Telling Tales Study Guide

Telling Tales by Migdalia Cruz

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Introduction

Migdalia Cruz's one-act play, *Telling Tales*, is actually a grouping of eleven individual monologues. It was first produced in 1990, and its playscript is available in a volume of the same name, edited by Eric Lane. Like many of Cruz's other plays, *Telling Tales* focuses primarily on the experiences of Puerto Ricans in the United States. Cruz told the Non-Traditional Casting Project, "People of color are different and I think our differences are important." Cruz also tends to explore Latino heritage through women and their unique point-of-view as they come to terms with their racial identity, cultural background, religious beliefs, and sexuality. The narrators of *Telling Tales*□perhaps one narrator drawn from Cruz□share painful memories, such as the narrator whose close friend was raped and murdered when they were only eight years old. They also share gratifying memories, such as the narrator of "Yellow Eyes," who enjoys a close relationship with her aged great-grandfather. Cruz gives them free rein to vividly express their feelings of anger, remorse, and confusion. They must face prejudices from the white-dominated world outside the insular South Bronx of Cruz's childhood. When viewed together, these eleven monologues show the development of a young Puerto Rican girl into a strong, independent Latina storyteller.

Author Biography

Cruz was born on November 8, 1958, in the Bronx, New York. She began writing plays when she was only a child, which she produced in the puppet theater that her father built for her. She graduated from high school at the age of sixteen and attended nearby Queens College from 1975 to 1976, initially as a math major. She received her bachelor's degree in fine arts from Lake Erie College in 1980 and her master's degree in fine arts in playwriting from Columbia University in 1984.

From 1985 to 1988, Cruz was a playwright in residence at Latino Chicago Theater Company. She also worked with Maria Irene Fornes's Playwright's Laboratory, a professional workshop in New York specifically for Latino writers. Many of her works developed out of Fornes's workshops.

Cruz was helped early in her career through the Fund for New American Plays Awards, which provided funding to Cruz and the theater that produced her work. Since then, she has been awarded twice with the National Endowment for the Arts playwriting fellowship, and she has won numerous other fellowships. In 1999, Cruz was named the first Sackler Artist in the School of Fine Arts at the University of Connecticut and was commissioned to write a play dealing with the effects of war on children.

In 1995, Cruz, accompanied by several other actors and writers, traveled around the world, interviewing children who had survived in war-torn countries, such as Cambodia, Tibet, and Bosnia, with the intention of writing a play about children who lived through war.

Throughout her career, Cruz also has worked in different dramatic formats. She has adapted works written by other authors, such as her *Another Part of the House*, which was inspired by *The House of Bernarda Alba* by Federico García Lorca; written the lyrics and monologues for several operas, including *Frida: The Story of Frida Kahlo* and *Street Sense*; created *Rushing Waters*, a musical fantasy about racism in Southern California's San Fernando Valley; written a bicultural re-interpretation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; and participated in writing a short play for *Pieces of the Quilt*, a collection of writings to be used to benefit AIDS organizations.

Plot Summary

Sand

The opening monologue of *Telling Tales*, "Sand" focuses on an eight-year-old girl whose friend has been raped and murdered. The narrator tells about the day that the neighborhood men caught the rapist, which causes her to recollect the violence he inflicted upon her friend. The neighborhood men throw the rapist in the playground sandbox and beat him. Long after the rapist has been turned in to the police, the neighborhood children avoid the sandbox.

Jesus

"Jesus" is about a young girl whose older sister, Tati, suffers from severe lead poisoning. While Tati is in and out of the hospital, her illness becomes the focus of the family and demands most of the attention of the narrator's parents. The narrator's mother tells her to pray to Jesus and gives her a picture of a Jesus with a bleeding heart. When the narrator makes a pincushion for her mother, it is shaped like a heart, and she keeps wondering if it will bleed. Eventually, Tati comes home for good, but she suffers from mental deterioration.

Yellow Eyes

"Yellow Eyes" is a recollection of the narrator's great-grandparents. The narrator enjoys a good relationship with her great-grandfather, but her great-grandmother she describes as delusional. The narrative juxtaposes the great-grandfather's love for his wife with her disdain or condescension toward him and the rest of the family.

Papo Chibrico

"Papo Chibrico" tells the story of Papo, a dwarf who lived in the narrator's neighborhood. He was her first crush, and he befriended her. For many years, she did not realize he was different from the other boys. At the age of nineteen he becomes a midget wrestler, but despite his success, the neighborhood boys make fun of him. As he becomes tougher, carrying a knife and even using it on someone, the narrator is not allowed to spend time with him. Papo eventually earns enough money to buy a special bicycle, which he rides around the neighborhood, showing off. One day, a car runs him over, killing him.

Parcheesi

"Parcheesi" tells the story of the narrator's friendship with a girl named Sharon, who gives her a Parcheesi game as a birthday present, which the eleven-year-old narrator recognizes as an extremely thoughtful gesture. In sixth grade, the girls are split up in school because Sharon does not belong in the smarter class. Despite this separation, Sharon defends her friend from a girl gang, whose members retaliate by jumping her and stabbing her. Years later, Sharon and the narrator bump into each other on the bus. The narrator has become a storyteller, and Sharon has become a police officer.

