patriotism, exile and the psychological costs of cultural fragmentation. However, there's an important difference between the two books. *Dreaming in Cuban* was set in the 1970s, when Fidel Castro's island still shimmered as a fierce and out-sized symbol of all that was at stake in the cold war, and when the ruptures between those who stayed and those who left were still raw. Since then, the world has been vastly reconfigured. Now Castro is an old man, flogging a tired experiment. A skeptical new generation of Cubans and Cuban-Americans has come of age, and their parents - who lived through the revolution as children or young adults - are a disappearing species.

The Agüero sisters - their family name means "omen" or "augury" - belong to that species and are the focus of Ms. Garcia's exuberant attention. (It should be said right off that she is a very funny writer, one who uses her wit not to trivialize her characters but to encourage greater access to the conditions of their lives.)

Reina Agüero, when we first meet her, is a 48-year-old master electrician who lives in one room of a Havana apartment that once belonged to her parents and now houses seven other families. She is regal, competent and enthusiastically promiscuous, though her grand passion is a married bureaucrat with orthopedic shoes who has been her lover for 24 years. Her parents were naturalists who catalogued Cuban flora and fauna on the verge of extinction, and Reina lives rather contentedly among the remains of their work - stuffed bats, old field notes - until December of 1990, when a literal bolt of lightning prompts her to take a closer look at her life.

Her half sister, Constanica, 51, has lived in America for nearly 30 years and is a paragon of capitalist enterprise. For many years, her husband, Heberto, owned a Manhattan tobacco store that sold the world's finest hand-rolled cigars, including illegal Cuban imports. Constanica herself is a genius at selling cosmetics, her motivation the sheer "satisfaction of staving off women's little everyday deaths." The couple move to Miami, where Constanica sets up her own cosmetics line, *Cuerpo De uva*, and Heberto becomes involved in the heady enterprise of anti-revolutionary politics. Off he goes with



a sub-machine gun to crash around in the Everglades with La Brigada Caiman, a bunch of old crocodiles who still think they're going to liberate Cuba. In his waning years, he has finally discovered the sharp thrill, "the promising grandeur of a quasi-historical calling."

But Miami's exile community has become aged and brittle, an invalid with a fever. Even Constanca finds the air "thickly charged with expiring dreams." And in that respect it's not so different from Cuba itself. Seen through the distinctly unrosy gaze of Dulce Fuerte, Reina's aimless 32-year-old daughter, Cuba in the 1990s is beset by a virulent combination of deprivation and boredom; it is a place where "the future is frozen" and everything from sex to a santeria initiation is sold for tourist dollars. Dulce wonders idly what her revolutionary father would think of her today. "I used to be friends with Che Guevara's son in high school," she says. "We used to joke about our respective revolutionary burdens. Last I heard, he was a heavy-metal musician, pierced everywhere and trying to leave the country."

Ms. Garcia is a strikingly deft and supple writer, both in her sensibilities and her language. She has a talent for the oblique that allows her to write what amounts to a family saga by focusing not on the strict beat that constitutes conventional plot development but on seemingly offhand memories and exchanges. The large events in the book - a lightning strike, a patricide, a guerrilla attack on Cuba - occur in the wings, so to speak. They are not what Ms. Garcia's characters choose to tell us much about. The important stories occur in the interstices between these dramatic events.

In a slight misstep at the beginning of the novel, however, Ms. Garcia seems to suggest otherwise. The prologue describes an apparent murder: the mother of the Aguero sisters is shot by her husband, Ignacio, while the two naturalists are on a collecting trip in 1948. Ignacio's motive is deeply unclear, so the reader is encouraged at the outset to expect the working out of that mystery during the course of the novel. Why did he do it? And furthermore, why was each of the daughters given a different version of her mother's death? Why was each version a lie?

Ignacio's voice is present in the form of nine dispatches that survived his death. But only in the very last one does he talk about the shooting of his wife. There is no gradual illumination of that shocking incident, as there would be in a conventional mystery. Instead, what Ignacio chooses to address is the Cuba of his childhood and the creatures that lived in abundance then, including men like his father, whose job was to read to hushed factory workers while they rolled cigars by hand. He remembers his growing obsession with birds and the day his parents gave him the voluminous, magnificently illustrated *Birds of the World*. He describes the day he saw an eight-foot leatherback turtle drag herself onto a beach and lay her eggs, and the day he and his future wife, Blanca, stalked a mauve frog a quarter-inch long. With exactness and insight, he offers a record of his own existence: what he yearned for, what he noticed, what disappeared as he watched. The mysterious shooting soon takes its place among the many large mysteries of a single human existence.



