

Love in the Time of Cholera Study Guide

Love in the Time of Cholera by Gabriel García Márquez

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Plot Summary

“Love in the Time of Cholera” is a 1985 Spanish-language novel written by Nobel-prize winning author Gabriel García Márquez. Edith Grossman translated the book into English in 1987. The novel explores the power that love has over lives, often comparing the symptoms of love to illness – specifically, to cholera. Gabriel García Márquez weaves a story that spans over 50 years and involves several lives in order to highlight the aspects of human nature that are universal like love, sexual desire and aging.

The novel begins with the death of a minor character, but the event quickly introduces the major characters of the book. Dr. Juvenal Urbino arrives at the home of his chess-playing friend Jeremiah Saint-Amour who has just been declared dead. Within a few days, mourners arrive at the home of Juvenal to grieve the doctor’s death after he falls from a ladder while attempting to retrieve a parrot from a mango tree. After his funeral, his wife Fermina is confronted by an elderly man named Florentino Ariza who confesses his love for her. She is angry, presumably at his timing, and kicks him out. From there, readers learn that the brief encounter after the funeral was one over 50 years in the making, and the story of Fermina and Florentino is told from the beginning.

Florentino is a messenger boy in late teens when he first sees Fermina Daza in the study of her father’s home. She is only thirteen at the time but Florentino is enamored by her beauty and demeanor. He resolves that he will be with Fermina and the two begin several years of secret correspondence. They agree to be married once Fermina is finished with school, but her father finds a trunk full of the letters and takes her out of the country for two years. Florentino finds ways to communicate through telegram messages and the two maintain their plans for marriage. When Fermina returns to her hometown, however, she realizes that she her love for Florentino has been nothing more than an illusion and she breaks off the communication.

Florentino determines that he will be with Fermina, no matter how long he has to wait. Fermina marries Juvenal Urbino and has two children but Florentino does not lose heart. He decides that in order to be the right type of man for Fermina, he must establish an impressive career and he spends years working his way through the ranks of a prominent river shipping company. In order to distract himself from the absence of Fermina in his life, Florentino has over 600 sexual relationships and never once falls in love with the women. Even as Florentino ages, he continues to cling to the hope that he will one day be with Fermina.

When Juvenal Urbino finally dies in his 80s, Florentino takes advantage of the opportunity to confess his love to Fermina again. Though she is first offended, she softens to his advances and the two begin their long delayed relationship. Since both are already in their 70s, the passion between them is virtually non-existent. Theirs is a relationship of companionship and familiarity and though it is not what Florentino had been dreaming about for over half of a century, he is satisfied to finally have Fermina for himself.



Chapter 1

Summary

The book opens with the respected physician Juvenal Urbino arriving at the home of his chess-playing friend, Jeremiah Saint-Amour, who has just been discovered dead. Juvenal is a well-known doctor who established himself as a leader in his field when he developed cutting-edge treatments for a devastating cholera outbreak. Though he is in his eighties, Juvenal is still called to the homes of wealthy patients and on high-profile cases of death, like the one involving Jeremiah Saint-Amour. Juvenal was called to the home to investigate the death of Jeremiah, along with the police inspector and a medical intern. Juvenal determines immediately that the death is a suicide and he can smell the stench of gold cyanide in the air. Though it is clearly a suicide, Juvenal is confused about the motive behind it as his friend showed no signs when he last saw him for a daily game of chess. Juvenal reads an eleven-page letter left to him in an envelope that outlines Jeremiah's final wishes, but also admits to secrets about his past. One of the secrets is that Jeremiah was a war criminal who had spent the rest of his life in hiding and the other secret is that he has had a secret relationship with a woman for decades. Juvenal is disturbed by both secrets but only because he feels betrayed that his friend did not have the courage to tell him when he was alive. Juvenal travels to the home of the woman mentioned in the letter and she admits that she helped Jeremiah plan his suicide. She says that he did not want to endure the indignities of old age and so he made the decision to take his life at the age of seventy. She says that she plans to sell Jeremiah's house and belongings and to remain living in her own place, humble as it is.

Juvenal returns home and takes a brief siesta before preparing to go to a celebration luncheon for a doctor that is his former pupil. Juvenal's wife, Fermina, has already laid out his clothing as she always does and is busy getting herself ready. Fermina is seventy-two years old and has managed to maintain her figure and health. She expends most of her energy keeping her husband of over fifty years healthy, clothed and safe from the dangers of his forgetfulness and deteriorating mental fortitude. The couple has had a happy marriage and the only fight that threatened to end their union involved an argument over soap in the bathroom. The two eventually reconciled after months of disagreement and have learned not to ever bring up the fight in each other's presence.

Juvenal and Fermina leave for the party and they are slowed by a torrential downpour. The inclement weather forces the 120 guests indoors and the windows closed, making for a hot, cramped party. The guests make do and enjoy the food, music and company. Juvenal begins to feel fatigued, so he and Fermina leave to return home where he can rest. When they return, they find the house in disarray after local firefighters had attempted to rescue Juvenal's parrot from the top of a mango tree. They were unsuccessful in retrieving the bird, and left behind dirty footprints on expensive rugs and broken items throughout the house and patio. Juvenal decides that the parrot is likely lost and sits on the patio to read. He soon hears the parrot begin talking on a nearby



tree. Juvenal tries to retrieve the bird by climbing up a ladder but he loses his balance and falls to his death.

Fermina hears the cry of a servant and rushes out to see her husband lying on the ground near the tree. He recognizes her and in his final breath says, “Only God knows how much I loved you.” Several days of mourning follow and Fermina entertains guests and tries to deal with her grief. Everything in the home reminds her of her husband and it causes her to sob uncontrollably whenever she is alone. Among the many guests at the funeral is Florentino Ariza – a man of 76 who has been in love with Fermina for most of his life. When all of the other guests have left, Florentino remains. He tells Fermina that he has been waiting for more than half of a century for his opportunity to tell her how much he loves her. Fermina is offended and kicks him out of the house. In the days that follow, Fermina finds that she is thinking more about Florentino than of her deceased husband.

Analysis

Old age is given a poignant look in the first chapter of the book. The first event that readers encounter is the suicide of Jeremiah Saint-Amour that was facilitated because he so dreaded the indignities of old age. Rather than take his chances on a few more good years, Jeremiah decides to take his own life at the age of 70. This is especially interesting, given the fact that Jeremiah has a disability and is referred to as being a “cripple” by the other characters. Many of the things that he likely dreaded about becoming old — like loss of independence, becoming a burden to others and decline in health — were issues that he had already dealt with in regards to his disability. The author’s point here is that for many, the idea of losing one’s mind to old age is a fate worse than losing physical abilities at any stage of life.

Juvenal Urbino is acutely aware of his own descent into old age but he does everything possible to outwardly deny it. He still visits patients in their homes, reads and takes pills to prolong his life and capacities. The only person that he will allow to see his old age is his wife, Fermina. He depends on Fermina to bathe him and lay out his clothing. She also serves as a symbol of clarity when he feels his mentality waning. Juvenal trusts Fermina with the truth about his old age and loss of capabilities, though he makes every effort to hide that truth from the rest of the world. Despite all of his precautions to keep his physical state healthy and as young as possible, Juvenal dies because of a momentary lapse in judgment. Though he is eighty-one, his death would have been just as likely at eighteen because it is one of misjudging a situation.