Fire

"Fire" centers on a fire that takes place in the narrator's apartment building. Her mother goes back into the smoky building to make sure her statues of Jesus are safe, leaving the narrator alone with her younger sister and her older, mentally disabled sister. The other people in the street tell the narrator that her mother has been killed in the fire, and she believes them. Suddenly, a woman appears, like an angel. She takes the sisters home and feeds them hot chocolate. Eventually, the narrator's father comes to take his daughters home. Their apartment is intact, as are the Jesus statues, but the windows are shattered. Shortly thereafter, the family moves to a new apartment. The narrator wants to say goodbye to the woman who gave them the chocolate, but her parents will not let her. The narrator comes to realize that the woman is a prostitute. Three years later, she hears that the woman has been gang raped and has attempted to commit suicide.

Loose Lips

"Loose Lips" is an invective against a woman whom the narrator describes as "[B]rutal, cunning, selfish, self-serving, inhuman, alien."

Sky

The narrator of "Sky" is a Native American woman, who recalls the time she and her sister, Vee, took mushrooms for the first time. Vee became convinced that a conch shell the narrator had was her right ear. Claiming she could not hear, she asked the narrator to speak into the shell. Vee wanted her ear back, but the narrator decided to eat the shell and take back her voice. The sisters scuffled, and Vee fell out of the second-story window. She fell in the bed of their father's pickup truck and died. Now that her dead sister lingers up in the sky, deaf to the words of the living, the narrator assumes her own voice lingers there, too.

Coconuts

In "Coconuts," a woman speaks in a stream-of-consciousness monologue directly to an audience. This monologue focuses primarily on the narrator's sexuality.

Rats

The South Bronx—bred narrator of "Rats" lives in suburban Connecticut, where she finds she is a novelty. She and her male partner have rats in the house, which upsets her greatly. The man says not to worry about the rats, but she has bad memories of such vermin from childhood. She recalls a story her father told her about a man whose eye was bitten off by a rat. She wonders if it is time to let go of these fears from the past.

She Was Something . . .

"She Was Something . . .," written in a poetic form, tells about a young woman from the South Bronx who has survived her childhood and developed into a strong, creative human being.

Characters

Papo Chibrico

The midget Papo Chibrico is fifteen years old when the narrator develops a crush on him. He befriends the narrator, helping her when she is ill and encouraging her to stand up for herself against bullies. When he is nineteen, he becomes a wrestler. Despite his small size, he is proud, but the neighborhood boys, with their superior height, are able to tease and torture him. He is forced to accept the narrator's help, which bothers him greatly. He becomes hardened because of this treatment. He begins to carry a knife and even stabs someone. He buys a special bicycle, which he shows off around the neighborhood. While he is riding his bike one day, a car runs him over and kills him.

Sharon Gray

Sharon Gray is a childhood friend of the narrator in "Parcheesi." Though lacking education□the narrator taught her to read in the fifth grade□she is kind and thoughtful. She purchases a present for the narrator's birthday. In the sixth grade, she is stabbed by some tough girls at school in retaliation for defending the narrator. She grows up to become a police officer.

Great-Grandfather

The great-grandfather in "Yellow Eyes" lived until the age of 106. He and his great-granddaughter share a strong, affectionate bond. In his final years, he tells her stories about falling in love with her great-grandmother.

Great-Grandmother

The great-grandmother of "Yellow Eyes" lived until the age of 99, and by the end of her life, she was "nuts." She thinks that she lives in a fine house and that her husband is the valet. She thinks that the narrator's mother is the laundress. She treats her family with great condescension, believing they are poor and deprived. She makes them eat pieces of soap that she cuts up and pretends are chocolate. She claims that only weak people eat candy, which takes away their senses and makes them fall in love with the wrong people, thus implying that she made a mistake in marrying her husband.

Narrator of "Coconuts"

The narrator of "Coconuts" is concerned with her sexuality.

Narrator of "Fire"

The narrator of "Fire" is a sensitive fourteen-year-old. She is different from her family, which is seen when they do not understand why she continues to cry even after finding out that her mother did not die in the apartment house fire. The narrator appreciates the angel woman who, by contrast, treats her concerns seriously. Her parents do not let her say goodbye to the woman, and she realizes it is because the woman is a prostitute.

Narrator of "Jesus"

The narrator of "Jesus" is a child about seven years old, who reflects back on the illness of an older sister, Tati. This illness keeps the sister in the hospital for the better part of five years, taking up most of the parents' time. The narrator prays for Tati to get well and misses her until she comes home from the hospital.

Narrator of "Loose Lips"

The narrator of "Loose Lips" rants against the woman she describes as "brutal" and "cunning," a "fiend" and a "false friend." She has violent fantasies which center on this woman.

