The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica Study Guide

The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica by Judith Ortiz Cofer

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Contents

Introduction

Judith Ortiz Cofer first published "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica" in *Americas Review* in 1992. The poem later appeared in a collection of poems, short stories, and personal essays titled *The Latin Deli*. The collection received much critical acclaim. A reviewer in *Booklist* wrote that Ortiz Cofer's stories, essays, and poems are a "delicious smorgasbord of the sights, smells, tastes, and sounds recalled from a cross-cultural girlhood. Whether delineating the yearnings for an island homeland or the frustrations of a first-generation immigrant's struggles to grow up in 'el building' in a New Jersey barrio, Ortiz Cofer's work is rich in evocative detail and universal concerns." The poem "The Latin Deli" focuses on a place where Spanish immigrants meet to talk to each other in their native language and to buy food from their homelands. The deli, presided over by the owner, offers a respite from the culture clash they have experienced in America. As they walk down the aisles, reciting the names of Spanish food like poetry, they are able to hang on to the traditions of the past, in order to maintain a clear sense of their cultural heritage. Ortiz Cofer transfers her own experience as an immigrant to art and so establishes a link between herself and the deli owner. Ortiz Cofer suggests that through her poems and stories that center on the lives of Spanish immigrants, she, like the owner of the deli, offers comfort and a sense of identity to others who share her heritage.

Author Biography

Judith Ortiz Cofer was born on February 24, 1952, in Hormigueros, Puerto Rico, to J. M. and Fanny Ortiz. Her family immigrated to the United States in 1956 when her father joined the U.S. Navy. The family made several trips back to Puerto Rico from their home in Paterson, New Jersey. In an interview for *Melus* she describes her experience in both cultures:

> I write in English, yet I write obsessively about my Puerto Rican experience. . .That is how my psyche works. I am a composite of two worlds. . .I lived with. . .conflictive expectations: the pressures from my father to become very well versed in the English language and the Anglo customs, and from my mother not to forget where we came from. That is something that I deal with in my work all the time.

Ortiz Cofer received a B.A. from Augusta College in 1974, an M.A. from Florida Atlantic University in 1977, and studied at Oxford University in 1977. She held several teaching positions in Florida and Georgia before she gained her current position teaching English and creative writing at the University of Georgia. Ortiz Cofer began writing while she was a graduate student. She first wrote poems about Latina women and then broadened her literary endeavors to the novel, the short story, and the autobiography. Her work has gained her several awards including Scholar of English Speaking Union at Oxford University, 1977; fellow of Fine Arts Council of Florida, 1980; Bread Loaf Writers' Conference scholar, 1981; John Atherton Scholar in Poetry, 1982; a grant from Witter Bynner Foundation for Poetry, 1988, for *Letters from a Caribbean Island* (poetry); National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in poetry, 1989; Pulitzer Prize nomination, 1989, for the novel *The Line of the Sun*; Pushcart Prize for nonfiction, 1990; O. Henry Prize for short story, 1994; and Anisfield Wolf Award in Race Relations, 1994, for *The Latin Deli*.

Plot Summary

Title

The full title of the poem is "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica." "Ars Poetica" translates into "the art of poetry," which is the title of a poetical treatise by the Roman poet Horace (65-8 B.C.) and of a poem by Archibald MacLeish (1926). In Ortiz Cofer's poem the "art of poetry" could be interpreted in different ways. The deli itself could be like a poem to the customers, as it provides them with meaning in their lives. Since the poem is the first piece of writing in *The Latin Deli*, Ortiz Cofer could also be suggesting that through her poems and stories that center on the lives of Spanish immigrants, she offers comfort and a sense of identity to others who share her heritage.

Lines 1-7

In these lines Ortiz Cofer introduces the poem's main character, whom she calls "the Patroness of Exiles"□what Ortiz Cofer could also be considered through her art. She delays her subject until the seventh line, after she has given a partial description of the deli. First she describes the Formica counter on which sits an "ancient register" with a "plastic Mother and Child magnetized to the top." This mixture of imagery reflects the reality of life for the Spanish-speaking immigrants who come into the store. The cheap countertop, the "ancient" register, and the "plastic" Mother and Child magnet reflect the lower economic status of the neighborhood. The register and magnet, however, take on a double meaning. The customers of the deli come there to connect with their heritage, and so these objects would comfort them. The "ancient" register keeps them in touch with the past. When Ortiz Cofer capitalizes the words "mother" and "child," she suggests these figures represent Mary and Jesus. Thus the magnet symbolizes the customers' strong religious beliefs that they have carried with them to the United States. Since these beliefs often clashed with the more secular American culture, the magnet helps them reinforce their sense of identity. In lines 4-6 Ortiz Cofer describes the "heady" smells of dried codfish and green plantains□food that also reflects the immigrants' culture. She reinforces the religious theme when she describes the plantain stalks hanging like "votive offerings." Line 5 finally introduces the owner, "the Patroness of Exiles" who as Ortiz Cofer notes in the first line "presides" over the deli. Ortiz Cofer gives her sacred status as she "opens" her food bins for her customers, providing them with a sorely needed cultural link. This Patroness watches over her customers like a Madonna, offering them comfort and a strong sense of self.

Lines 8-10

These two lines briefly describe the deli owner and begin a description of her interaction with her customers. Ortiz Cofer introduces her in a nondescript way as a woman of "no-age," suggesting that rather than being one specific person, she is an amalgam of all

the women who run delis in ethnic neighborhoods. Her role in the neighborhood is to spend her days "selling canned memories" while listening to the inhabitants "complain" of their life in America and reminisce fondly of their past.

Lines 11-17

These lines describe their complaints and hopes in America as well as a nostalgia for their home. This passage also identifies the different groups that come together into the deli. Puerto Ricans "complain" about the deli's high prices and Cubans boast of "a glorious return" to Havana. In their determination to hold onto the past, they refuse to admit that life has continued in their homeland without them. Mexicans "pass through" the deli, looking to make their fortune in the New World. Ortiz Cofer uses internal rimes in these lines to highlight their hopes. For example, the Mexicans are "ta*l*king lyrica*ll*y of *dól*ares."

Lines 18-23

This section returns the focus back to the deli owner, noting that her customers gain comfort from being able to speak Spanish to her. The image of maternal comfort is reinforced by her physical description: "her plain wide face, her ample bosom resting on her plump arms, her look of maternal interest as they speak to her and each other of their dreams and their disillusions." These physical details help provide them with a sense of identity, since when they look at her, they "gaze upon the family portrait."

Lines 24-28

Here Ortiz Cofer continues the maternal image as she describes the owner's "understanding" smiles at the customers as they lovingly read the Spanish labels of the food in the deli's aisles. These names read aloud stir memories of their lost childhood. Ortiz Cofer reinforces this emotion when she employs alliteration in this passage with the soothing sounds of "labels," "aloud," "lost," and "lovers."

Lines 29-37

This lengthy closing section first returns the focus to the owner, who personally wraps her customers' orders, and then to the customers themselves, whose shopping there becomes an integral part in their struggle to maintain their cultural identity. Ortiz Cofer notes that the food is more expensive in the deli, but the customers really do not mind the extra cost. The food they would get from an American supermarket chain would not satisfy their "hunger" for a place where they can connect with each other and with their heritage. The Spanish- speaking people who come to her store have lost a clear vision of themselves in the difficult process of assimilation, as symbolized by "the fragile old man lost in the folds of his winter coat." His love of his homeland emerges in the sounds of his language as he brings a shopping list "that he reads to her like poetry." In the final

lines Ortiz Cofer employs a touch of magic realism when she returns the focus to the owner and her almost supernatural powers as she "divines" her customers' needs. With the dual connotations of the word "divine," the deli owner becomes a combination of a seer and an archetypal Madonna figure. She has the ability to "conjure up" products from her customers' homeland, "from places that now exist only in their hearts." The poem closes with a focus on the difficult task of providing comfort to these transplanted people. Their hearts have become "closed ports" where memories of their heritage are moored. The owner's mission is to "trade" in these ports in order to enable her customers to reestablish a clear vision of self.

American History

American History Summary

This short story is told from the perspective of a ninth grade girl who lives in Paterson, New Jersey. Her family is Puerto Rican, and they live in a tall building that houses other families like hers who are saving money to buy their own home someday. In the meantime, the salsa music blasts from their windows along with the aromas of their spicy dishes.

The girl hates living in the city where the snow is grey and the other girls make fun of her skinny legs. She finds hope when a boy named Eugene moves into a house in the neighborhood. Eugene is a shy boy from Georgia with Southern manners and an accent that the other kids make fun of. Eugene and the girl become friends, perhaps because neither of them belongs in this place. Their friendship grows, and one night Eugene invites the girl over to study and to go to the library.

That afternoon, President John F. Kennedy is shot, and the girl's mother is shocked that her daughter still plans to see Eugene. Not only is it improper due to the tragedy, but the mother knows her daughter is headed for humiliation with this Southern white boy. The girl ignores her mother and arrives at Eugene's home only to be told by his mother that Eugene doesn't need any help with his studies. Eugene's mother says they won't be living there long so there is no need for them to form any attachment. The girl has never been humiliated by such a sweet drawl.

The girl tries to sleep but cries in her bed, not only for the dead president, but for herself. She watches the snow fall outside her window but will not look down to where it has turned gray on the street below.