The presence of Florentino at Juvenal’s funeral is telling. The funeral is in honor of the man that has lived half a century with the woman that Florentino loves, yet he feels no resentment. He does subtle things to keep the proceedings going smoothly and lends a hand where he is needed. Florentino does all of this in order to have his one moment with Fermina in order to confess his love. Though Fermina views his profession of love to be in poor taste, Florentino is unable to hold his amorous feelings inside any longer.



Vocabulary

unrequited, propitious, cadaver, circumvent, austerity, disingenuous, fastidious, somber, indomitable, despondency, salicylates, camphor, unsavory, anachronism, quagmire, antiquarian, convalescent, illicit, succumbed, inexorable, irrevocable, repudiate, impetuous, miasmatic, meticulous, pedagogy, inoculate, turpentine, cloister, diaphanous, aqueduct



Chapter 2

Summary

The story of young love and the early relationship between Fermina and Florentino is described in the second chapter of the book. As a young man, Florentino works in a telegraph office and he first sees Fermina when he delivers a telegram to her father. She is sitting in a room of the house reading to her aunt. Florentino is so taken by thirteen-year-old Fermina that he finds a bench in the park where he can read a book and watch her walking to school each day. He begins to write her a letter, professing his love, which he is not sure how to give to her. The letter ends up being over seventy pages long and he asks his mother, Transito Ariza, what he should do about his love for Fermina. His mother is supportive of his love but warns him against giving her the entire letter, for fear that she will be scared away.

School lets out for a three-month break and Florentino is unsure how to see Fermina. He finds a secluded spot in a park across the street from her home – an expensive, large home that Fermina's father has completely renovated. From his spot Florentino can see Fermina doing her lessons with her aunt. One day when her aunt leaves the room, Florentino walks to the door and tries to give her one page from his letter. At first, Fermina refuses but he insists and she takes it quickly before her aunt returns. She promises to reply. Florentino waits several weeks and receives no reply from Fermina. He returns to the house and when Fermina's aunt leaves the room again, he demands a reply. Fermina promises to send one before the end of her school vacation. Her aunt Escolastica visits the telegraph office and secretly slips Florentino a note from Fermina that confirms that she is interested in having a relationship with Florentino.

The two begin communicating by letter correspondence. Aunt Escolastica, fearful that Fermina's father will find out she is involved and kick her out of the house, tells them that she can no longer be part of the letter delivery and that they will have to find a new way to leave each other messages. After several more months of the secret letters, Florentino sends Fermina a formal marriage proposal. She replies after some delay that she will marry him, as long as he does not make her eat eggplant. They decide to keep the engagement a secret for two years and to reveal their intentions when she completes school. They continue to write letters but do not spend any time face to face. Florentino spends all of his time away from work living in a transient hotel where he is given a permanent room because he is friends with the owner. He writes letters to Fermina as prostitutes prance around naked in adjoining rooms. Florentino appreciates their beauty but is never tempted to do anything sexual because he is saving his virginity for Fermina.

Just before Fermina is done with school, her father Lorenzo Daza finds her trunk full of letters from Florentino. He is furious that the relationship has been going on under his nose and kicks her aunt out of the house with a handful of belongings and a little bit of money. He tries to reason with Fermina about the relationship with Florentino but she



will not listen. She stops eating and locks herself in her room. Lorenzo decides to pay a visit to Florentino. He tells Florentino about how hard he has worked to give his daughter every opportunity to marry an affluent man. Lorenzo asks Florentino to “get out of our way” but Florentino respectfully asks that Lorenzo discuss the issue with Fermina instead. Seeing that neither Fermina nor Florentino will listen to reason, Lorenzo decides to take Fermina on an extended trip away from home.

For the next two years, Fermina and her father travel abroad. They visit family throughout the countryside, including the parents of Fermina’s mother who had opposed the marriage of their daughter to Lorenzo. While visiting the family, Fermina receives a package of telegrams from Florentino. Before leaving town, Lorenzo had sent out a telegram of their travel plans and Florentino is able to use the information to send messages to Fermina throughout the journey. The two agree that they will be married the first chance they get when she returns. Fermina matures during the trip and her peaceful exterior leads her father to believe that she has forgotten about Florentino and so they return home. While they are away, Florentino learns about a sunken treasure off the coast and hatches plans to try to find it with the help of a local boy who is an excellent diver. He does not find the location of the treasure but does not lose hope that he will.

With no location to deliver telegrams, Florentino is unsure of how to contact Fermina. Before he can come up with a plan, he sees Fermina walking through town on the way to the market with a servant. Florentino is astonished at how grown-up Fermina looks and the confident way that she carries herself through the streets. He follows her for several minutes, before letting her know of his presence by whispering in her ear. When she turns to look at Florentino’s face, Fermina realizes that none of her feelings for him are real. It occurs to her that the scandal of the relationship created an illusion of passion. She tells Florentino this and then asks her servant to go pick up all of the items that she had sent to him over the years, including a braid of hair that she sent before her journey. It would be another 50 years before Florentino would be alone, face-to-face, with Fermina alone.

Analysis

From the start, outside influences working against Fermina and Florentino give their relationship an added level of strength. Florentino is blinded by his intense love for Fermina and she is a strong-willed young woman who wants to make her own decisions. The combination of both personalities brings heightened passion to their forbidden love. If the two had been allowed to court each other openly and with acceptance, Fermina may have quickly become disillusioned with Florentino’s romantic overtures and moved on. Neither is able to get to know the other one properly, however, causing the letter writing and secret plans to get married to continue for several years longer than they may have in other circumstances. The conflict surrounding the relationship of Fermina and Florentino accelerates their feelings of passion.



The intensity of love that Florentino feels towards Fermina is likely due more to his personality than to the actual attributes of Fermina. Yes, he is madly in love with her but readers see that Florentino is a natural romantic in all areas of his life. His desire to find the hidden treasure that no one else has been able to track down shows his unrealistic perception of his own abilities. Florentino does not see the regular boundaries that limit other people and lives his life with no concept of giving up on dreams like Fermina and the buried treasure. Even his own mother tries to bring him back to reality, only to be thwarted by her son's outlandish plans and larger-than-life dreams.

The similarity between the story of Fermina's parents' marriage and the relationship between Florentino and Fermina is meant to be ironic. Lorenzo admits to Florentino that he had nothing when he met Fermina's mother but that he built their life with his own determination. Despite this, Lorenzo cannot see the merit in Fermina wanting to marry Florentino. He hopes that by aligning his daughter with an affluent husband, he can secure his own future. Lorenzo even goes so far as to complain to his in-laws about the audacity of Florentino wanting to marry someone as "above him" as Fermina. Lorenzo has already forgotten what it feels like to be young and in love and cannot see past his own selfish pursuits for the sake of his daughter.