Narrator of "Papo Chibrico"

The narrator of "Papo Chibrico," a girl, is seven years old when she gets a crush on her older neighbor, Papo. Papo treats her with sensitivity and kindness, unlike the other boys. Not until she is eleven, when Papo becomes a wrestler, does she realize that he is a dwarf. While the other children in the neighborhood make fun of him, she continues to be his friend and tries to help him. After Papo stabs someone, she is not allowed to see him anymore, but she misses him and still watches him from her fire escape.

Narrator of "Parcheesi"

The narrator of "Parcheesi" is a woman who has grown up to be a writer. She recalls her friendship with a girl named Sharon who is generous but not bright. The narrator and Sharon played together and ran a lemonade business together. Sharon even was attacked and stabbed as a result of defending her friend. The narrator and Sharon lose touch, but the narrator never stops thinking about her friend. She is extremely happy when she bumps into Sharon on the bus one day.

Narrator of "Rats"

The narrator of "Rats" is a woman from the South Bronx who now lives in suburban Connecticut. Her new environment, and the white people in her community, are very

different from the environment and the people where she grew up. In Connecticut, her accent and the fact that she comes from the South Bronx make her a novelty. She cannot forget her past□as typified by the rats in her new home, which remind her of the mice and rats in the Bronx□and feels that she is haunted by her past and her ancestry. She wonders if it is time to let go of these ghosts.

Narrator of "Sand"

The narrator of "Sand" is an eight-year-old girl whose friend has been raped and murdered. Her monologue focuses on the day the rapist is caught. She feels that in his capture some sort of justice will be served, but she wishes she could inflict the pain on him that he inflicted upon her friend.

Narrator of "She Was Something . . ."

The narrator of "She Was Something . . ." is a young woman from the South Bronx. Using symbolic and poetic language, she reflects about the difficulty of her childhood, how she survived it, and how she maintains ties to her culture despite entering the world outside the Latino South Bronx.

Narrator of "Sky"

The narrator of "Sky" is Native American. She is lying on the beach, remembering the time she and her sister, Vee, took mushrooms. As a result of a drug-induced argument, Vee fell out the window and died. The narrator's life changes as a result, since she believes that her voice has gone with her sister.

Narrator of "Yellow Eyes"

The narrator of "Yellow Eyes" recollects her great-grandfather and great-grandmother. She is fixated on her great-grandfather's yellow eyes, which she stares at while he tells her stories about falling in love with his wife. Her love for her great-grandfather is apparent in her description of him and the relationship they shared. The narrator describes her great grandmother as delusional.

Themes

Racial Identity

As Cruz has stated in interviews, she sees herself primarily as telling the stories of Puerto Rican women. Almost all the narrators of *Telling Tales*, and most of the people who populate their worlds, are Latino. The families in these monologues□with the exception of the family in "Sky"□are of Puerto Rican descent. Their stories are part of the history and poverty of the South Bronx: Tati who suffers from lead poisoning, as is more likely among lower-income children; the immigrants who catch rats with their bare hands for $20; the midget wrestlers. Cruz's stories are the history of the violence of the South Bronx: the man who rapes and kills a child, ripping her "open with his teeth"; the sixth-grade girls who stabs a classmate to pay her back for preventing them from stealing a friend's bus pass; the prostitute who is gang raped by a local gang. However, Cruz's characters also celebrate their non-Caucasian heritage. They are interested in other minority groups in America. "Sky" features Native American characters, the narrator of "Parcheesi" is best friends with an African American girl, and the narrator of "Loose Lips" respects Asian cultures for their honoring of ancestors. The most obvious racial statement comes in "Rats" when the narrator subtly underscores the ridiculous behavior of WASP-y women who exalt her merely because she is from the Bronx.

Religion

Cruz has told Leonora Inez Brown that her characters are on a journey to find home: the "place where the divine meets the mundane□a place where a human can speak to God." Indeed, religion plays a prominent role in most of her monologues. Cruz's mothers place their faith in God and Jesus Christ. The mother in "Jesus" gives her two-year-old daughter a picture of Jesus and tells her to pray to him, for "Tati would get better if only I did this." In "Fire," the mother returns to the apartment building to save her almost human-sized statue of Jesus. While one character correctly observes that the firemen would not let her back into the building if it was not safe, her daughters do not realize this; the narrator is readily convinced by the neighbors that her mother is dead. In this instance, the mother places her need for the symbol of her religious faith above the feelings of her children. In "Rats," the narrator hints at why religion is so important to the mother. Instead of getting angry or bitter about the ghettoization of Latinos and the harshness of the South Bronx, she turns to religious ritual□lighting candles in the church□as a means of coping. As Cruz told Brown, "[M]y characters use religion to figure stuff out."

Such religious fervor is felt to a lesser degree by the narrator/narrators. In "Sand," the narrator says upon seeing the capture of the man who raped and murdered her friend, "That's when I thought there must be a God, because there was justice." In "Fire," the narrator likens the woman who rescues her and her sisters to an angel. The woman/angel seems to appear out of nowhere like someone bringing salvation. In

"Rats," the narrator also reveals that she almost became a nun, but her love of reading and writing were not in keeping with the demands of the Church.