American History Analysis

More than one dream has died on this sad day in November. Kennedy's death signifies the end of bright hopes for the underprivileged in America, including the family of the Puerto Rican girl in the story. They had come to the United States with a better future in mind, and now everything is uncertain. The girl learns an important lesson in prejudice that day when Eugene's mother rejects her. The girl's spirit is vulnerable, but there is still hope for her symbolized in her refusal to look at the gray snow on the ground, watching only the purity that falls silently outside her window.

Not for Sale

Not for Sale Summary

The girl's father denies her the opportunities that American girls have, such as driving and dating. He seems to think that they still live in Puerto Rico and he can protect her from dangers in the world. Secluded in her room, the girl reads and invents stories to ease her through her situation. One day she is an Indian princess kept away from outside influences; another day she is Papillon readying her escape.

The girl's mother senses the girl's need for life experiences but cannot go against her husband's rules. The mother buys her daughter a gold embroidered bedspread depicting the tales of Scheherazade from the salesman they call El Arabe. El Arabe spreads his glittering linens and jewelry in front of the girl and her mother, and on this day he shoves a huge ring on the girl's finger. He tells her to keep it on while he tells the story of Scheherazade.

Lost in El Arabe's stories, the girl and her mother don't realize the time and are surprised when the father comes in from work. The father doesn't like his routine being disrupted or the salesman's goods spread over his living room. When he spots the ring on his daughter's hand, he is outraged. The girl panics when the ring won't slide off, and the two men get into a heated argument when the father realizes that this salesman has offered to buy the girl for his son, who cannot immigrate to this country without an American bride. The girl can only hear her father yelling, "Not for sale! Not for Sale!

The salesman is never allowed back into the apartment, and eventually the father loosens his hold on the girl. Her dreams are woven among the stories on her embroidered bedspread.

Not for Sale Analysis

The girl resists her father's strict control over her and his refusal to adapt to American culture, but his protectiveness is validated when he interrupts the Arab salesman whose intentions are less than honorable. Risk is everywhere in a land where you are new and where people willing to take advantage of you, sometimes even coming to your door. The girl gives in to her father's guidance, and eventually they find a common ground where his fear and her growth can co-exist.

Twist and Shout

Twist and Shout Summary

During the summer of 1967 the Beatles are drowning out the salsa music in the building where the girl lives. One day the lure of the music in the apartment upstairs is too great, and the minute her mother leaves the girl forgets the kidney beans cooking on the stove and rushes upstairs to join the party. She encounters Manny, the dangerous boy who all the girls love. Manny dances too rough with the girl, and she slips away from him, but not before she sees two girls kissing on the lips. Startled, the girl runs back downstairs to rescue the kidney beans from burning and herself from a scolding from her mother had dinner been ruined.

Twist and Shout Analysis

The rush to get through adolescence is pushing at the young girl and all the young people in the Puerto Rican building. However, the girl finds that she may not be ready for all that adulthood has to reveal and that it's safer at home right now.

By Love Betrayed

By Love Betrayed Summary

The girl can still recall the scent of the cologne that her father wore when she was little. Her father would kiss her goodbye every night before leaving for his job at a night club after he had finished his day job as superintendent for their building. The girl remembers that her parents fought a lot and that her mother never wanted to answer questions about the father.

One day the girl feigns illness to stay home from school. Her mother is out for a few hours, so the girl leaves the apartment to find her father and see what his life is like during the day. She smells his cologne before she sees his toolbox outside a door two floors up. A wild-looking blonde woman answered the door and the girl can see her father combing his hair as he leaves the woman's bedroom. The father is surprised to see his daughter, but he flashes what the mother calls his "devil smile" and leads his daughter away for lunch even though she protests that it's only 9:30 in the morning.

By Love Betrayed Analysis

Had the girl not lied to her mother by faking an illness she never would have encountered her father's betrayal of her mother, and ultimately, her. Perhaps when she thinks about it now she realizes her first betrayal and the wound from that must ache, even though it's been long buried deep inside a secret place next to a "devil smile."

Poems From "Some Spanish Verbs"

Poems From "Some Spanish Verbs" Summary

Orar: To Pray

The girl's father leaves every night after the children are in bed despite his wife's pleas to stay, and every night the girl can hear the floorboard in her mother's room creak from the weight of her knees. The prayers that don't make it to heaven fall on the girl like pieces of wood from a cross that she helps to bear.

Dividir: To Divide

After the father's betrayal and all of the rumors died down, the girl chooses pride and the father opts for humility. The girl plays the martyr and never lets her father do even the slightest thing for her. The father bears his daughter's rage and indifference as his punishment until he becomes ill. Then the daughter waits the whole night for his last breath so that she finally can reclaim him.

Respirar: To Breathe

Don Juan de Dios, who used to make snow cones for the family in Puerto Rico, has died today, and the young girl waits her turn in line to view his body in the flower-filled room. She looked at Don Juan de Dios' hands clasped over his still chest, and she runs out into the street to take the breath that he cannot.

Volar: To Fly

After my death I will be a sparrow watching you at my grave and you will talk to the stillness and remind me how your Spanish dreams made you fly and you will hear my wings and will understand.

Poems From "Some Spanish Verbs" Analysis

A child's perspective of betrayal and death are the themes in these poems. Love betrayed is not limited to the two people in a relationship but extends to their children and even their grandchildren, who learn the emotional crime and the resulting punishing behavior and the cycle repeats. As part of the life cycle, the girl learns that death is more than being asleep, yet she understands that she will exist in some other form after her own physical existence has ended and will help those who have loved her in their understanding of it.

An Early Mystery

An Early Mystery Summary

The girl debates the benefits of the candy displayed before her. In the background, her mother is arguing with the shopkeeper in a voice that she usually reserves for arguing with her father. The girl's candy decision is halted for a moment when she smells the mixture of gardenia, cinnamon and alcohol as the woman who bends down, looks in her eyes and wonders if she is the father's little girl. Her mother separates the woman from the girl, yet somehow the woman is still there long after she is gone.

An Early Mystery Analysis

The father's mistress has the audacity to approach the girl in public, and the girl is whisked away. She is left with something heavy hanging over her and her mother instead of the sweets she thought she would get.

Fever

Fever Summary

The girl's father is a sporadic part of her life, joining his family on his weekend leaves. His unavailability drives her mother into silence that she would pull over the two of them after he left. The girl sleeps in her mother's bed and listens to her breathe. She lives on her mother's sorrow like a houseplant that doesn't get enough light.

Fever Analysis

The absence of her father in her life increases the girl's dependence on her mother, who is incapable of giving much due to her own disappointment and unhappiness. The girl considers her mother's sorrow a sweet thing, however, possibly because the girl is still young and that's all she has ever known.

The Lesson of the Sugarcane

The Lesson of the Sugarcane Summary

When the car has a flat tire, the girl's mother encourages her to breathe in the sweet air from the sugarcane field. The girls tries to run into the field, but her father pulls her back and warns her that snakes live in between the cane. The father leads the girl back to the car to sweat while he fixes the tire. The girl believes that that was her punishment for wanting more sweetness than she could handle.

The Lesson of the Sugarcane Analysis

This poem exhibits typical family roles. The mother encourages the daughter to experience the sweetness of life while the father pulls the daughter back, protecting her from rushing headlong into dangers that she can't yet see.

A Legion of Dark Angels

A Legion of Dark Angels Summary

Fidel Castro leads his revolutionary army out of the jungles to liberate Cuba. The family watches Castro's image on TV, and the father, who is from Puerto Rico, feels a brotherhood with the Cubans and blesses the image of the bearded hero. The mother weeps for all the men and boys who won't return.

A Legion of Dark Angels Analysis

At the time, Castro seems to be the salvation for Cuba. Latin people all over the world feel a sense of blessed relief that their savior has come. The men are triumphant in their machismo, and the women mourn for the sons and brothers who could be their own.

The Changeling

The Changeling Summary

When she is little, the girl amuses her father by dressing up in her brother's pants and an army helmet and strutting around the house pretending to be Che Guevara. Her mother always ends the girl's charade and makes her change back into her own clothes, into her nothingness, before she is allowed to eat dinner.

The Changeling Analysis

Stereotypical gender roles are still very strong when the girl tries out the role of masculine hero, and she wonders why she always feels small when her mother asks her to turn back into a mere girl.

Absolution in the New Year

Absolution in the New Year Summary

On New Year's Eve the girl dreams of her dead father and the humiliation she suffered the night he finds her diary and reads it under harsh lights, convinced that he will find the mystery of a secret life. When he reads about her first puppy love and her wish to escape from her father, her very first love, the girl wonders what she would do if her father actually did send her away. When her mother offers consolation and the excuse of her father's motivation, the girl tears up the pages and drops them for her mother to sweep away.

Absolution in the New Year Analysis

Years after her father's death, the girl still dreams of her humiliation at her father's hands and how her mother didn't defend her right to privacy. Although her father was the one who embarrassed her, the girl made her mother pay by sweeping up her pain with the torn pages on the floor.

From the Book of Dreams in Spanish

From the Book of Dreams in Spanish Summary

In her dreams, the girl reaches for the lush fruit at the top of the tamarind tree and devours all of it before it hits the ground. According to the book of dreams, the tree symbolizes her father and the fruit stands for unfulfilled words, hopes and wishes. The girl wonders why she is still hungry after eating all of the fruit.

From the Book of Dreams in Spanish Analysis

The girl wanted so much love and affection from her father, and the longing still permeates her dreams. She is still unfulfilled, however, every time the dream ends.

The Witch's Husband

The Witch's Husband Summary

The girl is now a young woman, and her mother has asked her to travel to Puerto Rico to help with her grandparents. The girl's grandfather is slowly losing his grasp on reality, and her grandmother refuses to leave him or put him in institutional care. The young woman wonders how she will give advice to her grandmother, who she adores and who has devoted her life to the care of other people. With the exception of one year when she was in New York for health reasons, the grandmother was with her husband and five children.