All credit to Ms. Garcia, Ignacio's creator. The novelist's geomancy might consist, as much as anything, in the ability to illuminate what is crucial while seeming not to. By letting Ignacio speak to us in his naturalist's voice about many things that don't appear to pertain to the story, she eloquently highlights the novel's major themes: evolution, exile, extinction - and the last days of some very rare birds.

Source: *Deidre McNamer, "World of Portents," in The New York Times Book Review, June 15, 1997, sec. 7, p. 38, col. 2.*



Critical Essay #5

*In the following essay, Ilan Stavans ambivalently describes Garcia's *The Agüero Sisters* as a well-written telenovel, a tangled and melodramatic path of well-written characters capturing, through the flow of their lives, the essence of the Cuban Diaspora. His criticism of the novel, however, is that Garcia utilizes a style too similar to her first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, in structure and plot, which diminishes both works.*

Cristina Garcia's second novel, *The Agüero Sisters*, is a magisterial melodrama. Its plot wends through fraternal rivalries, pregnant daughters at odds with their mothers, unexplained murders, illegitimate children seeking to unravel their obscure origins - a family feud of epic proportion, traversing generations. One could easily confuse it with the latest prime-time telenovela on Univision, save for its lack of orchestral music and commercial interruption. Then, too, there is Garcia's astonishing literary style and dazzling attention to the telling detail, so alien to the world of soap operas. But her universe is ruled by primal emotions just the same, bordering on the ersatz.

At the heart of *The Agüero Sisters* is a Cuban lineage that spans the twentieth century and globe-trots from Europe to the United States and back to the Caribbean basin. Ignacio Agüero, the family patriarch, is a renowned biologist. The novel opens as he kills his estranged wife, Blanca, while on a trip collecting fauna in the Zapata Swamp, on the banks of the Rio Hanabana. Pretending it was either a suicide or an accident, he carries her seventeen miles to the nearest village and, as related by the novel's too-lucid omniscient narrator (whose sections are interleaved with the characters' own narrations, not always well differentiated), he begins to tell his lies.

To illuminate the spectra of emotions thrown off by such an event, Garcia resorts to a narrative marked by counterpoint: In a Faulknerian approach (think of *As I Lay Dying*), she shifts scenes and subplots from this character to the next, from one viewpoint to another - from Constanica, the oldest Agüero sister, to her second husband, Heberto Cruz, a counterrevolutionary plotting another Bay of Pigs-style invasion of Cuba; from Reina's, Constanica's younger sister, to Reina's estranged daughter, Dulce Fuerte, and Constanica's first husband, Gonzalo, himself Heberto's brother. . . and so on. As the various story-lines unfold, each crashes against and redeems the others. This allows Garcia, in a fashion reminiscent of Fernando Ortiz's *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, to play a fascinating game of light and shadow, using one character to explain another and vice versa. A quote from early on:

Constancia pulls her husband to the dance floor. He is diminutive, like her, and she is dressed in white, like him. Together they look like a first communion date. Heberto is a good dancer, but often reluctant. Constanica is not, but excessively enthusiastic. She lurches too far to the right on a turn, but Heberto reels her in with a practiced air. Then he steadies her with a



palm to the small of her back and leads her across the room.

The chorus of voices in this novel echo off a single sounding board, though: Ignacio Aguero. His reflective journal, in fact, functions as a palimpsest of sorts: The family secret - the murder - lies hidden within it, and to bring the truth to light, characters variously hide it and unearth it. This, of course, is a technique as old as the novel itself, but in the baroque world of Hispanic America it has become the artifice of first resort, probably because of the collective urge to return, time and again, to the wound that lies at the origin of everything: the shock of birth. Borges's masterpieces are all palimpsests, and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is cast as a modern rendering of an ancient Gypsy scroll.

