Almost a Woman Short Guide

Almost a Woman by Esmeralda Santiago

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

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Overview

Almost a Woman begins immediately after thirteen-year-old Esmeralda and her family have moved to Brooklyn from Puerto Rico. Their father has decided to stay on the island, leaving Mami to raise her eight (eventually eleven) children on her own. The book is as much about Esmeralda's entry into womanhood over the next eight years as it is about Mami's struggle to support her family in a foreign, often hostile, culture. In the end, Esmeralda leaves her mother's house to move to Florida with a love interest, recognizing simultaneously that her deep bond to Mami is unbreakable and will endure both physical distance and time.

About the Author

Esmeralda Santiago's childhood in Puerto Rico exerts a profound influence on her writing. The eldest of eleven children, Santiago was born in Puerto Rico in 1948. At the age of thirteen Santiago, her mother, and her siblings moved to Brooklyn, leaving her father on the island. Soon, Santiago began to experience a lifelong conflict between her Puerto Rican background and her newer identity with mainstream American culture. This identity conflict forms the basis for a large portion of her work, much of which is autobiographical in nature.

Although she knew little English at the time of her relocation to Brooklyn, Santiago had mastered the language well enough to enter the highly selective High School of the Performing Arts in Manhattan only two years after her arrival on the mainland.

After attending community colleges sporadically over a period of eight years, she won a full scholarship to Harvard University at the age of twenty-six to study film production, graduating magna cum laude.

Santiago later completed a master's degree in fiction writing from Sarah Lawrence College. She is now a journalist and writer.

In 1993, Santiago published the first volume of her memoirs in both English and Spanish versions. When I Was Puerto Rican and Cuando erapuertorriquena detail her early years in Puerto Rico. The 1998 sequel Almost a Woman and its 1999 Spanish translation Casi una mujer begin with her arrival in Brooklyn and relate her adolescent experiences in New York. The author published her first novel, America's Dream, in 1997.

In addition to her literary pursuits, Santiago has also formed a documentary film production company with her husband and has helped to found a shelter for battered women. She and her husband live in Westchester County, New York, with their two children.

Setting

Esmeralda's life drew its inspiration from three separate physical arenas: Puerto Rican Brooklyn, Puerto Rico, and the white world of Manhattan: "That world in Brooklyn from which I derived both comfort and anxiety was home, as was the other world, across the ocean, where my father still wrote poems. As was the other world, the one across the river, where I intended to make my life." The action centers mainly in Brooklyn for the first part of the book and moves to Manhattan for the second part.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Santiago's portrayal of Puerto Rican Brooklyn is the ever-present food. Through the author's frequent and vivid food descriptions, the importance of food in Puerto Rican and Puerto Rican-American culture becomes apparent, as does the major role that food plays in Puerto Rican family life.

Every time a relative comes to visit, Mami and her mother Tata immediately begin to cook. Together, family members prepare and consume cafe con leche, roasted achiote, names, yautias, arroz con polio, sofrito, coquito with fresh coconut milk and Puerto Rican rum, rice and beans, asopaos, chicken fricassee, alcapurrias, and pastelillos.

Santiago's descriptions of Manhattan are equally vivid. Her characterization of the life at the High School for the Performing Arts, where Esmeralda first comes into close contact with Caucasian Americans, is especially well crafted. Unlike the mainstream world of Manhattan outside the high school walls, status at the High School for the Performing Arts is determined by talent, although wealth also divides the students.

Most importantly, everyone at the school holds a dream, the dream of entering the world of bright lights, wealth, and fame.

Esmeralda shares this dream, and her previous longing to return to her Island homeland dims as she becomes more and more ingrained in her Manhattan life.

Unlike her vivid descriptions of Brooklyn and Manhattan, the author never describes the Island directly. Instead, she presents it exclusively through Esmeralda's memories of and longing for her homeland.

Seen through Esmeralda's eyes at the age of thirteen, the Island is sunshine and "sensual curves," whereas Brooklyn is dark and dirty.