Her grandmother must sense the reason for her visit because she interrupts her granddaughter with the offer of a story, which the girl can never refuse. The grandmother tells her about a man who is concerned because his wife leaves the bed at midnight every night and doesn't return for several hours. One night he watches her and is amazed at what he sees. At midnight, his wife strips off all her clothes and paints her body with a substance from a little jar. When the church bells ring she denounces God, is immediately lifted into the air and flies away like a bird.

The second night the husband is determined to follow his wife. He finds himself at a palace that many other women also are flying toward, and they enter through the chimney. Once inside, the husband stays out of view of the women gathered there. They are the wives of his friends and neighbors, and they are enjoying a magnificent feast. He makes the mistake of thanking God for the salt to put on a bland dish, and the women flee in horror. The man has no escape, and the owners of the palace return to find the hall in a mess. They blame the hidden man, and he is beaten within an inch of his life and left to find his way home. The man vows never to follow his wife on her nightly journeys again.

The granddaughter is amused but wants to know more about her grandmother's missing year in New York. The grandmother tells her that she wasn't ill in her body, only her spirit, and that her husband arranged for the grandmother's sister to come to the island and care for the children. Her husband paid the rent on her New York apartment so his wife could stay there. He worked two jobs to make situation work because he knew his wife needed some freedom. After a year, the grandmother returned to her husband and their children and never wanted to leave again. The grandmother takes her granddaughter's face in her hands and tells her granddaughter that she promised her husband she would stay by his side forever, and she intended to keep that promise.

The Witch's Husband Analysis

Sometimes a husband has to trust his wife's instincts when she needs some freedom or time away from the demands of a family. The husband in the folk tale learned this the

hard way, but the old woman knew that her granddaughter would understand if she told her this tale about female bonding and spiritual reinvigoration. It is also a tale of unconditional love in that the grandfather takes the risk that his wife may never return from New York. He loved her enough to encourage her to find rest and come back to herself so that she ultimately could return to him.

Nada

Nada Summary

Dona Ernestina began to divest herself of her possessions when she learns that her son has been killed in Vietnam. Dressed in full mourning attire, complete with mantilla, she tells the women in the laundry room the next morning that she has refused the flag and medals that the government people brought. Dona Ernestina does not break down or cry like the others in the building. She maintains her dignity, although the others watch for signs of a crack in her exterior.

Finally one day Dona Ernestina notifies all of them that she is hosting a party to honor her husband, who died just one year ago, and now her dead son. People in the building see this as a sign that Dona Ernestina is recovering from her grief, and they prepare all sorts of food for the event. When the guests arrive, however, they find only a table with pictures of the two dead men lit by candlelight. Dona Ernestina invites them to say their goodbyes and goes from room to room making much racket while her guests eat and drink.

When it is time to leave, Dona Ernestina stands by the door with two shopping bags filled with trinkets, which she distributed to all her guests. Word of her gift giving spreads, and people from the street line up to receive a gift from her. The others in the building are concerned about the type of people who now loiter in their building, and they decide to visit Dona Ernestina with their concerns. When they enter her apartment, they find her sitting naked in a corner, all her furnishings gone. Everything is empty, including the pill bottles that are supposed to stop her pain. The women dress Dona Ernestina properly before the police take her away because she is a decent woman, and not even death can change that.

Nada Analysis

Dona Ernestina has been broken by her grief. The death of her only son following so closely the death of her husband has pushed her past the point of reason. In her mind, she has nothing more to live for. She believes she has lost everything that was important to her, so the rest is irrelevant and useless and it's best to be rid of it. Dona Ernestina is careful to give the things away instead of destroying them. They were, after all, part of her life and care should be given to the pieces of a person's life. When Dona Ernestina recovers, she will see that she is surrounded by people as decent as she is, and they will help her rebuild a new life piece by piece.

Letter from a Caribbean Island

Letter from a Caribbean Island Summary

Marina writes to her friend Ellen of an old man she watches everyday from her beach cabin. Marina is recovering from the death of her baby, and she has come to this place to recuperate. The old man sketches and sculpts by day and sits at the water's edge at night to watch for the dolphins. One night he screams with joy, runs into the water and rides one of the dolphins. His body is never found. The authorities believe the creatures must have been sharks, not dolphins, but Marina says she saw them herself and heard them sing. Marina says that for the first time in a long time she knows that she will heal.

Letter from a Caribbean Island Analysis

The grieving young woman has watched the eccentric old man go about his days with a mild curiosity, but now she has seen the magic of his being whisked away on the back of a dolphin. Her faith in dreams coming true is rekindled, which is more therapeutic than any medical procedure.

Poetry Series

Poetry Series Summary

Guard Duty

The picture of a guardian angel protecting two white children hangs over the bed of this Puerto Rican child as she hears the angry voices of her parents every night. The child has been entrusted to the care of her own guardian angel, but where is the angel on these dark nights?

The Purpose of Nuns

The young girls watch the nuns float by in their habits, and they wonder about the nuns' secret lives. The girls get a glimpse when they are sent on retreat to test their spiritual fitness amid their spotless rooms and volumes of perfect words. These monochromatic reminders of peace in a turbulent world almost sway the young souls, but they are all too glad to return to the blue sky of their own world and their own choices.

The Game

There is a humpbacked girl in the neighborhood who is hidden away, a beautiful shame brought down upon her family. The girl's mother is surprised when a new girl wants to be the girl's friend, and they play house under the palm fronds until the girl's mother calls her home to dinner and the game of pretend is over for today.

The Lesson of the Teeth

Legend has it that if you dream of teeth it is a sign that death is coming, so when the young girl sees her aunt's false teeth sitting in a jar she is horror-stricken. Now, whenever the aunt smiles an icy chill goes up and down the girl's spine.

They Never Grew Old

People with tuberculosis were sent away at the first sign of illness and on those rare visits to homes of relatives; the items the sick people touched had to be destroyed as if they never existed. The girl hears a story about two such people who were sick and fell in love. The people in the town were horrified, and the priest separated the couple and they died in separate beds. Their names were Eros and Psyche, and the girl remembers the carving she has seen showing them in an embrace. The girl decides that she too will wait for the man who will die young with her because it seems so romantic.

Nothing Wasted

Even though the family moves around a lot with the Navy, the mother always plants seeds and laments never seeing return growth on what she planted. But she always

tucks her daughter into bed at night and tells her that she will plant new seeds, taking away the girl's fear of the dark in another strange room.

Women Who Love Angels

There are women who are so thin and so fragile and they never marry, but they play heavenly notes on pianos on sunny afternoons. When the women die, death comes at night because it would be too impolite to take something so precious from someone with too many manners to protest.

To Grandfather, Now Forgetting

Carpenters, musicians and poets are prone to melancholy. The girl's grandfather makes his living in wood, which is just as good as any art, but the girl he loves dances with others because she knows that life with a poet would be too hard. Even though she is young, the girls senses sadness in the old man and that he wishes she would wear her fiesta dress to take him dancing so he can see the girl he loved one more time.

My Grandfather's Hat

The girl's grandfather is buried with the hat that his wife gave him before they became unhappy. The girl misses seeing the hat turned around and around in the old man's hands as it rested in his lap when he was inside the house, but she hopes that heaven is a beautiful island where he can wear his hat again. She's glad that he has the hat with him.

Blood

The old man now has new blood flowing through him, the result of transfusions in the hospital bed from which he now struggles to descend. He wobbles until the nurse leads him outside, and he sees a face he no longer recognizes in all the shiny surfaces.

The Life of an Echo

The woman prefers to be alone until she meets Manuel, who came to her from nowhere, heading nowhere, answering the call of the flesh and leaving her like the wind where she only can hear her own voice in return.

Juana: An Old Story

Juana has rejected the church ever since the death of her child. She has heard nothing from Carlos since that time. His last letter promised nothing, only tales of snow in the land where he lives now. Juana's pain is unending like the river and she watches God's work from her window and begins to pray the rosary, giving each bead the name of a child.

The Campesino's Lament

Lent begins today, and the man's face is ash-streaked as he looks at the empty bed in his house. He knows that wishes can't be harvested or children wished into being, and he prays that his wife will hear his pleas on the wind and come back to him.

Las Magdalenas

The women pull their shawls over their heads for 5 a.m. mass every morning so that they can shed their mortal lives for an hour in the presence of an old man who knows nothing of women. The priest ignores their yawns, gives them communion and sends them away with his blessings, their souls clean for another day.

Olga

Olga, who works in a denim factory, comes to the bodega for wine and cigarettes. She sways to Mario's seductive beats on the countertop yet hurries home with the wine inside her shirt just before night falls.

Poetry Series Analysis

The poems are stories from different women that could be a chronicle of all Latin women's lives, from birth to infinity. Some poems are about love and hope, but mostly there is pain from lost children, lost loves and lost hope. Yet a spirit of energy and passion that will triumph in spite of the owner's wishes and personal struggles flows through the poems. The tradition of respecting the grandparents is strong, and the stories imparted by these elders are revered as much, if not more, than those passed down from their religion. The sense of self and an inner dignity is strong from these women who rise above their work and their betrayals to create better lives for their families because they know they are building history and a future.