Vocabulary

impetus, myopia, irremediable, spinster, adversities, complicity, impetuous, tarnished, canticles, innocuous, convalescence, taciturn, vignettes, insatiable, nymphs, lugubrious, debaucheries, martyrdom, salaciousness, haggard, imperious, precipices, galleons, brigand, augment, vetiver, aphrodisiac, unequivocal



Chapter 3

Summary

The courtship and marriage of Juvenal Urbino and Fermina Daza is explored in the third chapter of the book. Juvenal returns from several years of studying in Europe to find the conditions of his city and country in a bad state. He can see that a lot of the health problems of the citizens, including cholera, stem from poor sanitation and waste removal. He begins at once to try to change public policy but faces challenges of winning over politicians and citizens who are set in their old ways. Juvenal successfully averts a cholera epidemic with his shrewd medical techniques and this helps him gain a foothold in reforming the unhealthy habits of the country. During this time, he is called to the home of Lorenzo Daza to examine his daughter Fermina who is demonstrating possible signs of cholera. While it turns out that she only has a minor illness that Juvenal is able to cure with medicine, the appointment proves life-changing for the doctor and Fermina. He begins to pursue her through letters and meetings with her father. At first, Fermina refuses – more because she resents being manipulated into doing what others want her to do and less because she not attracted to Juvenal. Her cousin Hildebranda comes to visit and tries to convince Fermina to give the doctor a chance. Though Fermina is irritated by her cousin's opinion on the matter, she ends up taking Hildebranda's advice and agreeing to allow Juvenal to request permission to court her from her father.

Juvenal and Fermina get married in a lavish ceremony that is attended by the highest class of people in the city, politicians and three archbishops. They set out for a two-year trip around the world. A virgin bride, Fermina is terrified about what her first experience will be like and it taints her wedding day and the first few days of the honeymoon. Juvenal attends to her fears with gentleness and patience. He talks to her about the scientific attributes of his manly organs, and of hers, and soon she is comfortable enough to be the aggressor. The newlyweds enter a time of blissful lovemaking and by the time they arrive back in South America, she is six months pregnant with their first child.

Florentino hears about the fact that Fermina is getting married and it sends him into despair. His mother begs Florentino's uncle to find him a job somewhere far away, preferably with no access to newspapers or telegraph service, in order to help him forget about Fermina. Florentino accepts a position in a telegraph office that is six days journey by sea from his hometown. On the voyage, he fantasizes about Fermina's wedding and wedding night and it drives him to sickness.

When walking the ship's deck one evening, he is pulled abruptly into a cabin and loses his virginity in the dark to a woman that he never discovers. He has suspicions about who she might be but is never able to confirm it. The sexual encounter awakens a thought in Florentino – he can drown his sorrows about Fermina by having passionate relationships with other women. He decides to return home instead of accepting his new



job and puts his new theory into practice. He has a long-standing sexual relationship with a widow that ends when both determine that the other has brought out the best in them sexually and they both want to move on. Florentino decides to grow a mustache and fights back his anguish when he sees the pregnant Fermina leaving church on the arm of her husband.

Analysis

Fermina's choice in a husband is someone who is the complete opposite of Florentino. Juvenal Urbino is confident, scientific and patient with Fermina, unlike Florentino who was introverted, overly romantic and anxious about a life with Fermina. Florentino was content to wait for Fermina because he had no other choice; Juvenal waits despite the fact that he could have any other woman in the city. The difference in personality between the two men reflects their life experiences but also their core personalities.

On the honeymoon, Juvenal admits to himself that he is not really in love with Fermina but that the conditions are right for both of them to fall in love with each other just the same. This is a methodical, scientific approach to love that is likely accurate, though not exactly a romantic way to approach it. Florentino, on the other hand, had no practical reasons for loving Fermina or even a practical plan for marrying her but loved her so much that he knew it would work out somehow.

The idea that love can cause physical illness presents itself time and again in the novel, including this chapter. Thinking about the impending wedding of Fermina makes Florentino physically ill on the boat voyage, to the point that the captain thinks that Florentino may have cholera. This is the same thought that Florentino's mother had when Fermina first rejected Florentino. In both cases, Florentino is simply suffering from the symptoms of love. Those symptoms are so strong that they penetrate his physical being, in addition to his mental state.

In order to try to live with the reality of no Fermina in his life, Florentino decides to live a life of loveless sex. He is already aware of the way this works from his time living in the transient hotel and watching the prostitutes in their occupation. He is not able to see the value of the unemotional set up until he has lost his virginity and at that point, he "gets" it. Though he knows that he will never love another woman the way that he loves Fermina, he sees the potential benefits of using sex as a life-long distraction from his heartbreak. As he frees himself from the sorrow through unattached sex, he manages to pass the same power onto the women whom he sleeps with – including the Widow Nazaret.

Vocabulary

plebian, promontory, alpaca, fallacy, ossuary, anisette, brocaded, petate, tedium, gorgets, reliquary, marasmus, pernicious, profligate, scapular, haute couture, impertinent, gazelle, assimilated, reticence, maniacal



Chapter 4

Summary

Florentino decides that somehow, some way he will win back Fermina's affection – no matter how long it takes. He realizes that two things must occur for this to be possible: he must become wealthy and successful and Juvenal must die. Florentino has no plans to do harm to Juvenal, but decides that he will just have to wait until the day that Fermina is a widow. In the meantime, he goes to his uncle and asks for a job in the River Company of the Caribbean. His uncle first gives him the job of writing business letters but they are all so poetic that they lack authority. He reassigns Florentino to cleaning garbage from the dock and tells him that he must work his way up. Florentino does just that, learning all of the mundane tasks of the business as he works his way up through the ranks until he is an important executive at the company. This happens over the course of many years.

As Florentino works up the ranks of his deceased father's company, he continues to enjoy the freedom of his loveless sex life. He meets several women along the way including a widow and grandmother who lives alone in a large home near the sea named Ausencia Santander. She is already in a sexual relationship with a captain from the River Company but Florentino and she have a tryst when the captain is away on his journeys. Ausencia's home is completely robbed one afternoon when she and Florentino lie naked together in bed and she never reports it to the police for fear that the captain will discover the secret of Florentino. He also begins an affair with a married woman named Olympia Zuleta who is murdered by her husband when he discovers the affair. He also strikes up an affair with a proclaimed bachelorette named Sara Noriega who is as poetic as he is. The two maintain a five-year relationship and Florentino begins to forget about Fermina for a time until an argument about Fermina leads to its end.

Florentino also discovers a woman of the street named Leona Cassiani, who asks him to get her a job at the River Company. He obliges and she starts as a lowly secretary. Leona quickly impresses Florentino's uncle and moves up in the company until she is just one step below Florentino. She subtly makes his business decisions for him, helping him gain esteem in the company without him knowing that she has actually done the work. The two never engage in a sexual relationship and form a friendship based on respect and professionalism. Florentino's mother, Transito, begins to slip into old age and dementia and she is forced to stop doing business in her notions shop. Florentino attends to her as much as possible and she dies in a state of mental confusion.