Childhood and the Past

Many of the monologues in *Telling Tales* explore events and relationships from the narrators' past. The narrators recall the rape and murder of a childhood friend, an ill sibling, an important friendship with an African American girl, an apartment fire that led to the family's move, among other incidents. The narrators spin out their stories from the distance of adulthood. They all live up to the ambition of the narrator of "Parcheesi": "to have a past" and to "tell about it."

The narrators also refer to a shared ancestral past. Sometimes this past is specific to their experiences within the family unit. In "Yellow Eyes," the narrator recalls her great-grandparents, particularly the affection she and her great-grandfather shared, and in "Jesus," the narrator relates her sister's bout with lead poisoning. In other instances, however, this past is the collective familial past. The narrator of "Rats" has transcended the more dire circumstances of her childhood and now lives in suburban, upscale New Canaan, Connecticut, yet she still carries the past with her. She wonders "if what they say is true□that you have the memories of all your ancestors inside your head." Because of her ties to her childhood as well as to the ancestral heritage of her Puerto Rican family, she finds it difficult to simply live in the present and accept the positive changes it has brought. At the end of the monologue, she announces that maybe it is time to let go of these childhood fears and hardships.

Style

Monologue

Telling Tales is a series of eleven monologues. A monologue is a speech given by one person in a drama. The narrators in monologues may speak as if they are simply telling a story aloud or they may address the audience directly; Cruz employs both strategies in the play. The monologues that are narrative generally employ the first method, while the monologues that are more stream-of-consciousness employ the second method. Three of the monologues□"Loose Lips," "Sky," and "Coconuts"□include stage directions as do traditional pieces of drama. "She Was Something . . ." is unique in its format, for it is transcribed on paper in the form of a poem. Also like a poem, this monologue contains vivid imagery and symbolism.

Imagery

Cruz refers to Latinos and other minorities in America as "people of color," and perhaps the most prevalent form of imagery that she uses throughout *Telling Tales* is color. Papo is the only person on the block with green eyes. A church smells purple. A rapist's teeth are golden but marred by blood and vomit. In his picture, Jesus has a "bluish-red heart."

Cruz's characters recollect people through color. The narrator of "Yellow Eyes" describes her great-grandfather, whom she loved: his brownish-green sweater, his brown pants, his undershirt stained with cherry red spots, his yellow eyes. Even his mucus "smells yellow." By contrast, she describes her great-grandmother, who condescended to the entire family, through her delusional actions. Her characters also recollect moments from their past through color. The narrator of "Parcheesi" remembers the shades of the childhood she shared with Sharon, whose last name is a color itself: *Gray*. Their school was filled with mint green and brown, the teacher who called Sharon stupid had white teeth, and Sharon had skin as black as "polished wood."

In other instances, the associations with color are less concrete. The narrator of "Loose Lips" ties color with ideas rather than with clearly explicated memories. For her, silver is a "mystical" color, a shade for people who care about their past and their ancestors, a shade for people of color, not people who are Caucasian. "I want to have a silver life," she says, but America is not a silver country. America has "silver nail polish and silver eyeshadow, but no silver foundation." Silver represents people of color□Puerto Ricans like Cruz and her narrators, or Asians, or African Americans like Sharon, or Native Americans like the sisters in "Sky." Their unique cultures accent white America but are not yet accepted or desired as a core part of its essence.

Symbolism

One of the most potent symbols that Cruz uses is fire and flames. Fire itself was physically present in the South Bronx in the years of Cruz's childhood, as landlords and tenants set their apartment buildings on fire, the former in hopes of getting insurance money and the latter in hopes of getting better low-income housing. It has been estimated that between 1970 and 1975, there were 68,456 fires in the Bronx□more than thirty-three each night. The apartment building in which the family in "Fire" lives most likely was part of this phenomenon.

Fire represents different things to Cruz's narrators. To the narrator of "Fire," the apartment building fire initially is negative because it leads her to believe that her mother is dead. When the "angel" neighbor brings the three girls to her apartment, "under the cover of a bright orange blanket," the narrator panics, thinking that she is dead and that the blanket is a fire itself. The fire eventually transforms into something positive, for a month later, the family moves to a new apartment, to a "better place." The narrator's choice of words recalls heaven and suggests a figurative death and rebirth. The narrator will, like the mythical phoenix, rise from the ashes to be reborn. Fire brings an end but it also brings a beginning.

Fire also figures prominently in "She Was Something . . ." The titular "she" has "eyes like flames . . . and, ooh, she made fire appear on most everything." Her "fiery pupils" singe the wings of the crows that cannot stop from turning their heads to stare at her. The fire represents the girl's power, drive, and ability□she has some special quality that other people in the South Bronx lack. Fire also has destructive capabilities, however. "People burn there" in the South Bronx, and "[F]lames shoot out of their mouths." In this case, fire represents both the physical landscape of the arson-assailed neighborhood as well as the anger of its "coffee-colored" denizens. Even the girl cannot help but burn the soles of her feet on the ground, but instead of trying to distance herself from the anger and ugliness that surround her, she swallows these feelings; her toenails pop off because of the heat, but still she "caught each nail in her mouth." The girl will take the might of fire and transform it into a force that she can use for her own benefit.