Not that in Cristina Garcia's hands this feels artificial. So what if it is derivative, a reader might ask - how much in art and literature isn't? Furthermore, isn't it in the nature of melodrama to deploy stock characters in archetypal situations? Sure, and Garcia brilliantly captures the cultural temperament of the Cuban diaspora. Always in search of something new, Constanica opens *Cuerpo de Cuba*, a beauty factory in Miami, and becomes a millionaire. As the novel progresses, she leaves the United States for Cuba, where her father's diary lies buried. Her sister Reina has migrated in the opposite direction. Fed up with Cuban socialism, she moves to the United States and becomes Constanica's confidante. Itinerancy, indeed, is the only constant: New Yorkers move to Florida, Cubans to Spain and the United States, Miamians to Cuba - a never-ending Gulf Stream whose flow symbolizes the real cycle of personal revolution.

Yet it is unfortunate that, with only a slight difference in approach, Garcia already gave her readers this material. The bulk of *The Aguero Sisters* takes place in 1991, as a group of Cuban counterrevolutionaries plan to overthrow Havana, unfolding in the same time frame and fashion, give or take a few years, as her debut novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*. The first book was also about - what else? - sibling rivalries and counter-revolutionaries and the crossroads of passion and politics. *The Aguero Sisters* reads, then, like a hand-me-down: Sisters swap partners, santeros unite the spiritual and the earthly, and Cuba is portrayed not as one nation but two: Fidel's and everyone else's.

Both novels are populated with a similar cast of characters and rotate around the search for clues to family identity. And as the genealogy in each is unscrambled, truth becomes more tangled. "It's all a mock history," Reina whispers at one point in *The Aguero Sisters*, and a bit later Constanica concludes, "Knowledge is a kind of mirage" - a statement [that] could pointedly apply to her precursors, the protagonists of *Dreaming in Cuban*.

Don't get me wrong: Garcia is an immensely talented writer whose work, like that of Jessica Hagedorn, Sherman Alexie and David Foster Wallace, is renewing American fiction. *Dreaming in Cuban* was original and endearing when it was published in 1992, and while some accused Garcia of misrepresenting the Afro-Cuban tradition, I embraced the book for addressing admirably what Jose Marti once called *las dos Cubas*, both from within and from without. Melodrama it was, sure, but it had much



more to it than laughter and Kleenex. Five years later, Garcia does write with more assurance, and her themes bear a certain Jewish flavor - memory and endurance, tradition and modernity. Not accidentally are Cubans sometimes called the Jews of the Caribbean.

Still, my feelings about *The Aguero Sisters* are ambivalent. Garcia has written, in many ways, the same book twice. Not word by word, like a Pierre Menard redrafting *Don Quixote* in the style of French symbolism. But she has become her own imitator, however deftly. *The Aguero Sisters* is indeed a wonderful book, but not a wonderful second book. It treads the same ground as its predecessor without taking new risks, without expanding into new horizons. Its prose is stupendous, its characters well rounded. But it is also predictable, simply because Garcia has prepared us for the same structure and plot - so much so that the excellence of *Dreaming in Cuban* seems retrospectively diminished by its author showing us the props and strings of its melodramatic structure. Not that I would rank her alongside Corin Tellado, the father of all Spanish-speaking melodramatists: Garcia's imagination is a treasure box of possibilities. So I feel disappointed that she has not dared to explore new structures and techniques, to reinvent herself as an artist. This puts me in mind of a memorable drama teacher I once had, whose motto was, "Don't give your audience only what it wants! Teach it to want more."

Melodrama has the habit of infiltrating serious literature everywhere, of course. One need only invoke Rosario Ferre's *The House on the Lagoon*, Julia Alvarez's *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* and *Yo!*, Denise Chavez's *Face of an Angel* and Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* to see the extent to which this is true, especially among Latinas. The reason, perhaps, is the emphasis Hispanic culture places on emotions and the signal influence soap operas have played in it since the fifties. Garcia's is a universe in which passion reigns and everyone is vulnerable and peevish and a bit insincere. Garcia surely isn't the sole explorer of the telenovela qua literary form - though she is one of the most gifted. Should we expect to be surprised in a writer's second act, or is being impressed enough?