As she becomes increasingly Americanized, Esmeralda's views of her three worlds change. Puerto Rico recedes into her memory—a nostalgic, ideal place of color and freedom. Brooklyn grows to represent the ethnic U.S., a place where she is comfortable, but not a place where she wishes to reside as an adult. Esmeralda grows to desire a life of wealth and class in Manhattan, which she now imagines to be the environment of successful mainstream Americans.

Esmeralda begins to lose her Puerto Rican identity and to acquire mainstream American qualities with amazing rapidity. After only two days in Brooklyn, she can already feel the respect and humility she has been taught to hold for her mother slipping away to be replaced with more typically American independence and resolve. Young Esmeralda wants, above all, to conform to her image of typical American girls, wearing makeup, sipping sodas in malt shops, and going on dates.

Mami fights Esmeralda's Americanization as much as possible, saying that Esmeralda is Puerto Rican and too young to act the way American girls act. Esmeralda resorts to Americanizing herself at school by hitching up her skirts, applying makeup, and restyling her hair. She removes all traces of this transformation each afternoon as she leaves the school grounds. When Mami learns of Esmeralda's daily transformations, she begins to understand how thoroughly she has lost her eldest daughter to American culture. Still, she does not abandon her fight against cultural imperialism, forcing Esmeralda to wash her face, re-comb her hair, and let down her skirt.

Members of the culture she wants so badly to join nourish Esmeralda's desire to become Americanized. She is taught "accent eradication" at the High School for the Performing Arts and told to change her name to something simpler, catchier, less ethnic. None of her good friends after she graduates from junior high school are Puerto Rican, and their influence further strengthens her resolve to become Americanized.

Although Puerto Rican Brooklyn and mainstream Manhattan are clearly the main settings of the book, with the Island as a setting extant only in Esmeralda's mind, Esmeralda also experiences the non-Puerto Rican New York City of the 1960s and 1970s. Esmeralda's neighborhood and junior high are predominately African American as well as Puerto Rican, and she attends college with a large African-American student population. As a teenager, Esmeralda works as an usher at one of New York's many Yiddish theaters, where she catches glimpses of the lifestyle of many elderly Jewish New Yorkers. The Santiago family visits Coney Island and experiences the leisure life of working class, multiethnic New York, and Esmeralda visits the posh Manhattan home of a wealthy play producer.

In the end, none of these settings is of primary importance to Esmeralda, as she opts to follow her lover to Florida, choosing the place she will live solely because it will be her lover's home, rather than basing her selection on any characteristics of the place itself.

Social Sensitivity

In addition to being a young woman's coming-of-age story, Almost a Woman is the story of a young immigrant's adjustment to her adopted culture. When Esmeralda first arrives in Brooklyn, she is surprised to hear herself labeled "Hispanic," having always considered herself Puerto Rican. In the eyes of non-Hispanic Americans, however, all Spanish-speaking cultures are one.

In general, mainstream Americans judge Esmeralda according to her ethnic and socioeconomic background, rather than judging her as an individual. At school, the counselor judges the non-English-speaking newcomer as a misfit, placing her "in a class for students who'd scored low on intelligence tests, who were behavior problems, who were marking time until their.

sixteenth birthday, when they could drop out." When a social worker inspects Esmeralda's home to determine if her family legitimately merits welfare, Esmeralda resents her family's dependence on the opinion of a stranger, but she is powerless to change the process. Sidney judges Esmeralda as a shiksa and not suitable for bringing home to meet his mother. Avery Lee judges her as incompatible with his desired future in Texas politics: "'It wouldn't look right,' he confessed, 'for me to have a Spanish wife.'"

Other characters and groups in the book make similar judgements about each other, Ilsa, a Holocaust survivor, dislikes all Germans and cannot see past their national heritages to judge each German individually. Shoshana enjoys dating men of various ethnic backgrounds, but she judges only Jewish men as acceptable for marriage. Mami even judges herself as "female, dark-skinned, on welfare" and not worthy of looking the clerk who cashes her welfare checks in the eye.