In the years that Florentino is busy building up his career and trying to distract himself with numerous lovers, Fermina is struggling in her marriage. Though she and Juvenal have the "perfect" marriage to those who see it from the outside, she is unhappy with the constraints of the arrangement. They live with her mother-in-law and two sister-in-



laws for the early years of the marriage and Fermina does not like the idea of not being in her own house or being the queen of her own castle. She also feels like Juvenal does not understand the difficulty of her domestic duties and harbors resentment. Fermina focuses her energy on her son and is happy as a mother.

In order to save their marriage, Juvenal, Fermina and their son leave for Europe for a few years. Their relationship is rekindled and while they are away, Juvenal's mother dies. They return home and sell the Urbino mansion in favor of a new home. Fermina discovers that she became pregnant again in Paris and she gives birth to a daughter. Her father falls from grace due to his shady business dealings and Fermina revitalizes the family home after he has left the country. She thinks of Florentino on occasion, and even runs into him from time to time, but never regrets the decision that she made when she was only a youth. As she and Juvenal begin to age, she takes care of him with increasing devotion and clings to their love in order to dismiss the increasing feelings of guilt she has about Florentino as she grows older.

Analysis

Appearances are not everything in the lives of both Florentino and Fermina and this becomes evident in this chapter. Every time that Florentino sees Fermina in public, she has the appearance of being perfectly happy in her marriage and as a mother. The truth, as readers learn, is that Fermina feels trapped and resentful in her domestic life. As a youth, Fermina grew accustomed to being the “lady of the house” and now she must share that title with her mother-in-law and two sister-in-laws. She does not like the food that her mother-in-law insists upon and feels like a prisoner in her own home. Fermina takes solace in being a mother to her son but grows increasingly despondent towards her husband. The reality of the marriage is a far cry from the outward appearances that Fermina and Juvenal put on. They have to escape the outside constraints of their hometown in order to rekindle their marriage.

Florentino's life is also a series of misguided façades. Though he is clearly a romantic, Florentino falls into loveless relationships that are based on sex. Whenever he feels himself starting to fall in love with a woman, he finds a way to end the relationship so that he is not unfaithful to Fermina. Florentino gives the appearance at work that he is a mature man that has grown past the feelings of insecurity and lovesickness from his youth, but in reality, he is still just as in love with Fermina and just as determined to be with her one day when she is available. Every step that Florentino takes, including rising in his career, is just a way to get back to Fermina.

Vocabulary

ineluctable, decrepit, repertoire, miserliness, lucid, mercantile, demoralize, infamy, circumspect, falconry, ignominious, diabolical, internecine, ephemeral, ineffable, clandestine, hendecasyllabic, restorative, contiguous, imbecile, pulverized, sibylline

Chapter 5

Summary

Fermina and Juvenal take a ride in a hot air balloon to commemorate the turn of the century and the flight over areas from Fermina's youth causes her to want to go visit the places. She gets her wish in a way that she would not have wanted when she discovers that Juvenal has been having a sexual affair with a young Jamaican woman named Barbara Lynch. Fermina tells her children and friends that she is leaving simply to visit family and the places of her youth; but in reality, she and Juvenal have decided on a break. Fermina is immediately disheartened at the state of her old neighborhoods and the way that Hildebranda has aged and put on weight. She stays for several months before Juvenal arrives unexpectedly to take her home. The two put the incident behind them without any further conversation.

All of the characters in the novel continue to age, so much so that when Florentino sees Fermina trip at a movie theater, he is reminded of his own old age descending. Despite fighting baldness for years with no success, Florentino decides to embrace being bald and begins to cut any hair that grows. Florentino's uncle dies and he takes over the company. He begins to fight feelings of his own impending doom and the idea that it is possible that he will die before Juvenal or Fermina and never be able to confess his love.

A young student named America Vicuna who is distantly related to Florentino comes to live with him while she studies at the university. Though she is only fourteen, she and Florentino begin a sexual relationship. He does not try to hide the fact that he is an old man and she does not try to hide her inexperience. After making love on the day of Pentecost, Florentino hears the cathedral bells clanging in honor of someone who has died. He hurries from their love bed and has his driver take America back to her school. Florentino asks the driver who has died and the driver confirms that it was Juvenal Urbino. Florentino rushes to the Urbino household to find it already crowded with others wanting to leave condolences. He leaves the residence dejected after Fermina's sharp words and falls into a deep sickness over the next two weeks. He arrives home from work to find a letter from Fermina lying in a wet puddle outside his entryway.

Analysis

Old age seems to creep up on the characters of Fermina, Florentino and Juvenal. Even as they demonstrate signs of aging, each person does not seem to notice it until they see it demonstrated in another person. For Florentino, he first realizes that old age is setting in when he sees Fermina walking feebly out of the movie theater. It occurs to him for the first time that Fermina may die before her husband. Florentino also considers the fact that he may die before Fermina and Juvenal. The fifty years of



waiting suddenly seem an absurd idea, but one that Florentino knows he will not be able to relinquish at this late stage in his life.

The sexual relationship between Florentino and America follows Florentino's self-realization that he may die soon. His return to being attracted to a young woman reflects his still burning desire for Fermina and the love he has harbored for the woman since she was the age of America. It becomes clear that America is simply a replacement for Fermina in Florentino's increasingly senile mind. As soon as Florentino discovers that Fermina is still available, however, his thoughts quickly turn from the young beauty in his reality to the aging woman of his life-long fantasy.

Vocabulary

crepuscular, recoil, enigmatic, insidious, phantasmal, gait, monastery, discordant, imperturbable, culpability, sanctum, auscultation, Antillean, troupiac, apparition, parvenue, millenarian, amiable, vacillation, carbolic, consternation, imbued, redolent, guileless, velocipede, lacustrine



Chapter 6

Summary

Florentino reads the hate-filled letter from Fermina and lies in his bed for several hours, contemplating what it says. He is not offended by her harsh words, but instead feels inspired because he sees it as a reason to communicate with her. He thinks about what he wants to say for several weeks and learns to use a typewriter to get it ready to send. In it, he apologizes for his actions on the day of Juvenal's funeral. He continues to send her letters that do not reflect on their past but instead look back over life and give insight into love. Florentino stops having sex with America and tries to change the role to that of a caregiver instead of a lover. America is bothered by the change and tries to figure out the identity of the "other woman."

After a year of correspondence, Florentino attends the memorial service for Juvenal Urbino and Fermina is happy to see him and tells him so. He does not write to her for two weeks following the service and then arrives unannounced at her home. She invites him inside but he needs to leave immediately because of severe abdominal pains and a fear that he will lose control of his bowels in front of her. Fermina is confused but agrees to let him return the next day for a visit. The meeting goes well and she tells him that he is welcome to visit her anytime he would like. The two get into an argument when Florentino attempts to discuss their past but it is quickly resolved and he continues to visit.

Disturbed by his mother's interest in a new man, Marco Aurelio invites Florentino to lunch. He ends up thanking Florentino for the companionship that he is giving his mother. Fermina's daughter Ofelia, however, thinks that Florentino should stop visiting her mother. This leads to an argument between Ofelia and Fermina that causes Fermina to kick her daughter out of the house.

