

# The Tree of Red Stars Study Guide

## The Tree of Red Stars by Tessa Bridal

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# Introduction

Tessa Bridal's *The Tree of Red Stars* takes place during a time of dire political upheaval in Uruguay. Most of the story centers on the activities that occurred during the 1960s and 1970s in Montevideo, Uruguay's capital. Although a fictionalized account, Bridal makes a statement in the front pages of her book that the story was inspired by real people and real events.

After leaving her country, Bridal was surprised to discover that, outside of Uruguay, no one knew what was really happening there. The stories that were being printed in the media of other countries did not correspond to her experiences and memories. She recounts that no one in Uruguay was left untouched by the violence that was occurring there, and her story is told as a way to make sure that the voices of Uruguayans will not be lost. Bridal "uses her book to present a harrowing account of that country's takeover by a military dictatorship, a regime that violently demolished one of Latin America's oldest democracies," wrote Paula Friedman for the *New York Times*.

It was during these troubled times in Uruguay that a citizen's group of urban guerillas, the Tupamaros, was formed to protest the dictatorship government that had set itself in power. *The Tree of Red Stars* tells the story of a young, outspoken girl, Magda, who comes of age in the midst of all this social, political, and economic chaos. Her older friends and some of their parents are secretly involved with the Tupamaros, and as the young girl matures into womanhood, she too takes up the fight against the corruption that has invaded her life and the lives of her family and friends.

*The Tree of Red Stars* is Bridal's first novel. It won the Milkweed Prize for fiction and first prize with the Friends of American Writers. It was selected by the New York Public Library for its 1998 Books for the Teenage list, was *Booklist* Editors' choice, and was chosen by *Independent Reader* as one of the five Most Recommended Books for 1997.

## Author Biography

Over one hundred years ago, Tessa Bridal's ancestors settled in Uruguay. They had come from Ireland and soon established themselves in the city of Montevideo. It was in Montevideo, the capital city of Uruguay, that Bridal was born and raised.

During her youth, Bridal witnessed the turmoil that occurred in her homeland during the 1960s and 1970s, when Uruguay suffered economic losses and turmoil in the labor sector. The government, which had formerly been very successful in supporting its Uruguayan population, became increasingly corrupt and slid into a form of dictatorship, which set the scene for the creation of the Tupamaros, an urban guerilla movement. All these elements strongly affected Bridal and play a very significant role in her first novel, *The Tree of Red Stars*.

Bridal eventually left Uruguay. She has since lived in Brazil, Washington, D.C., and in London. For the past twenty years, she has called Minnesota her home. It is in St. Paul, at the Science Museum of Minnesota, that Bridal now spends many hours of her day as the director of public programs, where her responsibilities include producing live theatre performances. For her work in this capacity, she has earned the American Association of Museums Education Committee's Award for Excellence. She has also worked as the artistic director of the Minnesota Theatre Institute of the Deaf.

In 1997, Bridal wrote and published her first novel, for which she won the Milkweed National Fiction Prize. She has also published many articles and short stories, which have been published in various literary journals. In addition, Bridal teaches creative writing classes through The Loft, Borders Books, The Minnesota Center for Arts Education, and at Hamline University in St. Paul and at North Dakota State University.

Currently, Bridal lives outside the Minneapolis St. Paul cities, in Albertville, with her husband, Randy, and their two daughters, Ana and Kate. She and her husband volunteer their free time for the Humane Society, for which they also run a foster home for animals. They share their home with a dog, a cat, two rabbits, and seventeen birds.



# Plot Summary

## Prologue-Chapter 1

*The Tree of Red Stars* begins with a prologue, written almost as a letter to the reader. The protagonist, Magda, is returning to Uruguay after a seven-year exile in Europe. She talks about Marco Aurelio Pereira, who has spent seven years in jail after rescuing her from a similar fate. Statements about the political unrest in Uruguay before Magda left are related, as well as Magda's efforts to secure the release of Marco.

Chapter 1 begins with details about Magda's childhood in Montevideo. The neighborhood is described, with a special emphasis on the poinsettia tree outside of Magda's home, where she and Emilia hide to watch their neighbors. As they sit in the tree, Gabriela, a young woman from the outskirts of town appears, and Magda convince Emilia to hide in the back of Gabriela's wagon to see where she lives. Once at Gabriela's house, which is made of cardboard, newspapers, and plastic, Magda sees a small plate, which she had made in school for her mother, hanging in Gabriela's home. Gabriela is proud of that plate, but Magda is hurt that her mother has given it away. In the meantime, Gabriela, concerned that the police might think she has kidnapped the girls, immediately sets out to return them.

## Chapters 2-3

Chapter 2 introduces Cora, a young Jewish girl, whom Magda and Emilia find mysterious. Cora keeps her distance and is always chaperoned by her parents. Also in chapter 2, Josefa, Magda's cook, tells the mythical story about the moon and its present of *mate*, a local, traditional tea that "makes brothers and sisters of all who drink it," a tradition that will soon be shattered as the political upheaval will pit one Uruguayan against another.

In chapter 3, Magda's aunts, or *tías* enjoy a brief discussion of politics and of a woman who insists on her rights in the male-dominated Uruguayan society. Magda carries tidbits of the aunts' conversations to Emilia's house and shares them with Emilia's mother, who proclaims that men "think they know more about being a woman than we do." The rest of the chapter provides further examples of the inequality of women and men in Uruguay.

