

# Empress of the Splendid Season Short Guide

## Empress of the Splendid Season by Oscar Hijuelos

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# Characters

Lydia is a complex character who provides a very good means for developing the different themes surrounding an exploration of immigrant life. She has a fertile imagination and a strong memory, but she is also determined and not unintelligent.

She has very definite values about how she sees herself and how she feels is the proper way to act, which she enforces for herself and her family. She has a very high view of herself, which prevents her from slipping into despair over the turn of events in her life. She does experience isolated moments of despair, when reality manages to break through the defensive barrier of her imagination, and she feels that she will not win the lottery or be whisked away by a rich handsome gentleman, that she will never be rich, so she must make her way the best that she can, but for the most part, she remains in a world in which she is an empress. This reinforces the importance of the American dream in most of the characters' lives. Lydia dreams of an affair with Mr. Osprey, which would bring her into his social realm. She imagines that the movie stars she meets see her worthiness to be in their circle. She has been fortunate to work for Mr. Osprey, who as the great American benefactor has been kind to her, and has brought her the closest to fulfilling the American dream. Lydia's complexity allows Hijuelos to demonstrate various difficulties of Hispanic immigrants in America and to speak to the difficulty of establishing an identity of their own. Lydia's mixing of Spanish and English, neither of which she speaks extremely well, her freely imagined sexual encounters, her strictness with her own children, her unshakable awe of the Ospreys, all point to the difference between the identity she wants and the identity that she actually possesses in the eyes of those around her. She finds difficulty in her role as a mother, which emphasizes the importance of family in the contrast of Lydia's relationship to her children as opposed to Raul's gentler dealings with them. As she grows older she also slips from the role of the beautiful, desired woman, the role for which she feels best suited, and which she enjoys the most. As she no longer can exercise her feminine powers in this manner, she is forced to find another way in which to interact with those around her.

Rico is the character who Hijuelos devotes the most attention to after Lydia. He is the one great effect of Lydia's life. His manner of living is a result of her strict upbringing, and it is mostly her lectures and distance that causes the confusion that he experiences when confronted with considering his position as a Cuban-American, but despite this, as a successful psychiatrist he is the embodiment of all that Lydia worked and hoped for. Through his experience with Mr. Osprey's daughter, Marie, years after his intense infatuation with her, he realizes that he is glad that he did not have that particular wish fulfilled, and it is at this moment that a dream that has remained with him has come up short of its desired effect. This is a common theme for Rico; he has everything he could want, and yet he still finds himself distanced and feeling empty, which proves that reaching the American dream and being in a higher social stratum is not the measure of success, despite what Lydia believed. The importance of family and remaining true to his roots as a Cuban are emphasized as he realizes that he values the time spent with his one Cuban patient, but at the same time he realizes that perhaps he is too far



separated from other Latinos. Rico values most the time he spends in the old neighborhood, among the people who have shaped him in the past. His connection to the history of his culture is the most important part of his life, and his discouragement is aroused when he feels that he is no longer able to enjoy and exult in it as he should; it is this time when he feels like an outsider in every world in which he moves. Both he and Lydia move in two different spheres, and they each must negotiate a position for themselves in those worlds. Hijuelos uses Lydia's various employers to manifest the worlds in which she finds herself. She is confronted with people of all kinds who deal with their search for a place to belong in all different ways. The successful quiet businessman uses sex, one professor uses the occult, and another has built a life around death. In each case, Lydia is confronted with people of very different ideals, and in each case, she finds a place from which to interact with these varying views; most often it is a common ground that she assumed did not exist.