Florentino invites Fermina to go on a cruise for leisure with him and she accepts. Fermina is excited about the change to get away from her home, belongings and social ties. The relationship between Florentino and Fermina strengthens on the cruise and he is finally able to make love to her. He is unsuccessful in his first attempt because of his old age, but they make love on the second try. Florentino receives a telegram that says America has committed suicide. He tries to put the horrible news out of his mind at first, but cries for her when he is alone later.

When the ship arrives at its last port, Fermina believes that she will be the subject of scandal because she sees many people that she knows on the shore. Florentino uses his authority with the River Company to convince the captain to raise the cholera flag and not allow anyone on board. Only Florentino, Fermina, the captain and one other woman remain on board and as the book closes, the boat travels from port to port with no stopping place because no one will allow the cholera on shore. In the closing lines of



the book, the captain asks Florentino how long he thinks they can keep up the charade, and Florentino answers “Forever.”

Analysis

Florentino finally gets the close relationship that he has waited his whole life to have with Fermina, but it is different than the relationship that they would have had in their youth. For one thing, the sexual side is nearly non-existent as a result of their old age. Florentino has spent his whole life making love to over 600 women, but when it comes to the one woman who he really wants intimacy; he is unable to perform the way he would like. The relationship becomes one that is more of companionship and mutual interests and less of one that is based on passionate love. This dismays neither Florentino nor Fermina, however. They enjoy the relationship for what it is and cherish it.

Though some readers may look at the book’s ending as sad in some ways, it is clear that though it is delayed, Florentino is grateful for finally achieving happiness with Fermina. The same is true for Fermina. Despite having a happy marriage for many years, Fermina had always felt trapped by her domesticity and the fact that she had to answer to so many others. With the confidence she gains in her relationship with Florentino, Fermina is able to break away from the boundaries of her life and just be free. It is the first time she has not had to follow the desires of another person, whether it was her father, aunt, husband or children. She takes control of the final years of her life and determines that she will live as she wants to live. This is why she is so thrilled to go on the cruise and get away from all of the material and social things that bind her. The open-endedness of the final paragraphs of the book reflects the unpredictable nature of the relationship between Florentino and Fermina and how their adventure is as unlimited as the sea.

Vocabulary

miniscule, eradication, impertinence, ostentatious, miserliness, salutation, insomnia, faculties, tremulous, voracity, pertinence, confectioner, enmeshed, extricate, unencumbered, aristocracy



Characters

Florentino Ariza

Florentino Ariza is the protagonist of the story and the tale of his never-ending love for Fermina Daza over half of a century is chronicled. Florentino is a quiet man, even in his youth, who is the illegitimate child of a wealthy shipping mogul. Florentino is raised by his mother alone as his married father refuses to recognize him publicly. He sees the face of the teenage Fermina Daza when he delivers a telegram to her home and it alters the course of his life forever. He spends the next several years courting Fermina through secret letters and the two makes plans to marry. His dreams are shattered, however, when Fermina returns from a long trip with her father and discovers that she is not actually in love with Florentino. Despite the fact that Fermina rejects him and ends up marrying another man, Florentino makes it his life's goal to be with Fermina and will not entertain any other serious relationships.

During the 50 years that Florentino waits for Fermina, he tries to distract himself by having sex with many women. The author mentions that Florentino ends up sleeping with 622 women in his lifetime and he chronicles each one in a notebook. Most of the sexual affairs are one-time encounters (though Florentino refuses to ever pay for sex), but some last over the course of several years. In the case of long-term affairs, Florentino is able to capably distract himself from the despair of not having Fermina, but they always come to an end eventually. Towards the end of the book, Florentino begins a sexual relationship with a fourteen-year-old girl that reminds him of the young Fermina Daza, though he denies the similarities to himself. This relationship begins shortly after Florentino realizes that he is getting old and that he may actually die before he gets the chance to be with Fermina.

In the end, Florentino does strike up a romantic relationship with Fermina towards the end of his life. By the time the only goal of his life is achieved, however, he is too old to be passionate and has essentially wasted his life chasing after a dream that can only be lived for a short time. It is all worth it in his eyes though and he is able to die a happy man as a result.

Fermina Daza

Fermina Daza is introduced when she is a just a teenager. She lives with her overbearing father and a pious aunt who keep her from socializing. Despite this, she strikes up several years of secret correspondence with the older Florentino Ariza and plans to marry him when she completes school. She changes her mind, however, after an extended trip out of the country. A few years later, she marries a notable doctor and the two spend over 50 years married and have two children together. Fermina never stops thinking about Florentino but not because she regrets her decision. Instead, she



feels guilt about dashing Florentino's dreams and even that he is an omen of bad luck in her life.

Fermina lives under the rule of someone else for almost her entire life. She leaves the rule of her father for the strict domestic rule of her husband. For the beginning years of their marriage, Fermina also has to deal with the judgments and stubborn ways of her mother-in-law and sister-in-law. She is not truly an independent woman until her husband dies when she is well into her 70s. Her children try to control her affairs at that point, but Fermina has had enough. She defends herself and her choices, especially when it comes to her relationship with Florentino, and for the first time feels free.

Juvenal Urbino

Juvenal Urbino is a respected doctor who receives several degrees abroad before returning to the Caribbean. He follows in his father's footsteps by becoming a doctor, though Juvenal's theories and expertise are far more advanced. Juvenal earns acclaim when he comes up with several theories to eradicate cholera in the area. He is also a devout Catholic and a member of many civic organizations.

Juvenal meets Fermina when he is called to examine her for cholera. She is not infected but he becomes enthralled with the young beauty. He marries her in a big ceremony that is attended by all of the most notable members of clergy, politics and social rank. Juvenal realizes on his honeymoon that he is not in fact in love with Fermina but that the two are compatible enough that he will likely fall in love with her at some point. He is a faithful husband over the 50-year marriage, except for one short affair that he admits fully to his wife. Juvenal dies when he falls from a ladder as he is trying to get his parrot down from the top of a mango tree.

Lorenzo Daza

Lorenzo Daza is the father of Fermina and painted as a villainous character. Though he came from humble beginnings, he will not allow his daughter to be courted by Florentino – preferring instead for Fermina to find a wealthy and noble husband instead. Lorenzo is quick to anger and mysterious about the ways in which he acquires his wealth. Towards the end of his life, several shady dealings are discovered and he is sent out of the country without any wealth left to his name.

Aunt Escolastica

Escolastica is Fermina's aunt, the sister of Fermina's father. She serves as a mother figure to Fermina, who lost her mother as a toddler. Escolastica wears a nun's habit and lives a pious life. Though she comes off as being very conservative, Escolastica approves of the letter-writing relationship between Fermina and Florentino. She is afraid of her brother discovering that she is involved and sending her away, so she tells Fermina to not involve her as the messenger. When Fermina's father finds a trunk full of



letters from Florentino to Fermina, he banishes Escolastica from the home with very few belongings and only enough money to live for a month. Fermina tries to find her aunt throughout her life and discovers that Escolastica died on a sequestered island for lepers.