Dear Joaquin

Dear Joaquin Summary

Olga has been banished from Puerto Rico to New York after her mother found her with her lover, Joaquin, on the beach. Olga's life now is cold and gray, and she drinks their favorite wine and writes Joaquin letters to which he has not responded in the ten months that she has been gone. She tells him of her undying love for him and begs him to come to her and ignore Rosaura, who she suspects has bewitched him. If he can't come, Olga asks him to at least write to remind her of what the sun feels like on one's skin in November.

Dear Joaquin Analysis

Olga is living in a bleak situation, spurned by the man who has caused her banishment. Joaquin's lack of communication doesn't deter Olga from writing to him every day in hopes of getting between him and Rosaura, or at the very least, maintaining the connection to a home and warmth that will never be hers again.

Lydia

Lydia Summary

It's been 20 years since the woman has seen her friend Lydia, who has come back to town for the woman's father's funeral. Although Lydia's appearance is much more subdued due to her new religious frenzy, the woman can still remember Lydia's wild days and how her friend would risk punishment herself by covering for the woman's behavior. In return for her protection, Lydia would give the woman tokens from her evenings out such as hotel ashtrays, a man's handkerchief or other wicked object. Now Lydia leaves only is a book of psalms before leaving the woman again. The tokens have become less controversial.

Lydia Analysis

The tale of lost youth and the memories that are most likely better than the actual events is the theme of this story. Forbidden activities always are relished more than the permissible ones, but eventually age makes everything possible and even wild spirits are tamed. The loss can sometimes be more painful to the observer than the wild one herself.

Poetry Series

Poetry Series Summary

Vida

The young woman loves the old man poet, Gabriel, whose house is at the top of the mountain. She climbs to see him at night, holds his fragile body and thinks to herself that soon she will gather flowers for his grave. For now, however, she is content to be *mi vada*, his life.

Paciencia

Paciencia, the oldest woman in the village, gums the flesh from figs and walks the night like a ghost straightening things and settling the dust kicked up from the young people. She has outlived everybody and every law and bends closer and closer as she tends to the graves of those she has loved.

Old Women

Women's lives are etched on their faces for the world to interpret, but there are also fragments that the world doesn't see. Hidden under their beds are photo albums and baby clothes and magazines holding secret wishes, all returning to the pulp they once were.

Poetry Series Analysis

The theme of death unites these poems with the natural progression that it is. Death is presented not as something to be feared, rather a natural event to be revered and understood for its own grace.

Corazon's Café

Corazon's Café Summary

Corazon sits in her store and wonders what she will do now that Manuel is dead. Looking around her, Corazon can see his touch on everything in the store and how it was arranged to his satisfaction, and her mind drifts to the first time she met him back on the island. Manuel had waited on her at the store where she was buying rum for her father, and she was touched by his beauty and by the fact that he didn't know he was so handsome.

Corazon is a girl starved for affection. Her mother died a few years before and her father is always drunk or angry, and he avoids both his daughters. Corazon was the assertive one in the courtship, and she married Manuel and moved into the house he shared with his mother. The three of them ran a store and catering business until the old woman died and the couple moved to New York. There they started their business anew and became a success due to their friendships with their customers. Although Corazon could not have children, her life was full taking care of their barrio store and loving her husband.

Their only employee was an Indian man named Inocencia, who had found his way to New Jersey from Peru, where he left his family in hopes of preparing a new life for them in America. He and Manuel became as close as brothers, and when Corazon tells him that Manuel has died, Inocencia tells her that he already knew because somehow his spirit had told him.

When Manuel succumbs to the same heart problem that claimed his mother, Corazon is left alone. Her first thought is to sell everything and go back to Puerto Rico, but the next morning as their faithful customers and friends came to offer consolation with their food purchases, she knows that she will stay and Manuel will live on through her café.

Corazon's Café Analysis

Like many of the young people living on the island, Manuel and Corazon share the dream of building a prosperous life in America and they accomplish a modest level of success. The theme of the strong Latin woman is prevalent in Manuel's mother and Corazon, who gives direction to the timid Manuel. Manuel's mother directs his early years, and Corazon takes over where she leaves off, even directing the steps of their courtship and marriage. The vision of the women forms the structure of all their lives while Manuel dabbles in the aesthetics, yet they are both so willing to indulge him and content to accept the beauty and sensitivity he brings to their world.

How to Get a Baby

How to Get a Baby Summary

The folklore of having a child instructs a woman to sit at the edge of the sea and beckon to the soul of her child, which will come in the form of a tiny luminous fish. The woman should sit still until the tide pulls the water away, and she will be full of new life that is brought to fruition through intimate relations with her husband.

How to Get a Baby Analysis

Legend and stories of spirit thread through the lives of the island women, and this most fundamental one is at the core of life itself perpetuating itself from the sea.

Advanced Biology

Advanced Biology Summary

The woman is packing her clothes for a trip to Miami, where she will promote her new book and then on to Puerto Rico to visit her mother. The trip reminds her of her childhood in Paterson, New Jersey, in the 1960's where she attended a public school populated mostly by Jewish and white children. This school is where she had her first crush on a boy named Ira. Ira introduced her to the topic of reproduction in biology class and assaulted her Catholic beliefs in a Virgin birth, both topics that were never discussed in her home. Eventually their mothers found out about their conflicting religions and put an end to the budding romance. Even now, however, the woman sometimes thinks about Ira and wonders what could have happened if reality could have been suspended just for a little while and vacations from logic were allowed.

Advanced Biology Analysis

Differing religious and political beliefs were not tolerated well in the early 1960's in America and wreaked havoc with the emotions of young people who still believed that anything was possible. An education in a city and school of diverse cultures taught life lessons quickly, most of them occurring outside the classroom, and left indelible marks remembered long after school ended.

The Paterson Public Library

The Paterson Public Library Summary

To the girl, the library seems to be a temple sitting amid the ruins of her city. The imposing structure with its classic architecture seems as out of place in the middle of the dying neighborhoods as she does in the classrooms where most of the other children hated her because she is Puerto Rican and smart. One girl in particular, Lorraine, threatens to beat her up every day, and her walks to the library on Saturday mornings become exercises in risk and fear as well as educational enlightenment.

The girl's need for the stories within the library walls overpower her fear of Lorraine, however, and she leaves with her two books to get her through the next week. Even now, long past the days of Lorraine, the woman still gets a rush from entering a library as if she's about to visit old friends for reunions long past due. There is a sense of spirituality for her in a library, and it seems fitting that her first memories of one show it as a temple, almost a place of worship.

The girl also remembers that Lorraine catches her one day and beats her up good while everyone watches and no one intervenes, yet she feels fortunate that she has found a way out of the violence that threatened to overtake her life in that city. She credits her parents for most of it, but also the books that taught her that there are other ways to be empowered.

The Paterson Public Library Analysis

The diverse cultures and low incomes inherent in inner city lives force the children into fight or flight mentalities to counter opponents they can't even see, so they fight the ones they could see. The system that keeps them poor and underprivileged is too big to take on, even for their parents, so they fight who they can: the ones with brown skin who are smarter than them. Fortunately, the ones who sought sanctuary in books, like the author, escaped childhood relatively unscathed because they learned alternative ways of thinking that moved them to better places in their lives.

The Story of My Body

The Story of My Body Summary

In Puerto Rico, the girl is considered white but in America she is brown, and she is in the minority no matter which country she's in. A skinny girl, but beautiful, she learns to adapt until a horrible bout with the chicken pox leaves her badly scarred for life. That's when she decides to become invisible.

Despite the girl's feeling of invisibility, her color still matters to those around her. She remembers the heat of the scrutiny she would get when her mother sent her to the corner grocery store. The three Italian brothers who owned the store would watch her and try to move her in and out as quickly as possible as if she were going to steal from them. The girl lingered a bit too long one day after eyeing the Susie Schoolteacher doll on a display of Christmas toys, and she made the fatal mistake of reaching out to touch the doll's golden hair. The manager removed her, calling her brown and dirty. Outside she looked at her hands and they looked no different to her, yet she scrubbed them thoroughly that night in anticipation of running her hands through her own Susie doll's hair on Christmas morning.

The girl is the shortest and skinniest girl in class, and she is always the last one chosen in gym class. The boys don't have any interest in her boniness. That's why she's glad to be transferred one year. She learns that there is a midget named Gladys in her class, making her more desirable now by at least one notch.

The girl wasn't always gawky and bony. According to the pictures she has seen, she was a beautiful baby and her mother dressed her in ruffled clothes and shopkeepers gave her treats just for being lovely. Eventually though, she entered public school where the torment of her looks came into fruition. Puerto Rican boys didn't respond well to skinny girls and didn't hide their feelings. Eventually, her looks are considered exotic in college and she marries young, eager for some stability. Now what matters to her is the respect of those who care about her individuality and potential.

The Story of My Body Analysis

Self image is so critical to a woman's healthy attitude, and so much is formed in the critical years when separation from the family is paramount. At a time when support is necessary comes the time to begin the process of individualism. Unfortunately those who refuse to fit it or who don't come equipped with the so-called acceptable body parts are ostracized, leaving psychological scars that can last a lifetime. The author has been lucky to escape the immature scrutiny with a healthy self esteem intact, and she shares her stories with the world in the hopes that other young girls may see a way out of the misery too.

The Chameleon

The Chameleon Summary

A chameleon is moved from a green leaf to brown bark to see his changes, and he stares back at the author to see her transformation. While she stays the same, he refuses to leave, even after she has opened the door to his cage.

The Chameleon Analysis

This wistful little poem speaks volumes about the girl's wishing that she could adapt as easily as the malleable chameleon, which seems more convinced about her adaptation skills than she is.