Esmeralda also judges herself. She judges her acting ability as lower than that of many other drama majors in her high school and her dancing talent as among the best in the drama group. In Maine, she judges herself as the darkest-skinned person in every restaurant and hotel, a judgement she expects Maine residents to share.

Other stereotyping in the book is more overtly hateful. In junior high, for example, Lulu and her friends verbally abuse Esmeralda after she is accepted to the High School for the Performing Arts: "'Hey, spick!' Lulu taunted as I walked into the girls' bathroom one day. 'You think you're better than us?

Well, you're just a spick, and don't you forget it.'" This same group of girls later physically beats Esmeralda. Even the young people in Esmeralda's world expect her to follow the set pattern of the Puerto Rican immigrant—move to the mainland, associate with Puerto Rican youth and adults, go to the vocational high school, have children, and live in a Puerto Rican neighborhood. Esmeralda refuses to conform to this pattern, making her a target for ongoing social discord.

Literary Qualities

Santiago is a professional journalist, and her journalistic expertise is evident in Almost a Woman. Although she includes melodic dialogue, vivid descriptive passages, and evocative literary imagery, her style primarily resembles the straightforward writing typical of newspapers and magazines. She tells her story in almost purely chronological order, offering each event in her life as an installment in a news story, interpreting and commenting on those events infrequently.

Although her style is largely journalistic, the author incorporates occasional thematic imagery into her writing. For example, she compares her lovemaking with Ulvi to dancing: "Our lovemaking was a dance, each part of our bodies attuned to its complement in the other, as if we were not two but one." Similarly, she equates the room where she works in Fisher Scientific to a stage: "It was an enormous stage lit on all sides, with an audience that could see every action from any angle. A daily theater in the round." These images expand the themes of drama and dance that run through the book.

It is people and places, more than story lines, that make Almost a Woman a fascinating and original memoir. Santiago portrays her characters largely through dialogue and actions, leaving the reader to interpret their words and behaviors. For example, the author expresses lisa's emotional scars from her Holocaust experiences through the following lines of dialogue: "'Fair? Was the murder of six million Jews fair? .. . The whole country stood by as Jews were murdered. My mother, my father, my sisters, and brother .. . I hope you never have to hate.'" The author could have used narration to explain why Ilsa is bitter, but the resulting impact would have been greatly diminished. Snippets of dialogue form the titles of each chapter, further emphasizing the importance of dialogue in Santiago's work.

As for characters' actions, Santiago tends to show the females involved in her story as good people despite their flaws. For example, Mami's actions show her to be a strict yet loving mother; Shoshana's actions show her to be a capricious yet faithful friend.

Conversely, the actions of most of the men in the memoir create more negative character portrayals. Don Carlos hides his marriage from Mami; Jurgen hides his profession from Esmeralda; Ulvi hides nearly his entire personal life from his fiancee. Only Francisco stands above the others as an honorable and kind adult man, but he dies young, in essence leaving Mami a deserted woman. Unlike her more balanced depictions of the female characters, Santiago offers few positive actions to offset the negative behaviors of the men. As a result, character actions throughout the memoir show women's relationships with men to be ephemeral and their relationships with other women to endure. As Esmeralda finally comes to understand, "If Ulvi left, there would be another man, but there would never, ever be another Mami."

Santiago's finely honed journalistic skills are perhaps the most evident in her masterful narrative descriptions of places and objects. These descriptions allow the reader to

experience Esmeralda's surroundings with all five senses. The author's use of visual details, especially color, is foremost. When she returns to the Puerto Rican home of her youth, Esmeralda stares in shock at the blue of the floor tiles. Esmeralda argues for, and wins, a yellow junior high school graduation dress, although her mother would have preferred a more demure navy blue or black.

Esmeralda's longing to wear makeup, another form of color, represents her persistent advance toward adulthood.

Esmeralda's sensitivity to color in physical objects reinforces the importance of human color in her life. To the world, Esmeralda's dark hair, dark eyes, and dark skin define her as a minority. Even her fellow junior high students, mostly Puerto Rican and African American themselves, constantly remind her that the color of her skin marks her as Puerto Rican.

As for the sense of hearing, Santiago uses aural verbs to make her scenes more vivid.