Each of the characters living within her community, who play a smaller role in Lydia's life, in his or her own way contributes to the theme of the importance of the American dream. The value of the dream is called into question as most do not succeed in real life the way they do in their dreams, but Hijuelos shows that just the way they live their life contributes something to their adopted culture. Mario, a friend of Lydia and Raul and Rico's godfather, dreams of being a famous bandleader. While he waits for his big break, he spreads joy among the community with his upbeat attitude. He never gets it, but he supplies the music that is the life force of the community. Mr. Fuentes the butcher, is a poet, eventually self-published and despite the thoughts of everyone in the neighborhood, not very good, but his contribution to the attitude of the neighborhood in general and for Lydia specifically is great. Both men are characters who may not be successful in the commonly accepted connotation of that word, or even in terms of Lydia's definition of success, but are successful within their own community, so in a small way, they did succeed in the American dream. Lydia does recognize this in her acceptance of them into her social circle. For Lydia, importance is placed on success, but even more important to her is a code of conduct that is befitting a person of high social standing. If one cannot be rich, then at least one can have the richness of decorum and gentility, which is what these men, and the other characters that Lydia deems worthy, possess. They exhibit this in their overwhelmingly positive attitudes, which enrich their lives and the lives of those around them.



## Social Concerns

The "empress" of the title is Lydia Espana, a Cuban emigrant living in New York City, post-World War II. It is mostly through Lydia's eyes that the city is revealed, and it is through Lydia's story that the difficulties of living as an immigrant in America from the late 1940s into the 1980s are depicted.

Hijuelos tracks Lydia as she attempts to find her way in the city and figure out "how life really works for people without money and connections." She marries and has two children, Rico and Alicia, who embody the world of first generation Americans, estranged from their cultural past, puzzled by the actions of their parents and looking to an uncertain future. The city of New York is full of opportunities and grand possibilities for Lydia, who sees herself as an empress, the name given to her by her husband as he courts her before they are married. Forced to become a cleaning woman, Lydia's exposure to many new environments as she travels around the city shows us more clearly the relationships of immigrants to the new unfamiliar territory.

Lydia's different jobs expose her to various facets of American life; she is exposed to many types of condescension, mistrust, and mistreatment that many immigrants face when they come onto the shores of this land of opportunity.

One major source of hope and frustration is a particular household that Lydia cleans regularly; the high-class Manhattan apartment belongs to the Ospreys. Mr. Osprey befriends Lydia because she reminds him of his childhood nannies from South America, and the Ospreys, for Lydia, are the ideal American family. They are successful, happy, and very wealthy. Mr. Osprey is generous, kind, and friendly, while Mrs. Osprey, beautiful yet aloof, warms to Lydia and eventually befriends her as well.

It is in this relationship between the two households, the Espanas and the Ospreys, that the differences in class, education, and opportunities are most striking. Lydia's fertile imagination brings her closer to their wealth and prominence, but it is only in her imagination. When Mrs. Osprey gives Lydia her cast-off clothing, Lydia wears it with pride, because it is the closest she will be to their wealth. This is most apparent with the fur coat that she inherits from the Ospreys.

By surrounding Lydia with such impractical finery and showing Lydia's happiness in it, Hijuelos accentuates the distance between the society to which she belongs and the society to which she believes she should belong. This is echoed in the responses of her children to her admonishments about being well dressed and behaving properly.

She forces them to abide by her own seemingly antiquated code of behavior, which accentuates her refusal to recognize her "place" in the world and the desire of her children to normalize themselves by taking on the practices of their adopted country. It is in her imagined superiority that she maintains the memory of her childhood in Cuba and the hope that the discomfort she and the rest of her family suffer is only temporary and can, at any moment, change, for she is in the land of opportunity.



Hijuelos shows that the only comforts that many immigrants have are their memories and their imaginations. He paints a picture of a bright immigrant community, that even though they are beset by daily hardships—little work, even smaller pay, condescension from non-immigrants—they manage to have hope and happiness in their relationships with each other. Through their music and dancing and late night parties, Hijuelos's characters attempt to maintain a connection to their past while seeking out their place in a new culture. In addition, various concerns that parents have in general are intensified for Lydia and her husband, Raul, as the attempt to negotiate the proper boundaries for their children in this unfamiliar place. When her daughter, Alicia, becomes friends with a local socialist cafe owner, Lydia is appalled at his values and beliefs and forbids the association, yet in the end, she befriends him herself, for he is someone to talk to, and his situation is much like her own. He is also a "stranger" in a strange land. Here, Hijuelos is working with the stereotypes of various characters and identifies these prejudgments to demonstrate that everyone has their own prejudices, which eventually need to be broken down.