The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named Maria

The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named Maria Summary

Her pursuit of education takes the girl to London one summer to Oxford University, where she encounters her first perspective of Latin women from other cultures. A man sees her on a bus, drops to his knees and sings songs from *West Side Story.* The girl is not amused, but she manages to get through the situation and remembers the difficulty of her transition from a Puerto Rican life to a more American life.

Clothing was always a big culture clash. Puerto Rican women who are beautiful in the colors of the island don't know how to prepare their daughters for entry into the education and business worlds. The girl soon learn the distinction between bright ruffled blouses and tailored silk blouses when a colleague remarks one day that Puerto Ricans seem to wear everything at once, meaning too much of everything.

The stereotypes follow the young woman into her career when she and a colleague encounter a man at a business meeting who calls her Evita and bellows the words to "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina." It never occurred to him to think of her as the sister or daughter or wife of someone he would consider important, for otherwise he certainly would have never insulted her in this way.

Despite the progress, the stereotypes remain of Latinas as domestics or comic characters. The woman knows that she is fortunate because her parents having given her strength of character and the educational opportunities not afforded to other girls she knows .The transformation of society will not occur on a mass level, but through each young girl who changes the paradigm for herself.

The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named Maria Analysis

The author admits to being fortunate in the advantages and opportunities that were made available to her and how lucky are the young women who can read her works and change perspectives for themselves. The grassroots movement for change has started, and its momentum is fueled by the continuation of the dignity and grace of the proud women who are paving the way.

Poetry Series

Poetry Series Summary

Saint Rose of Lima

The girl dedicates her life to God, disfigures herself and lives in solitude in the hopes of Him as her bridegroom. She repeats her zealous behavior as her life's sustenance.

Counting

A young mother who has slipped away from the Church has her faith renewed when she finds a rosary while searching in a drawer to pack a few things to take to her toddler in the hospital.

Unspoken

Adolescence separates a girl from her mother, who wishes she could tell her daughter that this awkward time won't last and that there will be a lifetime of pleasure and pain whose intensity will eclipse today's feelings. It is too much for one night, however, and she simply kisses her daughter goodnight.

Who Will Not Be Vanquished?

This poem is written for Tanya, named after the wronged wife in "Dr. Zhivago," the book her mother crushes in her hand when her labor pains start. Imagining mounds of snow, the mother gives birth to this island girl, realizing her child will face tragedy and heartbreak and wishes for her the same nobility of the Russian woman for whom she is named.

Hostages to Fortune

A death of a young girl in this poem freezes her mother as she looks at her body as if she is merely sleeping. The mother wonders how she will survive the burial and all the people telling her that her daughter had been in such good health, no signs of giving up any hostages to fortune.

To a Daughter I Cannot Console

The mother tells the daughter that time will heal her broken heart, but what can a 16-year-old know about time? All the passage of time means to her is no more new toys or bedtime stories, but the mother repeats the adage of hope.

Anniversary

The Vietnam War continues to haunt the woman's husband, and consequently it weaves its way through all their days and helps them mark time, as in the year they met or the day they married. America was angry and revolution was the rallying cry in those days, but now they know that death is more than a rallying cry. The wife listens to her husband's measured heartbeats now to measure time.

Poetry Series Analysis

This series of poems address the topic of loss, whether loss of innocence or the inevitable loss through death. Each stage of a woman's life brings with it positive elements, but the nature of change itself is a small death. All a woman can do is manage through with hope and instill the same hopefulness and coping skills in her daughters so that the cycle of renewal perpetuates.

5:00 A.M.: Writing as Ritual

5:00 A.M.: Writing as Ritual Summary

The author remembers a turning point when she changed from a frustrated artist to a published author, and it was as simple as getting up two hours earlier in the morning to pursue her craft. A family's demands can eat away at a woman's life no matter how willing she is to devote herself to the nurturing of the family, and society has all sorts of mechanisms in place to make her feel guilty.

5:00 A.M.: Writing as Ritual Analysis

Most of society doesn't make allowances for art as a profession, certainly in America with its digital work force and economy. Fortunately this woman has found a way to outwit the system and still make her mark in time when she realizes that the only way she can get time to create is to steal it from herself.

The Medium's Burden

The Medium's Burden Summary

The medium's friends spill their dreams to her, thinking that she can give them counsel and save them from evil fates with some positive interpretations. She has found, though, that it is easier to keep silent and smile like Mona Lisa and keep their secrets to herself.

Themes

Culture Clash

The clash between American and Spanish culture becomes the impetus for the immigrants to come to the Latin deli. In an interview in *Melus* Ortiz Cofer notes that this theme predominates in all the stories and poems in *The Latin Deli*. Her work reflects her own experience with trying to reconcile the contradictions in her cultural identity. She explains, "I write in English, yet I write obsessively about my Puerto Rican experience. . .That is how my psyche works. I am a composite of two worlds. . . .I lived with. . .conflictive expectations: the pressures from my father to become very well versed in the English language and the Anglo customs, and from my mother not to forget where we came from. That is something that I deal with in my work all the time." She continues, "One of the things that is so dissonant about the lives of children in my situation is that I would go to school in Paterson and mix and mingle with the Anglos and Blacks, where the system of values and rules were so much different than those inside our apartment, which my mother kept sacred. In our apartment we spoke only Spanish, we listened only to Spanish music, we talked about *la casa* (back home in Puerto Rico) all the time. We practiced a very intense Catholic religion, with candles in the bathtub, pictures of the Virgin and Jesus everywhere." The customers in the deli, like Ortiz Cofer's parents, struggled to hang on to the traditions of the past, in order to maintain a clear sense of who they are and where they came from. There they see the symbols of their culture□the Mother and Child magnet and especially the food. They also can hear and speak their native tongue.

Identity

In an interview in *Callaloo* Ortiz Cofer explains how places like the Latin deli helped Spanish immigrants reestablish their cultural identity. She writes, "The book is called *The Latin Deli* because the centers, the hearts of the barrios in New Jersey were the bodegas, which were called delis by some of us. There were Jewish and Italian delis. So if you sold sandwiches, well, it was a deli and that was part of our language. . .[F]ood is important in its nurturing of the barrio. To my parents their idea of paradise was eating *pasteles* (pork meat turnovers)." The deli owner in "The Latin Deli" is similar to a woman in one of the collection's short stories, "Corazon's Café." Ortiz Cofer explains that this woman is "fully committed to nurturing the barrio, to bringing life to it, not by standing on a soap box, not by becoming a great philosopher, but by keeping this bodega open. So that the people of 'el building' could have their *pasteles,* could have their cafe (coffee), could have a taste of what they needed to nurture them spiritually."

Art and Experience

The customers in the deli elevate the status of the items there to art as they read "the labels of packages aloud, as if they were the names of lost lovers." One "fragile old man lost in the folds of his winter coat" reads his lists of items "like poetry." The store items become poetry as they remind the customers of their culture and so reaf- firm their sense of themselves.

This theme also emerges in the relationship Ortiz Cofer establishes between herself and the deli owner. Ortiz Cofer suggests that through her poems and stories that center on the lives of Spanish immigrants, she, like the owner of the deli, offers comfort and a sense of identity to others who share her heritage. In her *Callaloo* she notes, "The idea of staying alive by telling stories is something that has always fascinated me. . .I like the idea of the neverending story that feeds one generation and then another. It's my own literary heritage; I am nourished by the stories that I heard and then I feed others, I hope. All my women□Corazon, Mama, all of them□rely on their imaginations to make their lives richer and to teach their daughters."

Style

Rhythm

Ortiz Cofer wrote "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica" in free verse, which varies line length and does not have an established meter. The poetic line becomes its basic rhythmic unit. Line breaks highlight important words in the poem. In "The Latin Deli" Ortiz Cofer frequently ends her lines with words that help convey the poem's themes. For example she ends lines 3-6 with "bins," "plantains" and "offerings," which reinforces the importance for the immigrants of the deli's Spanish food and the deli owner's position as "patroness," providing solace through food. Lines 18 and 19 end with "comfort" and "portrait," illustrating how the deli helps the customers reestablish comforting connections with their heritage.

Sound

Repetition of sounds in a poem can also emphasize key words and images and so create poetic structure. In addition, sounds can provide pleasure. Ortiz Cofer uses alliteration, the repetition of initial consonant sounds, in lines 26-27 in the words "labels," "aloud," "lost," and "lovers" to emphasize the joy the customers feel when they speak in their native language. She employs internal rime in lines 16-17 when she describes the Mexicans "ta*l*king lyrica*ll*y of *dóolares,* which highlights their hopes in the New World. The importance of food becomes evident through examples of consonance, the repetition of final consonant sounds, in "bins" and "plaintains" (lines 4-5).

Historical Context

In an interview in *Callaloo* Ortiz Cofer comments on the cultural background of the poem as well as the collected works:

> The book is called *The Latin Deli* because the centers, the hearts of the barrios in New Jersey were the bodegas, which were called delis by some of us. There were Jewish and Italian delis. So if you sold sandwiches, well, it was a deli and that was part of our language. . .[F]ood is important in its nurturing of the barrio. To my parents their idea of paradise was eating *pasteles* (pork meat turnovers). All my stories, I feel, have political commitment, but in "Corazon's Cafe" there is a woman fully committed to nurturing the barrio, to bringing life to it, not by standing on a soap box, not by becoming a great philosopher, but by keeping this bodega open. So that the people of "el building" could have their *pasteles,* could have their cafe (coffee), could have a taste of what they needed to nurture them spiritually. It is a political story in that this woman supersedes her own personal needs in order to take care of the people of the barrio. This is the Puerto Rican experience that I know.