Historical Context

America in the Early 1990s

The decade opened with the first President George Bush in office. One of the most significant events of his term was the Persian Gulf War, also known as Operation Desert Storm. This conflict was launched in January 1991 as a response to Iraq's invasion of its oil-rich neighbor, Kuwait. A multinational coalition, led by United States, contributed military might and attacked Iraq. These forces quickly defeated the invaders, and Bush enjoyed great popularity as a result. At home, however, his administration was drawing criticism for a faltering economy. Unemployment rose, and the number of Americans living below the poverty line grew by more than 2 million in 1990. The recession that hit that year continued through 1992 and contributed to Democrat Bill Clinton's election to the presidency. During Clinton's term, the recession ended□unemployment went down, inflation stabilized, and the stock market boomed. By the middle of the decade, most Americans were enjoying a higher level of prosperity.

Race and Ethnic Issues

The 1990 U.S. Census revealed that more immigrants had arrived in the United States in the 1980s than in any decade since 1910, the majority coming from Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. This influx led to social and political conflicts over immigration. Many native-born Americans grew alarmed at the trend and blamed immigration for taking away jobs, but supporters of immigration argued that immigration created new businesses that helped the economy. Amidst this debate, the Immigration Act of 1990 passed, which increased the number of immigrants allowed into the United States each year and doubled the quota on skilled workers.

Despite the country's ethnic diversity, racial issues became a matter of growing concern to many Americans in the early 1990s. The Los Angeles riots were perhaps the most significant event demonstrating simmering racial conflict. The riots stemmed from the trials of four police officers accused of assaulting an African American motorist named Rodney King. This beating was videotaped by an ordinary citizen, and it soon became infamous, shocking Americans around the country. In April 1992, a year after the beating took place, an all-white jury found the four officers not guilty. South Central Los Angeles, which was predominately black, erupted in anger, triggering four days of rioting. More than fifty people died and hundreds of businesses were destroyed in the largest racial disturbance of the twentieth century.

Multiculturalism

As minority groups grew in number and power, demands arose for a cultural norm that more closely reflected the cultural makeup of the country. Advocates of multiculturalism challenged the "Eurocentric" nature of American education and culture, demanding

more attention be paid to the accomplishments of non-European civilizations and to women. In the 1990s, they successfully brought a more egalitarian approach to teaching, for example, calling for the inclusion of more women writers and writers of color in literature classes. However, multiculturalism drew much controversy, especially when some more radical advocates portrayed traditional Western culture as inherently racist.

Hispanic Americans

In the latter part of the twentieth century, Hispanic Americans comprised the fastest-growing minority group in the United States. While in 1960 the U.S. Census reported slightly more than 3 million people of Hispanic origin living in the United States, by 1990 that number had risen to 20 million, or 6 percent of the population. This growing Hispanic presence became a political and cultural issue of increasing importance in the 1980s and 1990s. Latino activists in Los Angeles launched some successful challenges to labor practices, as did the group of Latino janitors who maintained their 1990 strike, despite being attacked by the police, and won union recognition and significant benefits. Besides campaigning for better labor conditions, Latinos also fought for tenants' rights and bilingual education in schools; the latter issue led to particular controversy. Latinos also organized a bilingual radio movement because they were kept out of the media.

The Bronx

Beginning in the late 1960s, the South Bronx underwent serious deterioration. Numerous factors contributed to this transformation. Federal government policies had a negative effect on the physical landscape. Construction of the Bronx Expressway cut through existing neighborhoods, altering, and in some cases, destroying, community life. Urban renewal programs cleared entire blocks of run-down buildings but merely left acres of vacant lots in the midst of once-thriving neighborhoods. As the government built new low-income housing projects, such as the 15,000-unit Co-op City, some residents, hoping to be moved to the top of the public housing list, burned their apartments. Landlords also resorted to arson in an effort to recoup from their insurance policies some of the losses they had suffered from declining rental profits and higher property taxes. Due to increasing business taxes, small businesses and manufacturers began to leave the Bronx, thus reducing the number of jobs for residents. The community was further undermined as drug abuse rose, and beginning in the late 1960s, the city adopted a policy of relocating welfare families to the South Bronx. In the wake of all these economic difficulties, crime rose dramatically. Robbers, muggers, and street gangs created widespread fear in the South Bronx. The government seemed unable to solve these problems, and stable families fled the area. By 1975, the South Bronx was the most devastated urban landscape in the United States, compared by some to bombed-out German cities after World War II.

A reversal of the situation in the Bronx did not begin until the early 1980s. In 1985, Mayor Ed Koch initiated an affordable housing program that spent $5 billion over the

next decade. Nearly $1.5 billion went to the South Bronx. Community development corporations, made up of community, volunteer, and religious groups, worked together to rebuild the area. Combining their own funds with city funds, they purchased and developed properties. Such efforts helped to bring about the revitalization of the South Bronx.