Class stratification is a major issue for this novel. Lydia, as a cleaning woman, has for the most part, free access to the apartments of the very rich, as well as apartments of the middle class. She is alien to both, and as she moves through the different environments, it is easy to see her isolation and her desire to move to another level of society. She encourages her children to do so, as well. Rico, through the benevolence of Mr. Osprey, is allowed to go to a private school where he associates with the children of the very rich. He too, in this environment of extreme wealth to which he does not belong, manages to find his niche.

He does this through his studies and the effect is that he is able to move up to another social level, to the level that his mother always belonged to in her mind, although she did not in terms of the physical world.

Alicia likewise, makes her way, through marriage, into a middle-class life. Both children struggle with what it means to be Cuban and American, and in their struggles manage to make a way for themselves in the world through individuality, determination, and opportunity. These qualities, which are necessities for the American dream, are emphasized through the success of the children. Lydia, although she has determination, is unable to raise herself to the next social level, because of her sacrifices for her family, and because of her stronger connection to her past in Cuba.

Opportunity and chance play a large role in the story, for it is only with the opportunities afforded him that Rico is able to succeed so fully. He is given the chance to go to a private school and thus gets the chance to remove himself from the stultifying world in which he finds himself in the public school. Hijuelos makes a point that it is only with opportunity can one exercise determination in order to succeed, that chance plays a large role in anyone's ability to succeed.

# Techniques

Hijuelos paints a biography of a career, beginning with the necessity for Lydia to become a cleaning lady, and ends with the termination of her employment. In the middle, the events of her life and the lives of those around her are recounted in relation to her work. It is through the use of this framework that Hijuelos is able to portray a wide spectrum of people for Lydia to meet.

Hijuelos focuses on Lydia, yet uses a third person narrator to relate things that Lydia would not divulge herself as a narrator, and allows Hijuelos to explore the thoughts and feelings of other characters as well, to gauge Lydia's effect on others, to a great extent.

The subject matter of the novel comes from the long history of social realism, with the impact of the more recent opening of the literary world to stories of immigrants, as long-ignored populations assert their rightful place in the literary marketplace. Hijuelos uses Spanish phrases in and out of dialogue to add to the realism of the story and to remind the reader of the context of the story and the importance of this community's story.

Additionally, the narration of the story is fragmented temporally. Anecdotes and other stories from the characters' lives are told out of order and are kept track of by section headings which often clue the reader in to the time frame of the vignettes. This fragmentation allows Hijuelos to deal with themes, rather than being bound to the strict chronology of relating a person's life.

In this manner, the novel takes on the ways in which memory works, or the way that one person would tell the story of another outside the confines of a literary biography.

A slight chronology is kept but is continually interrupted by significant foreshadowings and recognition of experiences from the past. Likewise, at the end of the novel, the focus shifts from the cleaning lady to the cleaning lady's son, as Hijuelos calls attention to the succeeding generation. This also comes from a tradition of familial stories, in which the guiding member of the family makes way for the younger generation to step in and become the focus, similar in this respect to *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo (although very dissimilar in many other ways).



# Themes

Lydia Espana represents the common immigrant who comes to America with dreams fertilized by a healthy dose of Hollywood fare. As a young girl in Cuba she meets Errol Flynn and she imagines that in America, the land of the movies themselves, she can meet many more famous people, and among them, she would have her place.

It is these unreasonable dreams along with her meager inheritance that are the first to go when she arrives in New York. Being displaced and looking for a place to belong are of extreme importance in this story.