In a *Melus* interview with Edna Acosta-Belen, Ortiz Cofer comments on the tensions experienced by Spanish-speaking immigrants in the United States, which resulted from their experiences with conflicting cultures. Acosta-Belen comments that the writings of Latina authors like Ortiz Cofer "represent an excellent illustration of how issues of gender, race, culture, and class become intertwined, expanding the terms in which marginalized groups construe their identity in relation to the U.S. mainstream society." Ortiz Cofer adds, "One of the things that is so dissonant about the lives of children in my situation is that I would go to school in Paterson and mix and mingle with the Anglos and Blacks, where the system of values and rules were so much different than those inside our apartment, which my mother kept sacred. In our apartment we spoke only Spanish, we listened only to Spanish music, we talked about *la casa* (back home in Puerto Rico) all the time. We practiced a very intense Catholic religion, with candles in the bathtub, pictures of the Virgin and Jesus everywhere and I sort of felt (and I have a couple of ironic poems about this) that God was always watching." Establishments like the one described in "The Latin Deli" also became places where immigrants could experience the customs and cultures of their homeland.

Literary Heritage

Magic realism is a fictional style, popularized by Gabriel García Márquez, that appears most often in South American literature. This style may have emerged from the mystification of Latin America that occurred during colonization, as many Europeans chronicled strange and supernatural occurrences in the new land. The term was first associated with the arts and later extended to literature. In the 1920s and 1930s, Latin American artists were influenced by the surrealist movement and so incorporated the style into their art. Authors who use this technique mingle the fantastic or bizarre with the realistic. Magic realism often involves time shifts, dreams, myths, fairy tales, surrealistic descriptions, the element of surprise and shock, and the inexplicable. Often something common converts into something unreal or strange in order to reveal the inherent mystery in life. The writer, however, usually creates a supernatural atmosphere without denying the natural world□a paradox characters appear to accept without question.

In an interview in *Callaloo*, Ortiz Cofer notes that Puerto Rican authors extend the definition of magical realism "to include a different way of looking at the world." She continues, "When you read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez or *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende, you are required to accept supernatural phenomena and to practice suspension of disbelief. When I write about espiritismo, I am writing about an ordinary, everyday thing that most Puerto Ricans live with. . .As I use espiritismo in my novel, there is nothing there that cannot be explained through natural law. I do not have any flying carpets or any other magical occurrences. . .My work reflects the reality that espiritismo. . .[is] for many ordinary people. . .an outlet for their emotions, a way to feel that they are in control of their world."

Critical Overview

Judith Ortiz Cofer first published "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica" in *Americas Review* in 1992 and in 1993 in a collection of poems, short stories, and personal essays titled *The Latin Deli*. The work received overwhelmingly positive critical reviews. A reviewer in *Booklist* writes that Ortiz Cofer's collection of her stories, essays, and poems is a "delicious smorgasbord of the sights, smells, tastes, and sounds recalled from a cross-cultural girlhood. Whether delineating the yearnings for an island homeland or the frustrations of a first-generation immigrant's struggles to grow up in 'el building' in a New Jersey barrio, Ortiz Cofer's work is rich in evocative detail and universal concerns." A reviewer in *Kirkus Reviews* finds the book "a remarkably cohesive, moving collection□a tribute both to Cofer's considerable talent and her heritage." Kenneth Wishnia, in his *Melus* article, focuses on themes present in the poem. He notes that Ortiz Cofer "works with many themes that are common to ethnic-American literature, for example, the feeling of being in exile in a strange land, where the sound of Spoken Spanish is so comforting that even a grocery list reads 'like poetry.'"

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is an associate professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland. In the following essay she examines one of the dominant themes in Judith Ortiz Cofer's "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica" the relationship between art and experience.

In his poetical treatise "Ars Poetica," which translates into "the art of poetry," Roman poet Horace writes of the importance of "decorum" in poetry, by which he means the appropriate connection between the parts of the poem and its whole. His principle of decorum emphasizes a concern with the relation of a poem to the reader□how the writer shapes the work to produce a pleasing experience for the reader. Judith Ortiz Cofer's "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica" also focuses on this relationship between reader and author. In the poem's description of the interaction between a Spanish deli owner and her customers, Ortiz Cofer establishes a connection between herself and the deli owner and herself and her readers. Ortiz Cofer suggests that through this poem that centers on the reality of Spanish immigrant life, she, like the owner of the deli, can offer comfort and a sense of identity to others who share her heritage. This effect, then, results from the art of her poetry.

In an interview in *Melus* Ortiz Cofer tells Edna Acosta-Belen about her personal vision of the relationship between art and experience: "As I was growing up, I learned from [my female relatives'] very strong sense of imagination. For them storytelling played a purpose. When my *abuela* sat us down to tell a story, we learned something from it, even though we always laughed. That was her way of teaching. So early on, I instinctively knew storytelling was a form of empowerment, that the women in my family were passing on power from one generation to another through fables and stories. They were teaching each other how to cope with life." In an interview in *Callaloo* Ortiz Cofer adds that these women were "powerful matriarchs" for her: "In my developing consciousness as a story-teller I saw that there was power there, power to influence." Commenting on her transfer of that oral tradition into literature, she explains, "I like the idea of the never-ending story that feeds one generation and then another. It's my own literary heritage; I am nourished by the stories that I heard and then I feed others." Her poem "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica" opens her 1993 collection of stories, poems, and personal narratives, which focus on the daily struggles of Spanish immigrants as they cope with the difficult process of assimilation. Her works, like the offerings in the Latin deli, help "nourish" those who read them. Ortiz Cofer's careful shaping of "The Latin Deli" sets the tone of the collection and establishes the crucial relationship between art and reader.

In the *Melus* interview, Ortiz Cofer discusses her own assimilation experiences after she immigrated from her native Puerto Rico to Paterson, New Jersey: "I write in English, yet I write obsessively about my Puerto Rican experience. . .That is how my psyche works. I am a composite of two worlds. . .I lived with. . .conflictive expectations: the pressures from my father to become very well versed in the English language and the Anglo customs, and from my mother not to forget where we came from. That is something that

I deal with in my work all the time." "The Latin Deli" exemplifies her maternal relatives' earnest desire to maintain a sense of cultural identity. The deli's customers respond to the challenge of living between two cultures by returning to the deli to experience the world of their homeland as they speak to each other and the owner in Spanish and as they sample the sights, aromas, and tastes of the offerings there. In the first few lines of the poem, Ortiz Cofer describes the deli, including the items that have a positive effect on the customers. First she notes the "plastic Mother and Child magnetized to the top" of an "ancient register." The customers of the deli come there to connect with their heritage, and so these objects comfort them. The "ancient" register keeps them in touch with the past. The capitalization of the words "mother" and "child" suggests these figures represent Mary and Jesus and highlights the spiritual nature of the deli. The magnet symbolizes the customers' strong religious beliefs that they have carried with them to the New World. Since these beliefs often clashed with the more secular American culture and their children's active assimilation efforts, the magnet helps them reinforce their sense of identity. In lines 4-6 food also becomes an important item in the deli. Ortiz Cofer describes the "heady" smells of dried codfish and green plantains□food that reflects the immigrants' culture. She reinforces the religious theme when she describes the plantain stalks hanging like "votive offerings."

Later in the poem, the customers read aloud the names of the foods on the shelves, which stirs memories of their lost childhood. Ortiz Cofer reinforces this emotion when she employs alliteration in this passage with the soothing sounds of "labels," "aloud," "lost," and "lovers." Their shopping there becomes an integral part in their struggle to maintain their cultural identity. Ortiz Cofer notes that the food is more expensive in the deli, but the customers really do not mind the extra cost. The food they would get from an American supermarket chain would not satisfy their "hunger" for a place where they can connect with each other and with their heritage. The Spanish-speaking people who come to her store have lost a clear vision of themselves in the difficult process of assimilation, as symbolized by "the fragile old man lost in the folds of his winter coat." His love of his homeland emerges in the sounds of his language as he brings a shopping list "that he reads to her like poetry." In her *Melus* interview, Ortiz Cofer notes her own connection to her native language and its influence on her art: "I use Spanish words and phrases almost as an incantation to lead me back to the images I need."

In her interview in *Callaloo* Ortiz Cofer describes her own experience with the Latin delis in her neighborhood: "The hearts of the barrios in New Jersey were the bodegas, which were called delis by some of us. There were Jewish and Italian delis. So if you sold sandwiches, well, it was a deli and that was part of our language. . .[F]ood is important in its nurturing of the barrio. To my parents their idea of paradise was eating *pasteles* (pork meat turnovers)." The deli owner in the poem commits herself to nurturing her customers by offering them the products of their homeland. Ortiz Cofer reveals the deli owner's vital connection to the Spanish immigrants as she cuts her focus in the poem back and forth between them. She christens the owner "the Patroness of Exiles," who as Ortiz Cofer notes in the first line, "presides" over the deli. Ortiz Cofer gives her sacred status as she "opens" her food bins for her customers, providing them with a sorely needed cultural link. This Patroness watches over her customers like a Madonna, offering them comfort and a strong sense of self. This woman of "no-age" becomes an

amalgam of all the women who run delis in ethnic neighborhoods. Her role there is to spend her days "selling canned memories" while listening to the inhabitants "complain" of their life in America and reminisce fondly of their past. Ortiz Cofer's physical description of her reinforces her nurturing image□"her plain wide face, her ample bosom resting on her plump arms, her look of maternal interest as they speak to her and each other of their dreams and their disillusions." These physical details help provide her customers with a sense of identity, since when they look at her, they "gaze upon the family portrait."