Transito Ariza

Transito Ariza is Florentino's mother and the owner of a notions shop. She earns a good living by working as a pawn broker to the rich and wealthy of the town. Transito charges high fees in exchange for keeping very discreet about the women who pawn valuable family jewels in order keep their family home and honor. Transito is very supportive of Florentino's love of Fermina at first, but then tries to encourage him to move on when it appears that Fermina will not marry him. Transito slips into dementia in the final years of her life and is forced to sell her shop and the many jewels that still remain.

Hildebranda Sanchez

Hildebranda is Fermina's cousin of about the same age. Fermina and Hildebranda form a close friendship when Fermina comes to stay with the family for three months. Hildebranda collects the telegrams that Florentino sends and keeps Fermina's secret. Hildebranda is not judgmental about the relationship because she too is in love with a forbidden man – one who is married, twenty years older and has children. Fermina continues to keep contact with Hildebranda throughout her life and makes stays with her an especially long time as they are nearing old age.

Lotario Thugut

Lotario Thugut is Florentino's boss at the telegraph office and though he is old enough to be Florentino's grandfather, the two form a strong friendship. Lotario enjoys drinking and frequenting prostitutes. He tries to draw Florentino into the same lifestyle, but Florentino stays away from the women because he believes in saving his virginity for love. Lotario buys a transient hotel that houses prostitutes and gives Florentino a permanent room that the boy uses for reading and writing letters to Fermina.

Jeremiah Saint-Amour

The suicide of Jeremiah Saint-Amour is described in the opening chapters of the book. He is a noted photographer and chess player who takes his own life at the age of 70 in order to avoid the indignities of old age. Jeremiah leaves behind a note for his good friend Juvenal Urbino that outlines the sins of his life, including the fact that he is a wanted war criminal and has had a secret relationship with a woman for decades. Despite his suicide and admissions, Juvenal convinces the governor to build an archive of Jeremiah's photography in order to preserve the talent for future generations.



Dr. Marco Aurelio Urbino

Marco Aurelio Urbino is the father of Juvenal and was a respected doctor and community leader during his life. He fought an intense cholera battle that infected the country when Juvenal was overseas studying and succumbed to the disease himself. Juvenal looked on his father with pride in the level of his civic duty but saw the flaws in his father's methodology when it came to fighting cholera.

The Widow Nazaret

The Widow Nazaret is the woman with whom Florentino formulates his first conscious sexual relationship. She comes to stay at the home of Florentino and his mother during a tumultuous time during the civil war and the first night she is there, she sheds her mourning clothes and aggressively pursues Florentino. The sexual tryst awakens a deep sexuality in her character and she begins to be promiscuous with several men and feel no shame for it. She and Florentino maintain their commitment-free relationship for two years before both going their own ways with their new sexual identities.

Pius V Loayza

Pius is Florentino's father who pays for Florentino's expenses as he is growing up but never tries to have a relationship, because Florentino's birth was the result of an illicit affair. Pius' wife never finds out about his illegitimate son until Pius dies at the age of 32, and he never has any other children. When Florentino begins to work at his deceased father's company, he looks at his father's writings and photos and realizes that they are a lot alike in personality and physical features.

Don Leo XII Loayza

Leo is Florentino's uncle who gives his nephew a break and allows him to work at the River Company owned by the family. Leo gives Florentino insight on his deceased father and acts as a mentor to Florentino. Though Leo is a strict businessman, he enjoys singing and is often invited to sing at funerals because of his deep, soulful voice. Unlike his brother, Leo is a devoted husband with six children.

Barbara Lynch

Barbara Lynch is a 28-year-old Jamaican woman with whom Juvenal Urbino has the only sexual affair of his marriage. She is the daughter of a Protestant minister who lives in a poverty-stricken area of the city. Juvenal first meets her when she comes into the clinic with a minor illness. He memorizes her address and begins making house calls to check on her health that soon turn into sexual rendezvous on an almost daily basis.



Leona Cassiani

Leona is a woman of African descent that Florentino meets on the mule-pulled trolley car. He can see that she is a woman of the street and when she follows him off the trolley, he tells her that he does not pay for sex. She says that she does not want that from him, but instead wants a humble position at the River Company. Florentino is so ashamed of his accusation towards her that he secures a low-level spot for her at the company. Leona works her way through the ranks by impressing Florentino's uncle with her business savvy and intelligence. She will not allow herself to be promoted above Florentino as she feels that she is forever in his debt. She never engages in a sexual relationship with Florentino and the two maintain a close friendship based on professionalism.

America Vicuna

America is a fourteen-year-old girl, a distant relative of Florentino who is sent to live with him when she studies abroad. They have a sexual relationship and she kills herself after he rejects her and she fails her exams.

Olympia Zuleta

Olympia is a married woman whom Florentino meets on the street during a stormy afternoon. He offers her a ride home and pursues her following that meeting. She thwarts his attempts on several occasions, saying that she is "not that kind of woman," but when Florentino shows up at her home one afternoon when he knows that her husband is out to sea, the two begin an affair. They meet in deserted buildings at the River Company and one afternoon, Florentino draws an obscene phrase on her abdomen. Forgetting about the drawing, Olympia undresses in front of her husband and he kills her by slitting her throat.

Ausencia Santander

Ausencia is a single woman with grown children and a few grandchildren who is in a sexual relationship with a captain who works with Florentino. The captain invites Florentino over to see the beautiful home by the sea and Florentino falls in love with the home. This leads to a sexual relationship with Ausencia on the days when the captain is at sea. One afternoon, Ausencia and Florentino lie in bed for hours after making love and emerge from the room to find the entire house stripped of its beautiful furniture and belongings. Florentino stops seeing Ausencia and the captain never understands why Ausencia never reports the robbery to the police.



Sara Noriega

Sara is a poet who Florentino meets at the annual poetry competition that he always enters. The two bond when neither of their poems win and begin a sexual relationship that lasts for five years. Sara is a bachelorette who has no desire to be married and Florentino finds that he is actually distracted from his feelings for Fermina during the years with Sara. When a poem that the couple writes together does not win the poetry prize, Sara becomes convinced that Fermina did something to make it so she did not win. Sara knows nothing about Florentino's love for Fermina, but says that she just has a womanly instinct about Fermina wanting to hurt her. Florentino is so appalled by the way that Sara speaks about Fermina that he ends the relationship.

Euclides

Euclides is a boy of twelve who agrees to help Florentino find the buried treasure from a shipwreck. At first Euclides does not know what Florentino is looking for and simply dives down wherever Florentino suggests. Eventually Euclides convinces Florentino to tell him what they are looking for and he starts to emerge from the water with pieces of jewelry and other small trinkets. He tells Florentino a story about seeing the sunken San Jose at the bottom of the ocean, full of treasure. Florentino tells his mother about the developments and she tells him that the jewelry is not real and that Euclides is taking advantage of Florentino. Euclides stops coming to help Florentino after he is confronted about the scam.

Marco Aurelio Urbino Daza

Marco Aurelio is the only son of Juvenal and Fermina. Like his father and grandfather, he becomes a doctor. When his mother begins a relationship with Florentino at the end of the book, he is protective and skeptical at first. Once he sees his mother's happiness, however, he relents and thanks Florentino for providing her companionship.

Ofelia Urbino Daza

Ofelia is the daughter of Juvenal and Fermina. She is married with three daughters and lives in New Orleans. She falls from favor with her mother when she forbids Florentino from having a relationship with her.