Lydia is forced from her home and finds herself in New York, where she becomes a seamstress in a factory in deplorable conditions. She falls from being the spoiled daughter of a prominent man to a common worker sewing fake pearls on sweaters. She finds herself in conditions that are utterly foreign to her; she mentions to her friend Concha that at that point she knew "how Marie Antoinette felt before going to the guillotine." As a result, she must find a way to survive. She does this by meeting people who are like her and find themselves in similar situations. The people of the community with their similar hopes and similar despairs unite together, and it is when they are together that they do not feel as out of place as all other times. Family becomes increasingly important as another safe place for dislocated people. This safe place is threatened from time to time, which affects Alicia and Rico the most. The difficulty of finding one's place as first generation Americans is mirrored in the awkwardness of youth and adolescence that they stumble through with Lydia's lectures, daydreams and forced ways of dress continually occurring around them.

Each member of the family and each of the other immigrants whose lives we peer into find individual ways to deal with their dislocation. Lydia resorts to her dreams of wealth, and believed superiority. As she demonstrates for her children in the fine antique store, she plays games with people of the higher class to demonstrate her rightful place among them. Raul finds his solace in drinking, but also in religious fanaticism.

His religious fervor is contrasted with Lydia's conditional faith. He becomes ever more religious, until his dying day when he dies on his knees in supplication. Lydia, on the other hand, who is much more concerned with her and her family's own wellbeing, has a measure of faith when she needs it, seeing the church and God as neither needing her help nor devotion, for as she tells Raul when he attempts to give an offering during a service, "God is already rich!" Raul is more religious, and finds more comfort in his children. He treats them kindly and tenderly and seems to recognize the importance of genuine human interaction more fully than Lydia. He continues supporting his ex-wife and meets with his estranged first son; both actions cause much dismay for Lydia, and his relationships with his other two children are also warmer and closer than their relationship with their mother. Raul, as he becomes more religious, begins looking out for his fellow person more and more, no matter their social standing, whereas Lydia continues to distinguish the "good" from the "bad." Lydia refuses to interact with those she sees as "unsavory" for whatever reason and encourages her children to be similarly





particular. It is in this action that she displaces herself even more, and perpetuates a cycle of stereotyping and mistrust that she herself suffers from. She has her own group of people that she believes are below the standards of her and her family, just as many for whom she works see her as below their own standards.

Rico and Alicia also have their own ways of coping with their displacement as Cuban-Americans. Bristling against Lydia's admonitions about proper friends, Rico draws into himself and finds solace in literary pursuits. He becomes friends with unsavory characters and as a result gets into trouble from which only Mr. Osprey is able to extricate him. His intentions were not misguided, but his quietness led him to be in an uncomfortable position. Alicia looks for her place in the spirit of the time by rebelling. She befriends a socialist cafe owner and investigates philosophies much different from those endorsed by her parents. She looks for a way to make her own way in the world, far apart from the well meaning but misguided Lydia.

Another way that many of the characters attempt to ease their displacement is dependence on the "American dream" as a source of hope and comfort. Lydia is surrounded by the stories of other immigrants, friends, relatives, and others who tell her their lives so that we may see how it really can be for immigrants in America. Many rely on the American dream. If only they work harder, spend even less, save more money, they can move away from the city to a place of their own far away. The dream is not all that it is thought to be, as one of Lydia's friends finds out. She makes enough money as a cleaning lady to buy a house in upstate New York for her and her husband to live in, and soon after dies. Many, many more find out that the American dream is all but impossible. The money is most often just not there even for day to day existence, much less for building a nest egg to use to propel one up the social ladder or to retire quietly. In the meantime, each person lives day by day, until one day, they hope, something lucky will happen, and like another of Lydia's friends, they will win the lottery or they, like Lydia herself, will have a rich benefactor, but winning lottery tickets and rich benefactors are few and far between and what these immigrants are left with is a mind full of hope and memories, and nothing in the bank.