Critical Overview

Cruz's dramatic work is part of a larger genre of Latino and Latina literature. Latino writers are writers of Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Latin American descent who live in the mainland United States. American audiences began to develop a greater interest in Latino literature in the late 1980s, and narrative writers like Sandra Cisneros, Luis Rodriguez, and Julia Alvarez gained widespread popularity.

Latino writers generally write about their communities in order to preserve their heritage and explore the experiences of bicultural citizens living in a predominantly Caucasian country. Cruz's narrator in "Rats" experiences difficulties in suburban Connecticut where her background and her Bronx accent transform her into an exotic creature and an object for show-and-tell. Latino writers also explain that they tell their stories, and those of their families, in order to define themselves and to prevent others from defining. This is particularly relevant as there are comparatively few images of Latinos in the popular media.

In her writing, Cruz shares her cultural background. The monologists in *Telling Tales* often make reference to their ethnic background. However, Cruz also communicates her personal history with her audience. For example, in her introduction to her play *The Have-Little*, Cruz writes that telling the stories contained within it is her way of preserving memories of her friends and honoring them. Some of the characters who appear in this play also appear in *Telling Tales*, such as Anita, Cruz's friend who was raped and murdered, and Sharon, who became a cop. Cruz further aims to universalize her experiences. Cruz (as quoted in Sharon Mazer's review of *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color*) writes of Lillian, the central character of *The Have-Little*, "The world of poverty that surrounds Lillian is my world, and by writing the play I hope others are able to recognize it and appreciate the beauty of its humanity and mourn the loss of its children."

Cruz's plays further belong to the genre of Latino and Latina drama. Left out of mainstream theater to a large extent, Hispanic Americans have set up their own theaters and theater companies, to promote their art and artists. New York City's INTAR Hispanic American Arts Center was founded in 1966 as a response to the lack of opportunities for Latino theater artists. Teatro Visión was established in San Jose, California, in 1984, with the goal of recognizing, reflecting, preserving, celebrating, and sustaining Latino theater. Both of these organizations stage productions and provide educational programming. *Telling Tales* was developed at INTAR's Hispanic Playwrights-in-Residence Laboratory, a writers' workshop run by Maria Irene Fornes.

Such support is crucial to Latino artists, as Cruz believes that the American theater lacks opportunity for Latinos and other minority groups. "It [American theater] is still limited to people of color having to enter a white world," she said in an interview that appeared in the newsletters for the Non-Traditional Casting Project. Despite the lesser interest that Caucasian America has in writings or performances about people of color, Cruz continues to create what she knows best: the "stories of Puerto Rican women." In

Telling Tales as well as in her numerous other works, Cruz explores their most pressing concerns, issues, and experiences.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, Korb discusses the development of the storyteller in Telling Tales*.*

Cruz's *Telling Tales* is a collection of eleven very brief monologues, all of which can be read or performed as stand-alone pieces. While the monologues intrinsically retain their individual dramatic integrity, they also build upon and support each other. Connected as they are through narrators, characters, themes, and chronology, the pieces, when looked upon as a unit, chronicle a life grown up.

Cruz has said in interviews that she uses her writing to explore issues and events from her own life, as well as the feelings and emotions they raised. For example, when Cruz was eight, her best friend was raped and murdered. The murderer then threw the victim's body off the rooftop of the building where this violent act took place; this event forms the narrative of "Sand." Given Cruz's own words about the role of autobiography in much of her dramatic work, it is tempting to equate the unknown narrators of the pieces in *Telling Tales* with Cruz. While such an approach is in opposition to many schools of literary criticism, a fair approach to take with *Telling Tales* is to interpret the individual narrators as representing different stages of life in the development of a Latina storyteller.

In certain instances, the narrators' own words make clear that they are one and the same person. The narrator of "Jesus" has a sister, Tati, who is one year older. Tati suffered from lead poisoning as a toddler, an illness that adversely affected her mental development. "We played rocking horse together. That's where you cradle each other and rock back and forth," the narrator says. "After awhile only I could do the cradling. That was okay. But nobody ever explained it to me." Compare these siblings to the sisters in "Fire." The narrator notes that the sister who is a year older "really couldn't understand what was happening. That's when I first realized she would never get any better." To help her frightened sister, "I held her in my arms and she rocked furiously." The sister's mentally impaired condition□one of the deleterious effects of lead poisoning□as well as her movements, obviously bring Tati to mind. The narrators of "Parcheesi" and "Rats" also are the same person; both of them had a best friend named Sharon who grew up to become a cop.

In the other pieces, however, whether the narrators are the same person is neither stated nor implied. In fact, in "Sky," the narrator is a Native American. Still, all of the pieces, when read in order, form a sort of chronology of the life of a girl of color. She grows up to become a woman and a storyteller, one concerned with issues of race and identity.

Telling Tales opens with "Sand," the monologue that tells the story of Cruz's murdered childhood friend. This monologue introduces the storytelling narrator at a pivotal point in her young life. It also introduces several themes that will be developed throughout the

course of play: the importance of religion ("He threw up and choked and he kept choking on his own blood and spit and sand. . . . That's when I thought there must be a God, because there was justice"); the violence associated with sex, ("Rip him up, like he ripped Anita. Take his hands and make him pull his own guts out. And then the balls. Slash. Cut. Tear"); the constant presence of family and community ("A whole army of men from the neighborhood were carrying him above their heads").