Daily during her Broadway run as Soni, Esmeralda walks along the streets of Manhattan listening "to the commotion as if it were a marvelous song. Taxi horns blared.

Tourists chattered in a plethora of dialect, all of them incomprehensible but familiar.

The Hare Krishna clinked their finger cymbals, pounded the drums, chanted their joyful tune."

Taste is also prominent in Santiago's descriptions. As discussed above, the author describes the culture of her home life largely through the many traditional Puerto Rican foods they eat. Food is also prominent at the dance clubs and on Esmeralda's many dates.

However, not all of Santiago's sensory descriptions are pleasant, especially those related to the sense of smell. In a particularly negative use of smell, Esmeralda identifies vagrants by their distinct odor, an odor she is relieved to find that alcoholic Tio Chico lacks. If he does not smell like a bum, she reasons, he must not be a bum.

Santiago's use of tactility is less prominent than her use of the other four senses in her descriptions, but it is still appreciable.

For example, she describes the weight of a string of pearls that she coveted: "The pearls hung heavy in my hands, languid like a tropical afternoon." She also describes many of the feelings that Esmeralda experiences when men touch and embrace her.

Santiago frequently combines elements of more than one sense within a single descriptive passage. For example, she combines visual and aural images to illustrate the city dawn as viewed from Esmeralda's tenement window: "Over the jagged horizon, the sun punctured through thin, wispy clouds that turned pink, then melted into yellow. A soft roar accompanied the dawn, a low growl that grew louder as the city awoke. Within

minutes people hurried up and down the street, across the avenues, to and out of stores, their staccato steps muted by the first horns, distant sirens, muffled radios."

Themes and Characters

Esmeralda is unquestionably the protagonist of the book, as Santiago places her in the center of every scene. Thus, the reader experiences Esmeralda's life from her point of view. Young Esmeralda faces two major conflicts, which form the basis for many of her actions and decisions. First is the cultural conflict of her Puerto Rican cultural heritage and her adopted American culture. Second is the conflict of living in between childhood and adulthood, of craving the protection and safety of youth, while desiring the freedom and independence of maturity.

Above all, Esmeralda is in between—in between cultures, in between childhood and adulthood, in between languages, in between races. She wants to become Americanized, while still dreaming of returning to the Island. She feels she can only be herself in the comfort of her childhood home and within Mami's protective shelter, while yearning for the freedom and privilege of adulthood. Esmeralda learns English quickly, but she remains in an in-between lingual state, thinking in Spanish and translating her thoughts into English. She feels she is neither white nor black, selecting "other" in response to the race questions on the many government forms she completes.

She is "simply too dark to be white, too white to be black." Even at the close of the book, Esmeralda still finds herself forced to choose between her mother and her lover, forever in a state of in between.

Mami is the second major figure of the book. She embodies hard work and determination, as well as dedication to family.

Her lack of English is a clear disadvantage to her in supporting her family, yet she always manages to provide sufficient food and shelter for her many children, often also supporting her mother, her uncle, and various other family members who take temporary shelter in her home. When she is periodically laid off from her factory jobs, Mami swallows her pride and petitions the welfare office for emergency support, placing her family's needs above her own pride.

Mami fears constantly for her children.

She is afraid of the unfamiliar culture of her transplanted home, perpetually afraid that algo (something) will happen to her children. That something might be crime, drugs, injury, illness, or moral downfall.

Mami also aims to protect her daughters from men, who, she believes, only want women "for one thing," making them another algo. Paradoxically, Mami considers men the only means for her daughters to leave her, saying, "'The only way you're leaving my house... is as a married woman.'"

She also sees her male family members as protection against dangerous, unknown men. When Otto picks Esmeralda up for their date, Mami heads a send-off party

composed of herself and the four oldest men in the family to appraise the unknown male and to serve as a warning that they intend to protect Esmeralda's virtue. Indeed, Mami and Don Carlos fulfill this intention by driving the long distance to Otto's sister's house after Esmeralda forgets to call them.