# Adaptations

An abridged version of *Empress of the Splendid Season*, read by Rita Moreno, is available on audio tape through Harper Audio.



# Key Questions

Oscar Hijuelos in many of his works includes Spanish phrases throughout the English narration. He manages to maintain a Hispanic flavor in his fiction, which remains true to his roots as the son of Cuban parents as well as to the subjects of his stories. As the debate for bilingual education and the rights of immigrants in America remains a very important issue, so are stories told by and for immigrants. Also, issues surrounding the working poor and the class stratification within American society are important in this novel.

1. Hijuelos uses various techniques to demonstrate the thoughts, feelings and other nuances of his characters. Often these techniques create a separation of these passages from the rest of the narrative.

What is the significance of the use of italics for long passages within the novel? Is this similar to his use of passages within parentheses? What about his use of Spanish? What is Hijuelos trying to do by using these techniques, and is it effective?

2. Oscar Hijuelos is known for his novels based in postwar America, and specifically New York City. Does he provide an accurate background to his stories concerning the issues that were important to citizens at this time? How does he incorporate background information into his stories? What is the significance of the story being placed in New York City?

3. It seems that most of the people who are able to leave the community in New York and the social level on which they live for another place or level have done so because of opportunity. One of Lydia's friends saves enough money to buy a house, one wins the lottery, Rico becomes a psychologist, etc. Why would Hijuelos show that opportunity plays a large part in success? Once a character is presented with an opportunity, does it always lead to success? Happiness?

4. Hijuelos paints a portrait of the CubanAmerican community in New York City.

How do the men and women within this culture relate to one another? Are there people who work against the grain in this respect? How does the relationship between Raul and Lydia compare to that of Mr. and Mrs. Osprey? What about the relationship between each set of parents and their children?

5. At Raul's funeral, Lydia shows her father to her children and tells them: "Always remember that your grandfather was Cuban." Rico is surprised at this comment. How do Rico and Alicia compare in terms of, as Rico puts it, their "Cubaness"? What point do you think Hijuelos is trying to make?

6. How do you think Hijuelos would feel about bilingual education?



7. Raul recites a poem he has written for Lydia before he proposes, and it is from this poem that the title of the novel originates. What is the significance of the poem, the environment in which it is recited, and the use of a line from it as the title of the book?

## Literary Precedents

This novel finds itself within a growing collection of Latino fiction. As the canons of literature expand and begin to be broken down by those who have been previously excluded from it, new opportunities for writers of cultures different from the AngloAmerican culture are developed. One novel that works to tell the story of a particular ethnic culture in New York City is Toni Morrison's *Jazz*. In Morrison's novel, although to a greater extent but similar to *Empress of the Splendid Season*, music is of extreme importance, and its relation to the interaction between men and women is emphasized. Although focusing on an African American community, many similar themes arise as recently arrived people look for a reconciliation of their past and present and as different social classes come into contact with one another on the streets of the city. *Empress of the Splendid Season* also fits in with other novels with a Latino focus.

Another book to investigate could be *Like Water for Chocolate*, by Laura Esquivel.

## Related Titles

Empress of the Splendid Season is Hijuelos's fifth published work. Two of his other works also focus on Cuban immigrants in postwar New York, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* and *Our House in the Last World*. *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* won a Pulitzer Prize and has been made into a motion picture. It also deals with issues surrounding Cuban immigrants in America, by focusing on the true story of a man and his brother who for a brief time led the band the Mambo Kings and achieved fame by appearing on the television show, *I Love Lucy*. Here, the lead characters are musicians, and this story demonstrates even more prominently than *Empress of the Splendid Season* the role that music plays in the Cuban American community. He also has written introductions to a collection of Latino poetry and a collection of Latino short fiction, so throughout his literary career thus far, Hijuelos places extreme importance on the validity of Latino fiction and the necessity for those from backgrounds such as his to tell the stories of their culture, sharing the richness and depth of it with those who are unfamiliar.



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