In "Parcheesi," the narrator explores ideas of race as well as her interest in storytelling. This monologue includes people of three races: Hispanic, African American, and Caucasian. Sharon, an African American girl, is a close childhood friend of the Latina narrator. The only white person in the story is the principal who has "long, blonde hair and long, white teeth." She yells at the children on the stage performing *My Fair Lady*, saying to Sharon, "'How can we enjoy the show if we can't hear you? Only stupid people forget their lines.'" This brief introduction to the piece, which seems an unlikely segue into the narrator's remembrance of Sharon, underscores the fact that, to the narrator, most things in the world hinge upon race. Perhaps more importantly in this piece is the narrator's revelation of what she desires in life: "I wanted to have a past. So now she [Sharon] can blow your head off with a three fifty-seven magnum and I can tell you about it." The juxtaposition of these sentences shows that the narrator conflates storytelling with creation. By telling stories about her past□as Cruz does in *Telling Tales*□she creates her own identity.

"Fire" begins to explicate the hold that religion has in the narrator's life. She is growing up now□in this monologue she is fourteen. The apartment building in which the family lives has caught fire, and her mother "braved the flames to save our four-foot-tall statue of Jesus Christ." This action solidifies for the narrator the all-important role that religion plays in her mother's life. The mother leaves her three daughters alone in the street, where their neighbors convince them she has died in the fire, to rescue a religious icon. When the family is allowed to return to their apartment, the narrator sees that the Jesus statues are safe, even though all the windows nearby are shattered. "They guarded our apartment and Mom guarded them." The simplicity of the statement underscores the abandonment the narrator feels at her mother's choice. This disaffection between mother and daughter is further reinforced by the narrator's inability to stop crying, the result of thinking her mother was dead. Her mother only calls her "crazy" for listening to the neighbors and leaves her alone.

"Loose Lips" and "Sky" both raise issues of racial identity in the United States. "Loose Lips" implies that Americans are unconcerned with important "mystical" issues and states that they do not "listen to their dead" or pay attention to the lessons they can learn from their ancestry. She compares Americans disfavorably to Asians, who, like Puerto Ricans, are people of color. She also implies that Americans err in not learning from the wisdom of their elders (as she does in "Yellow Eyes"). "They never ask for advice," she says. Interestingly, "Sky" presents a Native American narrator who comes from a small town. However, this character is allied with the other non-whites who exist within American society and who suffer prejudicial treatment. Native Americans are associated with nature, spiritualism, and the earth, so if she were looking up at the sky, white people would expect her to indulge in a dreamy muse about humans' place in the

universe, instead of saying something like "God, it's hot!" or "Gee, I hope there are some cute guys on the beach!"

By the time the narrator tells the story in "Rats," she is a grown woman. She has left the predominantly ethnic Bronx and moved to "white suburbia" where she is the "only Puerto Rican in New Canaan, Connecticut." Her unexpected accent draws the attention of a "WASP-y lady" who drags her around a party, introducing her as "a wonderful creature . . . from the Bronx□the South Bronx!" The responses of "Amazing! Is anybody still living there?" negate the narrator's background and cultural heritage. In fact, the people and experiences of her youth are considered trivial and inconsequential by the partygoers, who insist that "nobody important" lives there, which degrades, to the narrator, "My mother, my father, my sisters. The priest who gave me my first communion. My friend Sharon."

An adult now, the narrator of "Rats" is able to speak specifically to many of the themes raised throughout the previous monologues. She complains that white society's treatment of Hispanics turns them to violence. "It's when they herd us into *barrios* that we turn. . . . When you're fighting for your life, you get ugly. You get bitter." She reveals that when she was sixteen, she was going to become a nun. However, this religious vocation did not work out because "I liked to read too much. And I liked to write. Mother Superiors don't like that kind of stuff." She also raises important ideas about religion, particularly religious fervor in relation to her mother. Instead of becoming ugly or bitter about life, her mother chooses to "spend a lot of time in church lighting candles."

The narrator of "Rats" also speaks to the hold the past has on her and implies how that contributes to her need to tell stories. The title of the monologue derives from the vermin that live in the walls of the home shared by the narrator and her partner. He urges her to ignore them□after all, they will be gone in the spring. But the narrator grew up in vastly different circumstances, killing mice and rats within their apartment to "prevent disease, death, desolation." Grown ups were so accustomed to the mice that the men at her father's factory regularly played with them. While the vermin in Connecticut are different with their "cute little noses and big, brown eyes," they remind the narrator of the terrors and depredations of her childhood. "I wonder if what they say is true□that you have the memories of all your ancestors inside your head," she says. "I wonder if my children will jump up when they hear mice in the wall." Perhaps to prevent this from happening, she begins to consider letting go of the hardships of her past.