Together, both Mami and Tata represent maternal heritage. Esmeralda yearns to break free of their mold, to become an independent American woman, yet she sees herself reflected in them. When she makes her face up as an old woman in theatrical make-up class in school, she stares at the mirror in shock, seeing her maternal and paternal grandmothers gazing back at her from the mirror. Esmeralda also sees her own mother acting like a young girl as she begs Tata for permission to attend a dance or to go on a date, mirroring Esmeralda's similar frequent begging. No matter how hard she tries to break away, Esmeralda learns, she will never completely break free from her maternal heritage.

Language and words are other central themes in the book, foreshadowing Esmeralda's future as a journalist and writer.

Esmeralda uses picture books from the library to teach herself English, understanding that English is the key to navigating the governmental and social services systems of her adopted culture. She communicates with her father exclusively through letters, and she maintains an active (albeit one-sided) correspondence with Otto.

After her breakup with Ulvi, Esmeralda writes Shoshana's words of consolation on a piece of paper in an attempt to ease her mental anguish.

Esmeralda's deaf-mute cousin La Muda represents survival without verbal language, in contrast to Esmeralda's language dependency. Despite her disability, La Muda still communicates effectively using body language. When dancing, Esmeralda compares herself to La Muda, unable to express herself through speech, but able to communicate with her body.

Esmeralda learns that words can help her to survive, but that words can also hurt her. The word "illegitimate" is a particular source of pain for both Mami and Esmeralda.

Mami aches from the shame of never having been married and dreams of vicarious redemption through the church weddings she imagines in her children's futures. In spite of her shame of being illegitimate, Esmeralda rejects Jurgen's proposal for marriage and becomes Ulvi's unmarried lover, echoing her mother's unmarried lifestyle.

Esmeralda also learns that language can be a separator. When she and her siblings begin to learn English, they speak a mixture of English and Spanish that only they understand, isolating themselves from Mami and Tata. And the more Esmeralda becomes accomplished in her second language, the more the world of the English-speaking opens to her, leaving her less time for Mami's world of the Spanish-speaking.

Acting and dance are also important themes wound throughout the book. Not only does Esmeralda act while attending high school, she decides to pursue acting as her life's

career. She accepts this career aspiration more than she chooses it, accepting it because others tell her she has talent, rather than choosing it because she enjoys it. Perhaps her greatest acting and dancing successes occur in her nonacademic life.

She feels that every time she steps out the door of Mami's home she puts on an act: The minute I left the dark, crowded apartment where I lived, I was in performance, pretending to be someone I wasn't. I resisted the Method's insistence on truth as I used it to create a simulated reality. One in which I spoke fluent English, felt at home in the hard streets of New York, absorbed urban American culture without questions as I silently grieved the dissolution of the other me, the Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican girl most at home in a dusty, tropical dirt road. I created a character that evolved as the extended improvisation of my life unfolded.

Her dancing at the many dance clubs she frequents with her mother makes her a popular partner—free, wild, and sexually alluring. In dancing, Esmeralda finds freedom from her constant state of inbetweenness, and she finds the self-esteem she otherwise lacks.

Topics for Discussion

1. Santiago discuses the social hierarchy at the High School for the Performing Arts. What drives this hierarchy? Where does Esmeralda fit into it? How is this hierarchy representative of or different than the social hierarchy at her junior high? At other American high schools?

2. How do Esmeralda's feelings about her father develop and change throughout the book?

3. Young Esmeralda's picture of mainstream American culture is that portrayed in the Archie comic books. How accurate is this view? Can American culture be portrayed monolithically?

4. How might life have been different for the family if Papi had moved to Brooklyn with them?

5. Mami worries that Esmeralda will become "Americanized." Does Esmeralda become Americanized? In which ways does she change and in which ways does she keep attitudes that are Puerto Rican?

6. To what extent are Esmeralda's experiences as an immigrant in the U.S. uniquely hers? To what extent are they representative of the Puerto Rican immigrant experience? To what extent are they representative of the experiences of other ethnic groups that have immigrated to the U.S.?