Objects/Places

Unnamed Colombian City

The main location of the book is in a port city near the Caribbean Sea and Magdalena River that has been assumed by many readers to be the city of Cartagena in Colombia. The city undergoes a transformation in the fifty years of the story due to advancements in technology and sanitation and several civil wars.

Home of Fermina and Juvenal

Juvenal and Fermina live most of their married life in the Urbino family home. Some of this time is spent living with Juvenal's mother and two sisters. Fermina never feels quite at home in the house as she never feels like it actually belongs to her.

Hotel

Florentino spends much of his young adult life in a transient hotel owned by a friend. He uses his permanent room there to read and write letters to Fermina, ignoring the sexual presence of the many prostitutes who live and work there.

Arcade of the Scribes

The Arcade of the Scribes is a market area in town that has several vendors who sell questionable wares. As a girl, Fermina is afraid to go there but after she has returned a woman from her travels abroad, she navigates the bizarre with confidence and enjoyment. It is in the Arcade of the Scribes that Fermina realizes her love for Florentino is nothing but an illusion.

Flores de Maria

Flores de Maria is the area when Fermina is originally from. Her deceased mother's family still owns a ranch there and Fermina visits it with her father as a youth, and then returns as a middle-aged woman when she learns about her husband's affair. The area contrasts with the metropolitan conveniences of Fermina's new home and she views it as dirty and backward in many ways.

Parrot

Juvenal and Fermina have a pet parrot that Juvenal trains to speak in many languages. The parrot also has a dirty vocabulary that it learned from its time on a cargo ship. The



parrot escapes its cage and goes to the top of a mango tree. The fire department tries to catch the bird with no success and Juvenal falls to his death when he climbs a ladder in an attempt to catch the bird.

The San Jose

Florentino becomes obsessed with finding the sunken San Jose and the rest of its fleet, which he believes is just off the coast of his homeland. According to records, the ship was carrying a record amount of treasure before it was shot down by a fleet of British ships several centuries earlier. Though no one else has been able to locate the ship or treasure, Florentino is determined that he will be the one to find it.

Lighthouse

Florentino becomes enchanted with the local lighthouse and becomes friends with its keeper. He learns about the skills it takes to run a lighthouse and dreams of one day being able to buy it and have it for his own. He also uses the lighthouse as a location to take lovers.

Letters

Letters play a key role in the storyline of the novel. For over three years, Fermina and Florentino communicate by writing secret letters to each other where they confess their love, though they are never able to meet in person. Juvenal begins to send letters to Fermina to persuade her to allow their courtship, and she finally gives her consent by sending him a letter in return.

Cholera

The disease of cholera serves practical and symbolic purposes in the novel. Dr. Juvenal Urbino earns a reputation as an intelligent man of science because of his theories on eradicating cholera and he also meets Fermina when she is suspected of having the disease. Florentino is twice suspected of having cholera when he has a strong physical reaction to his heartbreak over Fermina.

Florentino's Mustache

When Florentino finds his new passion for loveless sex, he decides to grow a mustache. He views the mustache as a new symbol of his identity and keeps it for the rest of his life.



Themes

Love as a Disease

The concept that the symptoms of love are often similar to the symptoms of physical diseases is explored throughout the novel "Love in the Time of Cholera". As Florentino falls more deeply in love with Fermina, he begins to feel and act ill. After Florentino speaks to Fermina for the first time, his appetite disappears, he cannot sleep and he loses his voice. As he awaits her response letter, he becomes disoriented and deals with violent bouts of diarrhea and vomiting. His mother calls the doctor, fearing that he has cholera but the doctor says that the only medicine Florentino needs is something to calm his nerves.

This idea is repeated throughout the book, even in old age. During the weeks following Fermina's rejection of Florentino in her home after Juvenal's funeral, Florentino is a mess. He cannot sleep or eat and is even more struck by his feelings of illness because he is an old man. When Fermina invites Florentino into her home as an old woman, he is struck by a strong feeling in his bowels and feels that he will have an accident in her home. Of course, the author uses this example to poke some fun at the loss of bowel control in old age. But the premise of love affecting the way that people feel physically is highlighted again.

Florentino is not the only one who deals with ailments as it relates to love. Fermina is described as feeling physically ill when she suspects her husband of an affair. She also experiences loss of appetite and some insomnia when her father forces her to travel away from Florentino. America Vicuna shows physical and mental weakness when Florentino abandons her as his lover and in the end, she kills herself as a result. The physical toll that love can take on a life, even to the point of death, is a point that the author chooses to highlight throughout several portions of the novel.

Old Age

The journey into old age and how different individuals handle the changes is a subject examined at length in the novel "Love in the Time of Cholera". Florentino is the most prominent example of the exploration of aging. Since his entire life revolves around the memories that he formed in his early 20s, he is unaware of the fact that his body is aging. The author says that Florentino goes to the doctor at the age of 40 and reports several ailments. The doctor can find nothing wrong with Florentino and tells him simply "it is age." This statement takes Florentino completely by surprise. Even the problem of his balding does not alert Florentino to the fact that he is indeed getting old because it is a problem that he has battled his entire life, even when he was a very young man. The author mentions that Florentino is known for dressing like an old man and behaving as one, which could contribute to the fact that he does not seem to realize when he actually becomes old.



Florentino bases a lot of his perception about his own age on other people, most specifically Fermina. It never occurs to him that he may not outlive Fermina and Juvenal until he sees how elderly and frail Fermina looks at the movie theater. Once he sees the way that she stumbles and must be led out of the darkness by her husband, he despairs that she may be closer to death than her husband. This makes him think more closely about his own longevity and ultimately leads him to start a sexual relationship with a fourteen-year-old girl that reminds him of the young Fermina. Old age is also examined with Transito Ariza and her descent into debilitating dementia. The author writes poignantly about how aging is a fact of life and how the realization of it in us can lead to drastic behavior and decisions.

Sex Without Love

The concept that sex is not related to love is explored at length in “Love in the Time of Cholera”. Florentino falls in love with Fermina when he is still a virgin. For many years, he keeps that virginity sacred because he wants to save the sexual side of his being for the woman that he loves. His virginity is stolen from him, however, by a woman whom he never identifies and once it is lost, he realizes that sex is merely an act and has no bearing on actual love. Instead of trying to regain purity for the sake of Fermina, Florentino becomes a slave to casual sex.

The author mentions that Florentino has sexual relationships with 622 women in his lifetime and that he writes about the adventures in a notebook. When he finally reaches a moment of intimacy with Fermina, Florentino is so old that he is unable to perform. He is able to facilitate the act on the second encounter but it is a fast and sad process. This does not mar Florentino’s ideal image of Fermina, or she of him. The author includes this bit of insight to show readers that Florentino’s sexuality has no bearing on the love between the two. Though the passion of sexual relationships is no longer available to Florentino and Fermina in their old age, they love each other just as intimately.