Telling Tales ends with "She Was Something . . ." This monologue is the most poetic in form and language. The narrator is trying to maintain her balance while walking along a "mean" and "lowdown" wall on the southside of China, but everyone is laughing at her. The act of walking along the wall represents the lack of support the narrator is getting in her efforts to maintain her cultural background while existing in the outside□the white□world. The narrator sees "she," who exudes a powerful presence with her flaming eyes. Strong and capable, walking calmly along the burning ground, "she" is an attention-grabber. The narrator sees in "she" the chance of achieving her goals: being able to exist both as a Puerto Rican from the South Bronx and a storyteller living in the wider world. As Cruz said in an interview with Leonora Inez Brown, printed in *American*

Theatre, "Home is a state of mind and heart. . . . Is home an island I visited only once, or a New York City ghetto where my people seemed forsaken?" *Telling Tales* provides this answer: Home is both places.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on *Telling Tales*, in *Drama for Students*, Gale, 2004.

Topics for Further Study

Cruz has stated in numerous interviews that she is a child of the South Bronx and her works exhibit her experience there. How much of a role does setting play in *Telling Tales*? Do you get a strong sense of place?

Learn more about the Latino literary and theater movements. Analyze Cruz's role and the role of her stories within these groups.

Read another play by Cruz and compare it with her treatment of issues of racial identity in *Telling Tales*.

Which aspect is more significant in *Telling Tales*: Cruz's status as a woman or her status as a Puerto Rican?

Conduct research about what it was like to grow up in the South Bronx in the 1960s and 1970s. Create a fictional character and write a monologue for that person, exploring and developing the experiences and mentalities encountered in your research.

Cruz has said that white readers have little interest in the stories of Puerto Ricans. Do you think that *Telling Tales* is readily accessible to white audiences? What about the play is likely to draw a wider audience? How universal is the play?

What Do I Read Next?

Cruz's *Another Part of the House*, first staged in 1997, is an adaptation of Federico García Lorca's classic *The House of Bernarda Alba*. In it, Bernarda's mother, who is locked away in her bedroom, and his daughter plot to escape Bernarda's tyranny.

Maria Irene Fornes's play *Fefu and Her Friends* was the Cuban-born dramatist's first major success, and it won her an Obie award. Produced in 1977, the play focuses on a group of women gathered at a New England country house. Issues to think about while reading this play include such contemporary topics as gender roles and how marriage might stir feelings of insanity, violence, sexual frustration, and repressed lesbian desire.

Puro Teatro: A Latina Anthology (1999), edited by Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez and Nancy Saporta Sternbach, collects dramatic works from Latina playwrights from the 1970s to the present day.

Infinite Divisions: An Anthology of Chicana Literature (1993), edited by Tey Diana Rebolledo and Eliana S. Rivero, collects poems, stories, essays, and plays by fifty Chicana authors, including noted authors such as Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros.

Shattering the Myth: Plays by Hispanic Women (1992) features leading Hispanic female playwrights, such as Cruz and Cherrie Moraga. The works in this volume cover three generations of bicultural Hispanic women.

Contemporary Plays by Women of Color (1996), edited by Kathy Perkins and Roberto Uno, presents eighteen plays, each representative of a specific cultural group. These plays share the assumption that women of color in the United States share a common bond.

Telling Tales: New One Act Plays (1993), edited by Eric Lane, is a volume of one-act plays that borrows the title of Cruz's work, which is included. This collection gives voice to a wide range of contemporary, original playwrights.

Further Study

Arrizón, Alicia, and Lillian Manzor, eds., *Latinas on Stage*, Third Woman Press, 2000.

This anthology collects performance text, interviews, and critical commentary on numerous aspects of Latina theater.

Howell, Daedulus, "Play Right," in *Sonoma County Independent*, October 30, 1997.

Howell's interview with Cruz touches upon her childhood, background, and current projects.

Lopez, Tiffany Ana, "Violent Inscriptions: Writing the Body and Making Community in Four Plays by Migdalia Cruz," in *Theatre Journal*, March 2000.

Lopez analyzes Cruz's juxtaposition of childhood, the human body, and violence, as well as the playwright's development of community in dramatic art.

Trevino, Marisa, "Latina Playwrights Probe Collision of Cultures," in *Women's Enews*, August 26, 2001.

Trevino discusses contemporary Latina playwrights and the issues they raise in their dramas.

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Brown, Leonora Inez, "Writing Religion: Is God a Character in Your Plays?" in *American Theatre*, Vol. 17, No. 9, November 2000, p. 29.

Cruz, Migdalia, Commentary, in *New Traditions Compendium Forums & Commentaries: 1992—96*, edited by Sharon Jensen and Harry Newman, Non-Traditional Casting Project, 1994, at http://www.ntcp.org/compendium/artists/MIGDALIA.html

Mazer, Sharon, Review of *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color*, in the *Drama Review*, Vol. 43, No. 3, 1999, pp. 205—08.

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) 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, DfS 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 DfS 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 DfS 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 DfS 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 DfS 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

DfS 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 Drama 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 DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS 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 Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama 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 DfS 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.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

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

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, 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 Drama 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 DfS, 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 Drama 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:

Editor, Drama for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535