7. Characterize Ulvi. He talks little about his life before Esmeralda. Is it likely that he is hiding something about his past, and if so, what? He does not want to marry Esmeralda. Why not? Why does Esmeralda decide to stay with him?

8. If Esmeralda had been born a boy instead of a girl, how would her life with Mami likely have differed?

9. How does the fact that Esmeralda's parents never married affect her life?

Her view of herself?

10. How does Esmeralda fight against cultural stereotypes, if at all? How do cultural stereotypes frame her world and her world view?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Jurgen's friend Flip jokes that all women turn into their mothers. In what ways is Esmeralda like Mami? How are they different?

2. Trace the evolution of Esmeralda's life aspirations throughout the book. How do these changing aspirations reflect her maturation and development?

3. To what extent does the Santiago family recreate Puerto Rican culture on the mainland? How are Puerto Rican and mainstream American life combined in the Santiago household?

4. Discuss the importance of clothing and makeup in Esmeralda's life.

5. How did the many times her family moved affect Esmeralda? What aspects of her personality and self-estimation probably stem from her transient life?

6. How and when does the author incorporate Spanish into the text? What are the resulting literary effects?

7. When Mami refers to the High School for the Performing Arts, she calls it the school for "blanquitos." What does she mean when she says this? What is the significance of this term to Esmeralda's life in general? To Mami's life?

8. Compare and contrast Mami and Ulvi and their relationships with Esmeralda.

For Further Reference

Copeland, Libby Ingrid. "Cultural Go-Between: Author Esmeralda Santiago's Two Languages and Two Lives." The Washington Post (November 12, 1998): C01.

Copeland ties Santiago's early feelings of cultural disenfranchisement to "the vivid realism of her writing."

Gregory, Gwen. Review of Almost a Woman.

Library Journal (October 1, 1998):104-6. A positive review that praises Santiago's skill in writing descriptions and dialog.

Rios, Alexandra. Review of Almost a Woman.

Hispanic (June 1999):70. A review that emphasizes the author's courage in the face of the culture shock and the negative stereotyping that she encountered on the mainland.

Schon, Isabel. Review of Almost a Woman.

The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education (August 27, 1999): 37. Well-known Hispanic youth literature expert and critic Schon sums up the book as "a wonderful memoir about an immigrant family's experiences in New York amid the perils of poverty and the love of family and Puerto Rican culture."

Stuttaford, Genevieve, Maria Simson, and Jeff Zaleski. Review of Almost a Woman.

Publishers Weekly (June 15, 1998):47. A positive review that lauds Santiago's mixture of the harsh realities of her impoverished immigrant life with humorous stories of dating and relationships.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Certainly, readers who enjoyed Almost a Woman will also enjoy the first volume of Santiago's memoirs, When I Was Puerto Rican.

Readers might also enjoy Las Christmas: Favorite Latino Authors Share Their Holiday Memories, which Santiago coedited with Joie Davidow.

Another fine memoir by a Puerto RicanAmerican author is the fictionalized The Line of the Sun: A Novel, by Judith Ortiz Cofer. Ortiz Cofer weaves together fact and fiction, narrative and folklore to tell the tale of her parents' and grandparents' lives in rural Puerto Rico and her own life in Paterson, New Jersey. Similarly, How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, by Julia Alvarez, relates the author's experiences when, as a youth in the 1960s, she and her family moved from Santo Domingo to the Bronx. Alvarez and her sisters rebelled against their parents' traditional upbringing as they struggled to find themselves in their new country.

Victor Martinez's Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida describes another type of cultural clash.

Fictional protagonist Manuel Hernandez is a Mexican-American teenager growing up in the projects of the Central Valley of California. Even though he was born in the U.S., he still faces cultural discord with the mainstream white culture and struggles with many of the same issues as Santiago portrays in her memoirs. Gary Soto explores his Chicano roots as a teen growing up in Fresno, California, in Living Up the Street: Narrative Recollections. This collection of essays highlights Soto's gift for poetic language and his tender affections for youth culture and for his native California. Finally, Sandra Cisneros' classic House on Mango Street portrays the life of a young girl coming of age in a Spanish-speaking section of Chicago.

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