Style

Point of View

The book is written by a third-person narrator who chronicles the storylines of three main characters – Juvenal, Fermina and Florentino. Occasionally the author slips into a first-person tone, specifically when talking about the country of Colombia. This usually presents itself by use of the word “our” and is generally in isolation. For the most part, the story is told by an omniscient narrator who is able to convey the events, thoughts and feelings of all of the characters in the novel.

Though three main characters are examined, the mentality of Florentino is explored in the greatest detail. This gives readers a central character of focus in the storyline and someone to relate all of the events to. Florentino is both sympathetic and appalling at different points in the book which lends a sense of reality to his character. By placing the focus on Florentino’s thoughts and feelings, the author is able to highlight both the pathetic and triumphant nature of love and life.

Setting

The book is set in an unnamed port city in Colombia and covers fifty years that begin in the late 1800s. Many readers have come to believe that the city is intended to be Cartagena, especially since the author spent so much time there as a young man. The fact that the main city in the book is a port city affects many sections of the storyline. The characters are able to travel with relative ease because of the many boats nearby and Florentino rises to executive status in a company that specializes in river transportation.

A few settings are outside the port city, including Flores de Maria, an inland farming community where Fermina was born. Many of the scenes are also set on boats which are navigated on the Magdalena River. Specific settings within the city include Florentino’s home, Lorenzo Daza’s home, Fermina and Juvenal’s marital home, a transient hotel, a park where Florentino sits and waits to watch Fermina walk by and the Catholic cathedral.

Language and Meaning

The novel was originally written in Spanish and was translated to English in 1988. A few Spanish words remain in the English translation but most are generally easily recognizable phrases. The author writes in a poetic way but uses fairly simple language to do it. He takes the universal concepts of young love, forbidden love, the constraints of marriage, and the inevitability of old age and death and gives readers a sense of the beauty that underlies them all.



There is very little dialogue in the book. The author instead describes the interactions of the characters. This is a fitting way to write since the two main characters – Florentino and Fermina – say very little to each other in the course of their whole lives. They communicate through letter writing and other nonverbal means, and go years without any form of communication at all. Conversation is not something that plays a large part in the characters interactions, and so the author does not make it a large part of the book.

Structure

The book is structured into six unnamed chapters, all between 50 – 60 pages in length. Within each chapter, several storylines are explored. The novel is not written in chronological order, but begins instead at the end of Juvenal Urbino's life. It takes some time to get back to the beginning to fully understand the relationship of Fermina and Florentino and at that point, the novel does have more of a time-linear structure returning to the end of Juvenal's life and beyond.

The main plot of the book is the lifelong love that Florentino has for Fermina. From the time that he first sees her as a teenager in her father's home to the ending pages when they are together on a cruise at the end of their lives, the events of the book all lend themselves to the story of Florentino's undying devotion to Fermina. Subplots include the marriage and struggles of Juvenal and Fermina, the sexual exploits of Florentino, the relationship between Florentino and his uncle, Juvenal's application of advanced theories to cure cholera and Florentino's rise to executive status in the company that was created by his deceased father.



Quotes

Each man is master of his own death, and all that we can do when the time comes is to help him die without fear of pain. (chapter 1)

No one ever thought that a marriage rooted in such foundations could have any reason not to be happy. (chapter 1)

They had just celebrated their golden wedding anniversary, and they were not capable of living for even an instant without the other, or without thinking about the other, and that capacity diminished as their age increased. (chapter 1)

All that was needed was shrewd questioning, first of the patient and then of his mother, to conclude once again that the symptoms of love were the same as those of cholera. (chapter 2)

She felt the heavy weight of the time they had lost while she was away, she felt how hard it was to be alive and how much love she was going to need to love her man as God demanded. (chapter 2)

He was still too young to know that the heart's memory eliminates the bad and magnifies the good, and that thanks to this artifice we manage to endure the burden of the past. (chapter 3)

This was his world, he said to himself, the sad, oppressive world that God had provided for him, and he was responsible to it. (chapter 3)

Until then Dr. Juvenal Urbino and his family had conceived of death as a misfortune that befell others, other people's fathers and mothers, other people's brothers and sisters and husbands and wives, but not theirs. (chapter 3)

He was aware that he did not love her. He had married her because he liked her haughtiness, her seriousness, her strength and also because of some vanity on his part, but as she kissed him for the first time he was sure there would be no obstacle to their inventing true love. (chapter 3)

Nevertheless, Florentino Ariza discovered the resemblance many years later, as he was combing his hair in front of the mirror, and only then did he understand that a man knows when he is growing old because he begins to look like his father. (chapter 4)

With no tears, she wiped away the memory of Florentino Ariza, she erased him completely, and in the space that he had occupied in her memory she allowed a field of poppies to bloom. (chapter 4)

It was the time when they loved each other best, without hurry or excess, when both were most conscious of and grateful for their incredible victories over adversity. Life



would still present them with other mortal trials, of course, but that no longer mattered: they were on the other shore. (chapter 4)

Taken together, they marked the passage of his life, for he experienced the cruelty of time not so much in his own flesh as in the imperceptible changes he discerned in Fermina Daza each time he saw her. (chapter 5)

He thought that all the moments in the day, which had once been his allies and sworn accomplices, were beginning to conspire against him. (chapter 5)

It had to teach her to think of love as a state of grace: not the means to anything but the alpha and omega, an end in itself. (chapter 6)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Who is Florentino Ariza? Describe his physical appearance. Explain why he is considered a “romantic.” Why do you believe that Florentino is so taken with Fermina? Is he really in love with her or mentally ill? Why does Florentino insist on maintaining his virginity, even after Fermina rejects him? After Florentino has lost his virginity, what changes in his life? Why does Florentino have trouble accepting that he is aging?

Topic 2

Who is Fermina Daza? What are some adjectives that the author uses to describe her? Describe her physical appearance. Why do you believe Fermina has such a change of heart about Florentino when she returns from her travels abroad? Do you believe that Fermina ever stops loving Florentino? Why does she allow Florentino into her life after her husband dies? In what ways is Fermina a prisoner in her own life?

Topic 3

Who is Juvenal Urbino? Why does Juvenal become such a famous doctor? How does Juvenal feel about Paris? Describe the way that Juvenal acts towards Fermina on the first few nights of their marriage. Why is Juvenal not alarmed at the fact that he is not immediately in love with Fermina? Why do you believe that Juvenal has an affair with Barbara Lynch? How does Juvenal die? Why is it such an ironic way for him to die?

Topic 4

Explain the role that parents play in the book. Describe the personality of Lorenzo Daza. Do you believe that he is a good father to Fermina? Why or why not? Explain the relationship between Florentino and his mother, Transito. What was Florentino’s relationship with his father? What role does Florentino’s uncle play in his life? What is the relationship between Juvenal’s mother and Fermina? Why do you believe the marriage of Juvenal and Fermina improves after his mother dies?

Topic 5

What is cholera? In what ways does the author use the dreaded disease to explain love? Why does Florentino’s mother believe that he has contracted cholera? How does cholera play a role in the meeting of Fermina and Juvenal? What changes does Juvenal make to decrease the chances of deadly cholera outbreak in his home region? How



does cholera protect Florentino and Fermina in the final pages of the book? What is the significance of using cholera in the book, as opposed to a different disease?