In the end, *The Aguero Sisters* is indeed impressive, a book about revenge and love and hatred but especially about courage, in all its forms: courage to antagonize a regime, courage to be reconciled with one's own past courage to find the truth. As Ignacio Aguero, the family patriarch, tells his daughters, "The quest for truth is far more glorious than the quest for power."

Source: Ilan Stavans, "The Aguero Sisters," (Book review) in *The Nation*, Vol. 264, No. 19, May 19, 1997, p. 32.



Topics for Further Study

Reina writes Constanica of deprivation in Cuba, telling her of brain surgeons who bake birthday cakes on the weekend for extra cash. Constanica thinks to herself that she never would have been happy in Cuba after 1959. Research the economic situation in Cuba today and examine what role economics play in Reina and Dulce's lives.

Garcia told an interviewer for the *Chicago Sun-Times* that while living in Hawaii, at the edge of a bird sanctuary, she became obsessed with ostracized ducks and began reading up on naturalism. Birds play an important role in this novel. Research some of the birds that Garcia refers to and consider their significance in the story that Garcia is telling. Remember that birds migrate and that they can become extinct.

The custody battle over Elian Gonzalez was prominent in the news in early 2000. Many Cubans immigrated to the U.S. after Fidel Castro took power. What have been the different U.S. immigration policies toward Cubans and how have these policies changed between 1959 and the present day?

Toward the end of the novel, Constanica consults a santero. Research the Afro-Cuban religion Santeria and discuss its influence on the actions of Constanica and the other characters in this novel.



What Do I Read Next?

In Garcia's first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, three generations of a Cuban-American family are divided over their conflicting feelings about everything from the Cuban revolution and Fidel Castro to their new life in Brooklyn.

Like Garcia, Julia Alvarez is concerned with how families are bound together in their adopted culture and what divides them as they look back on their lives in their birth countries. In *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, four young sisters leave the Dominican Republic with their parents and are sent to prep school before forging new-world lives.

Gabriel García Márquez's classic *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a family history in which the most fantastic wonders happen alongside far more ordinary events in the fictional village of Macondo. A master of magical realism, Márquez tells of an entire town plagued with insomnia and a woman who ascends to heaven while hanging her laundry out to dry.

Cuban-American writer Oscar Hijuelos made music his theme in his exploration of the immigrant experience. In *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, the novel for which Hijuelos won a Pulitzer Prize, two young Cuban musicians go from Havana to New York in 1949, determined to be mambo stars in the U.S. Both Hijuelos and Garcia share an interest in music, showing how songs can evoke mood and emotions like longing and nostalgia.



Further Study

Burkett, Elinor, "Author Focuses on Cuban Nostalgia," in *Chicago Tribune*, April 9, 1992, p. 11I.

In this interview, Garcia describes how it feels to be a Cuban-American writer and discusses her childhood and literary beginnings.

Davila, Florangela, "Cristina Garcia Identifies with Her Characters," in *Seattle Times*, June 17, 1997, p. C1.

An interview with Garcia in which she discusses how a flock of ducks was the inspiration for her second novel.

Garcia, Cristina, "Star-Spangled," in *Washington Post*, July 18, 1999, p. W21.

Garcia writes of her own childhood and how it felt to celebrate her birthday on the Fourth of July, the birthday of her adopted country.

Italie, Hillel, "Imagining Cuba," in the *Associated Press*, March 30, 1992.

Garcia discusses the beginnings of her first novel.

Stephenson, Anne, "*Dreaming in Cuban* Has Happy Ending: First-Time Novelist Hailed as Major Voice for Latinos," in *Arizona Republic*, March 31, 1993.

In this interview, Garcia discusses what it feels like to be called "a major new voice in an emerging chorus of Latino writers" and how her family reacted to her first novel.



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Stavans, Ilan, review, in *Nation*, Vol. 264, No. 19, May 19, 1997, p. 32.

Vourvoulis, Bill, "Talking with Cristina Garcia," in *Newsday*, May 4, 1997.



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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, LDNfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and



undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LDNfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LDNfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members "educational professionals" helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in LDNfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by LDNfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LDNfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literature of Developing Nations for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literature of Developing Nations for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literature of Developing Nations for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LDNfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LDNfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literature of Developing Nations for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literature of Developing Nations for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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