In the poem's closing section, Ortiz Cofer reinforces her ties to the deli owner and her customers/ readers. She employs a touch of magic realism when she notes the owner's supernatural powers as she "divines" her customers' needs. With the dual connotations of the word "divine," the deli owner becomes a combination of a seer and an archetypal Madonna figure. She has the ability to "conjure up" products from her customers' homeland, "from places that now exist only in their hearts." Through the construction of her poem, Ortiz Cofer "divines" the needs of her readers, "conjuring up" comforting images of their heritage. In the final lines of the poem, she notes the difficulties she and the deli owner face in their attempts to provide solace to these transplanted people whose hearts have become "closed ports" where memories of their heritage are moored. The mission for both Ortiz Cofer and the deli owner is to "trade" in these ports in order to enable their readers and customers to reestablish a clear vision of self. Thus the deli and the poem become a safe harbor for Spanish immigrants, like Ortiz Cofer, to reconnect with their cultural heritage and so find a respite for a time from the difficult process of acculturation.

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

Critical Essay #2

A widely published poet, fiction writer, and critic, Chris Semansky teaches literature and writing at Portland Community College. In the following essay, Semansky explores the relationship between nostalgia and poetry in Ortiz Cofer's poem "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica."

In terms of population, the fastest growing segment of the United States is Hispanic. Hispanics constitute the second largest minority population in the country next to African-Americans, and Spanish is the most frequently spoken foreign tongue. Mexicans, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans make up the bulk of the Hispanic population. The Mexican population is largely concentrated in the West and Southwest, with states like California and Texas boasting the largest numbers. Cubans have a large presence in South Florida, and Puerto Ricans are heavily concentrated in New York City and northern New Jersey. The United States, or the "mainland," as it is known to Puerto Ricans, is considered a place of economic opportunity and freedom, and the rate of immigration to the states from Hispanic countries is very high. However, with opportunity also comes sacrifice. Those who leave home and come to America miss their homeland and a sense of belonging to a more homogeneous culture where family, neighborhood, and town often form the backbone of one's identity. Many immigrants becomes exiles of a sort, caught between cultures, not wholly belonging to their new home or their old. Judith Ortiz Cofer's poem, "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica," explores the nature of yearning for a place and a way of life that has been lost, linking it to the "stuff" of poetry itself.

The most profound feature of Romantic poetry and, arguably, modern poetry is the sense of loss: loss of love, loss of life, loss of identity. This loss is often couched in terms of nostalgia, a profound and insatiable desire for the past. Ortiz Cofer evokes this nostalgia in the opening lines of the poem, describing the Latin delicatessen:

> Presiding over a Formica counter, plastic Mother and
> Child magnetized to the top of an ancient register, the
> heady mix of smells from the open bins of dried
> codfish, the green plantains hanging in stalks like
> votive offerings, she is the Patroness of Exiles, a
> woman of no age who was never pretty, who spends
> her days selling canned memories while listening to
> the Puerto Ricans complain that it would be cheaper to
> fly to San Juan than to buy a pound of Bustelo coffee
> here, and to Cubans perfecting their speech of a
> "glorious return" to Havana□where no one has been
> allowed to die and nothing to change until then; to
> Mexicans who pass through, talking lyrically of *dolares*
> to be made in el Norte□

"Canned memories" is a figure of speech playing on the fact that delicatessens sell canned goods as well as produce and other items. Because this yearning and the attendant memories on which the yearning is based are repeated in almost ritualistic fashion, "canned" also means prepackaged, something which can be used time and time again with exactly the same effects. Canned laughter, or laugh tracks, a staple of television situation comedies, is one example of this effect. Nostalgia by its nature is always the same, a melancholic yearning for the past that can never be appeased. It repeats itself precisely because it cannot be appeased. The deli lends itself to feelings of nostalgia because its features and products are similar to those of the immigrants' homelands. The delicatessen is described as a cross between a church and a museum. Ortiz Cofer's description suggests that this is not one Latin deli, but *all* Latin delis. The food here and the Catholic knick knack, a Mary and Jesus magnet, are staples of many Latin countries, most of which are heavily Roman Catholic, (Puerto Rico is 85 percent Catholic). Rather than satisfy the exiles' longing, however, the deli catalyzes it. These people are emotional exiles as well as physical ones. Though they have left their countries for a better life, they still long for the comfort of their homeland, as represented by foodstuffs such as plantains, a variety of banana that cannot be eaten raw, and Bustelo coffee, a particularly strong blend especially popular in Puerto Rico. The smells and sights of these items remind customers of their past and encourages them to act in particular ways. They become caricatures of exiles from their respective countries: the Puerto Ricans exaggerate and complain about how expensive goods are in the states; the Cubans beat their chests and brag of the day when they will overthrow Castro; the Mexicans are obsessed with making money to escape their impoverished lives. Stuck in the past, these cultural "interlopers" nonetheless must deal with the present. Their inability to do so forces them to live in a kind of purgatory, where the carrot of their homeland is dangled in front of them only to be pulled away the closer they get to it.

The proprietress of the deli is herself a combination of Mother Mary, museum curator, and muse. Like the exiles described and the deli itself, she is a type. Sexless and smiling, she embodies all of the characteristics of the stereotypical Latin mother with her "plain wide face, her ample bosom/ resting on her plump arms, her look of maternal interest." She symbolizes their heritage, the values of Latin culture, and stands for all that is good about the places they have left. In this way, she anchors the exiles in the past even though their hopes and dreams are also in the present and for the future.

Ortiz Cofer underscores the exiles' desire by focusing on language, visitors to the deli "wanting the comfort/ of spoken Spanish." Verbalizing the names of goods (for example, candy) takes the exiles deeper into their purgatory. The past is now like some unattainable lover, whose name they call but who will never answer. Ortiz Cofer once again highlights the ossified nature of the exiles' desire by calling these confections, "*Suspiros,/ Merengues,* the stale candy of everyone's childhood." Though the candies promise to be sweet, they only disappoint. They symbolize the static quality of impossible want.

The final images of the poem describe the extreme pathos of the exiles' situation. An old man, symbolizing all old men who are exiles, must have the ham and cheese sandwich

from *this* deli, even though he could buy a less expensive sandwich elsewhere. The proprietress, in her role as patron saint of the exiles, attempts to satisfy this need by making the sandwich in the way that the man remembers it being made in his own country, "slicing *jamon y queso* and wrapping it in wax paper/ tied with string: plain ham and cheese/ that would cost less at the A[and]P. . ." The man's "hunger" is an appropriate metaphor, and the physical nourishment with which the deli supplies him only keeps his real hunger for his homeland alive. That she "divines" the needs of these exiles, and "conjures" up items from their past, suggests that she has powers, magical and religious. Her real trade is in desire. No doubt caught between cultures herself, this "Patroness of Exiles" presumably also keeps her own dreams of her homeland alive by trafficking in the hopes of others.

How can this description of a Latin delicatessen be called an "Ars Poetica," or art of poetry? If readers consider the patroness a muse as well and consider the customers as poets this title can be better understood. Historically, patrons, both individuals and organizations, have materially and through encouragement supported poets. A good current example is the National Endowment of the Arts, which gives money every year to poets and artists to help them begin or complete projects. In return, poets acknowledge the support, sometimes in their verse itself. The "Patroness of Exiles" in the Latin deli offers customers emotional support and confirmation that their desires are "real," even though it is "canned memories" that she sells. As muse, she inspires the exiles. In her store they find "the comfort/ of spoken Spanish," mournfully recite the names of deli products, finding solace (and misery) in the act of naming itself. The promise that the patroness offers is the promise of poetry. Poetry, like the patroness, is able to "conjure up" things that exist only in the human heart. Poetry makes something out of nothing, and often originates in the imagination, the same place that gives birth to nostalgia and dreams. But there is something ironic in Ortiz Cofer's calling her poem an "Ars Poetica," for if we understand the deli as a sad place, a "stale" place where heartbroken exiles are sold the same illusions over and over again, we must understand poetry, by extension, as something akin to the act of lying. This is similar to how Plato saw poetry in *The Republic*, when he argued for it being banned from his utopian community because it represented no truth of its own, but rather provoked the emotions and kept humanity from knowing the real truth. In evoking the exiles feelings of hopelessness and despair Ortiz Cofer is not making anything up; rather, she is mining reality itself for the lies that we tell ourselves. The art of poetry for Ortiz Cofer, then, is the art of unmasking our own self-deceptions.

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

Critical Essay #3

In the following review of Ortiz Cofer's The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry*, Kenneth Wishnia states that the writings of Ortiz Cofer "defy convenient classification," though she addresses many common themes of ethnic-American writing, including the various sub-themes of culture clash such as sexuality, mores, and belief systems.*

Judith Ortiz Cofer's writing defies convenient classification, although she works with many themes that are common to ethnic-American literature, for example, the feeling of being in exile in a strange land, where the sound of Spoken Spanish is so comforting that even a grocery list reads "like poetry." The daily struggle to consolidate opposing identities is perhaps most clearly exemplified by the tradition which determines that a latina becomes a "woman" at age 15, which means, paradoxically, not more freedom but more restrictions, since womanhood is defined as sexual maturity, which must then be contained at all costs. This leaves one of her characters feeling "like an exile in the foreign country of my parents' house" because of "absurd" rules that do not apply to her present reality in Paterson, New Jersey.

Another striking example of such cultural clash occurs in the story, "Advanced Biology," in which a ninth grade Jewish boy tells the eighth grade narrator about both the Holocaust and reproductive biology. This leads her to doubt both God's "Mysterious Ways" and the Virgin Birth (and to have a screaming match with her mother on the topic), but concludes with her asking:

> Why not allow Evolution and Eve, Biology and the
> Virgin Birth? Why not take a vacation from logic? I
> will not be away for too long, I will not let myself be
> tempted to remain in the sealed garden of blind faith;
> I'll stay just long enough to rest myself from the
> exhausting enterprise of leading the examined life.

Indeed, Ortiz Cofer invites us to do the same when she presents the story of a young Puerto Rican girl's first disappointing attempt to date a non-latino Catholic. In "American History," we get a fictionalized account of the girl living in a tenement in Paterson, who takes a liking to a "white" boy from Georgia named Eugene, only to have her mother warn her, "You are heading for humiliation and pain." Soon Eugene's mother tells her in a "honeydrenched voice" that it's "nothing personal," but she should "run back home now" and never try to speak to the boy again. In "The Story of My Body," a similar situation occurs, and her mother tells her, "You better be ready for disappointment." The warning is followed by the boy's father saying, "Ortiz? That's Spanish, isn't it?" as he looks at her picture in the yearbook and shakes his head No. In the poem "To a Daughter I Cannot Console," the narrator telephones her mother for advice on how to console her own lovesick sixteen-year-old daughter, and when her mother asks her "to remember the boy I had cried over for days. / I could not for several minutes / recall that face." The reader is left with the impression that such an event must have happened to Ortiz Cofer, or else why would she describe it three different ways in the same book?

But it is precisely these "three different ways" that ask us□perhaps even compel us□to withdraw from "the exhausting enterprise" of examining too closely. Such events are common ethnic-American experiences, and thus all versions are in some way equally "true."

Other familiar themes treated in colorful and moving ways include the preparation of food (one character derives some fragment of solace after the death of her husband by entering her apartment building at dinnertime, and inhaling deeply "the aromas of her country," and there is a hilarious episode in which some furious adolescent petting is abruptly ended because the narrator has to go stir the red kidney beans before they get ruined), the untranslatability of certain culturally-bound concepts into English (nada can mean so much more than "nothing"), disappointment with fathers, men, and God, and the different standards of beauty between cultures. The essay "The Paterson Public Library" should be required reading in all high schools and colleges.

One especially provocative issue will have to serve for discussion: "The Story of My Body" begins, "I was born a white girl in Puerto Rico but became a brown girl when I came to live in the United States." This essay, about how our identities are often dependent upon how others define us, is followed by a poem appropriately called, "The Chameleon," and another essay, "The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named Maria," in which Ortiz Cofer exposes and rejects common stereotypes of latinas as "hot," "sizzling," etc., explaining that in Puerto Rico, women felt freer to dress and move "provocatively" because the climate demanded it, and they were more-or-less protected by "the traditions, mores and laws of a Spanish/Catholic system of morality and machismo whose main rule was You may look at my sister, but if you touch her I will kill you."

Yet, at the opening of "The Myth of the Latin Woman," Ortiz Cofer writes about how she coveted "that British [self-] control," and in the poem, "Who Will Not Be Vanquished?" she writes:

Morning suits us Spanish women.
Tragedy turns us into Antigone□maybe we
are bred for the part.

Perhaps an "insider" can write this, but does it not also suggest that we all have our own preferred stereotypes? (In a related issue, three of the reviewers who are cited on the back of the book don't seem to be familiar with the traditional Spanish system of naming, referring to the author as "Cofer," when she clearly identifies herself as "Ortiz Cofer.")

In "5:00 A.M.: Writing as Ritual," Ortiz Cofer describes a period in her life when motherhood and adjunct teaching freshman composition at three different campuses somehow failed to fulfill her completely, and she writes that "There was something missing in my life that I came close to only when I turned to my writing." There is a bit of this sentiment in all of us.

Source: Kenneth Wishnia, "The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry," (book review) in *MELUS,* Vol. 22, No. 3, 1997, p. 206.

Critical Essay #4

In the following review of Ortiz Cofer's The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry*, Michael J. O'Shea praises Ortiz Cofer's eclecticism, calling her writings "profound, poignant, funny, universal and moving." O'Shea suggests echoes of the writings of James Joyce in the works of Ortiz Cofer, but states that ultimately, it is her ability to weave autobiographical remembrances, humor, and general human concerns as well as the interplay between fiction and non-fiction that make her "an author worth knowing."*

Judith Ortiz Cofer, author of fiction, poetry collections and essays, presents all three in her latest book, *The Latin Deli*. Some readers and reviewers might overlook the volume because of its eclecticism. (It might have escaped editorial notice in this journal, for instance, because about 60% of the volume is devoted to poetry and essays.) Others might ignore it because they incorrectly assume that its appeal is specifically "ethnic." The latter premise reminds me of a mid-Atlantic university administrator I knew whose office would not subscribe to the *New York Times* because "we don't care what's going on in New York." For the record, then, don't buy this book solely for the poems, solely for the stories, or solely for the essays; moreover, don't buy this book solely to read about the experiences of Puerto Rican characters in the continental US. Instead, buy this book for the profound, poignant, funny, universal and moving epiphanies between its covers.

Cofer's combination of essays and poems produces a sustained embroidery on the short stories (and vice versa). Indeed, the essays and personal poems (especially the poems "Absolution in the New Year," "Who Will Not Be Vanquished?," and "Anniversary," and the essays "Advanced Biology," "The Story of My Body," and "The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named Maria") reveal some of the autobiographical materials that Cofer uses in her stories. Her characters include young Puerto Rican girls who, like her, grow up in Paterson, New Jersey, in or around a tenement known as "El Building." In "American History," the teenaged protagonist is so focused on her impending study "date" with the blond-haired Eugene that she is unable to respond to the other events of 22 November 1963. Her mother, offended by the daughter's failure to grieve over the Kennedy assassination, predicts that her infatuation with an Anglo boy will bring only "humiliation and pain." The prediction comes true immediately when Eugene's mother refuses to let the girl in the house. In a bitter epiphany recalling Joyce's "Araby" and "The Dead," the girl "went to my window and pressed my face to the cool glass. Looking up at the light I could see the white snow falling like a lace veil over its face. I did not look down to see it turning gray as it touched the ground below."

There are other echoes of Joyce, from the explicit allusions to *Ulysses* in the epistolary narrative "Letter from a Caribbean Island" to the homely character in "Nada" whose "long nose nearly touched the tip of his chin" (like Maria's in Joyce's "Clay"). On a more sustained level, Cofer's stories recall Joyce's Dubliners in their cumulative portrait of El Building's characters in different stages of maturity, from young Eva, who is baffled by the evidence of her father's marital infidelity in "By Love Betrayed," through the

emotional powerhouse of "Corazon's Cafe," encapsulating two lives in the narrative frame of the hours following a young husband's sudden death. As the childless widow is surrounded in the embrace of her community, Cofer sketches that community's members with extraordinary economy and force.

Cofer's essays and poems are highly personal and as powerful as her stories. The interplay between her non-fictional commentary on the power of writing ("5:00 a.m.: Writing as Ritual") and the poems and stories that demonstrate that power constitute an implicit narrative structure tying the volume together. Several poems (among them "Saint Rose of Lima" and "Counting") evoke the power of Catholic symbol and mysticism recalled through some secular distance, yet retaining not only the power of vivid recollection but also that conferred by artistic transformation. The emotional range of the volume is impressive, from the moving posthumous reconciliation with a father in "Absolution in the New Year" (with its disarmingly witty yet powerful coda, "There is more where this came from") to the funny adolescent pangs of "The Story of My Body" ("Wonder Woman was stacked. She had a cleavage framed by the spread wings of a golden eagle and a muscular body that has become fashionable with women only recently.")

Cofer's writing is not "about" being a Latina woman in America, nor is it "about" what critics call "marginality" or "Otherness," except to the extent that we are all marginal or Other to some degree. Who could be less "Other" in U.S. society, for instance, than George Bush; but who has been more marginalized than he was in and since the last US presidential election? Judith Ortiz Cofer's work touches on human concerns that speak to none Other than all of us. She is an author worth knowing.

Source: Michael J. O'Shea, "The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry," (book review) in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 31, No. 3, Summer, 1994, p. 502.

Topics for Further Study

Read other selections from Ortiz Cofer's *The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry*. Do you find themes similar to those addressed in "The Latin Deli"?

Research the psychological effects of cultural assimilation. How are the people in the deli affected by their immigration to the United States?

Write a description of what you would miss about your culture if you moved to another country that did not have English as its dominant language.

What Do I Read Next?

Santiago, Roberto, ed., in *Boricuas: Influential Puerto Rican Writings An Anthology*, includes more than fifty selections of poetry, fiction, plays, essays, monologues, screenplays, and speeches from some of the most creative and lively Puerto Rican writers.

Ortiz Cofer's 1995 collection of short stories, *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio*, is set in a New Jersey barrio; the stories focus on Puerto Rican teenagers.

"The Latin Deli" was published in 1993 in a collection by the same name of poetry and prose by Judith Ortiz Cofer. The collection explores the lives of Latina barrio women.

Raining Backwards by Roberto G. Fernandez looks at the lives of multiple generations of a family in Cuba and Miami. Like Ortiz Cofer, Fernandez focuses on the problems of assimilation in America.

Further Study

Review, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 240, No. 45, November 8, 1993, p. 60.

This reviewer praises the collection of works in *The Latin Deli* especially in their portrayal of the "complexities of Latina identity."

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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:

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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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