## Chapters 4-5

Magda and Emilia celebrate their twelfth birthday. They discover that Cora is also about to turn twelve. Cora is a romantic image to them, especially in reference to her relationship with her father. Magda's and Emilia's fathers are seldom home and pay little attention to them when they are. They later realize that Cora's father is so attentive because he is afraid Cora will be assaulted for being Jewish.



Señora Francisca is introduced in chapter 5. One night, Magda sees Lilita, Cora's mother, sneaking into Francisca's home. Magda, after intercepting Emilia, insists that the two of them also sneak inside to find out what the two older women are doing. When they overhear the women's conversation, Magda and Emilia realize that the women are involved in the revolution.

Francisca opens the chapter with a loud wailing sound after her husband's mistress appears at her door, telling her about all the money that he spends on her. Francisca is devastated. Although she has given the appearance of having money, her house is all but bare of furnishings. She decides to seek revenge by going on a shopping spree.

In chapter 7, Magda, Emilia, and Cora go to the zoo. After Magda risks danger by climbing over a fence to feed her favorite elephant, Cora yells at her about her careless behavior. Cora fears not only for Magda's life but also for her own, because she is afraid that Magda will one day get her in trouble.

Marco is introduced as Magda goes to his house to visit his mother. Magda describes him and pays special attention to his mouth. "I was too young to understand the hunger it evoked in me," she says, foreshadowing her involvement with him. Marco expounds on his political views, especially his dislike of the United States' intervention in Uruguay.

## Chapters 8-9

Che Guevara comes to the university to speak. Magda is forbidden to go but sneaks out anyway and takes Emilia with her. Magda is inspired by Che's talk but, when a gunshot is heard, pandemonium breaks out. Emilia and Magda run into Cora, who has been injured. Magda seeks help, but a policeman corners her and assaults her sexually. She kicks him and runs down the street and is pulled into a doorway by some students, who hide her. They then help her, Emilia, and Cora to get home.

Upon arriving home, Emilia finds that her mother has tried to commit suicide. Lilita is saved and makes Magda promise never to get Emilia into any more trouble.

Chapter 9 takes on a lighter tone as Magda and Emilia celebrate their fifteenth birthdays. At the birthday celebration, Marco dances with Magda and kisses her. He also announces that he has enlisted in the army. Magda also meets a friend of Marco's, Jaime Betancourt, who courts her. As they become more involved, Magda's mother tries to get rid of Jaime, whom she disapproves of because of his social status. She promises to introduce him to people who will help him to find a job in the United States. When this does not work, she tempts Magda with a trip to the United States, hoping Magda will forget Jaime.

## Chapters 10-11

Some of the history of Magda's family is portrayed in chapter 10. Her grandfather came from London when he was twenty-four. He arrived in 1902, bought a ranch, and



eventually married eighteen-year-old Aurelia Ponce de Aragon, against the wishes of both sets of parents.

There is also mention of the first of Magda's ancestors arriving in Uruguay and of a special ancient agate puzzle that was made by a Charrúa native and which has been handed down over generations in the family. Magda's grandmother imparts this information as she prepares Magda for her trip to the United States.

In chapter 11, both Magda, who lives for one year in Michigan, and Emilia, who spends a year in Missouri, compare life in Uruguay to their experiences in the States.

## Chapters 12-13

Chapter twelve is written in the form of several letters sent by Emilia to Magda, Magda to Emilia, Jaime to Magda, and Magda and Marco to one another. In the letters, Magda and Emilia continue to share examples of the strange culture that they are experiencing in the States. Jaime tells Magda how much he misses her and asks her to find out the names of airline executives to whom he can write.

In Magda's letter to Marco, she relates such incidents as the cold winter, the latest Beatles' movie, and sports—typical American topics. In Marco's letter to Magda, however, the tone is more somber, as Marco discusses the student protests in Uruguay.

Magda returns to Uruguay in chapter 13. The mood in Uruguay is rapidly changing, as Brazilians, fleeing their country to escape the military dictatorship there, warn the Uruguayans that the same thing could happen in their country. Marco is now a lieutenant in the army, but he is still involved with covert work that helps the protesters. Magda visits Gabriela, who tells Magda that Marco "has a mission" and that "such men are difficult to love." Magda has broken up with Jaime because both she and Jaime realize that she is really in love with Marco.

Cora elopes with Ramiro, a man she meets at a political gathering. Her parents are devastated.

## Chapters 14-15

A friend of Jaime's dies in a plane crash, and Jaime blames his commanding officer, Captain Prego. Jaime believes that Prego was negligent and challenges him to a duel. Prego shoots Jaime in the chest, claiming that Jaime moved into the oncoming bullet. Jaime dies.

As a result of her being at the duel, Magda's picture appears on the front page of the city's newspaper. To avoid scandal, Magda's grandmother takes Magda to Caupolicán, the family ranch. While at the ranch, Magda realizes that her future plans must include Caupolicán. Her grandmother wants to give the ranchland to her, as no one else in the family truly appreciates it. Once back in the city, Magda enters the university in





Montevideo and decides to major in economics and land management. One day after attending classes, she runs into Ramiro, who promises to take her to see Cora.

## Chapters 16-17

There is a discussion between Cora, Ramiro, and Magda that involves the politics of the day. Russia is hoping that Uruguayans will not promote a capitalistic government, whereas the United States is hoping that there will be no move toward socialism. Ramiro tells Magda that he and Cora are involved with the guerilla group called Tupamaros, a group that wants to ensure that a social democracy is established in Uruguay. Magda decides to become involved.

Magda holds a job at the U.S. Information Services (USIS) because of her fluency in English. She promises the Tupamaros to act as a spy for them. In such a capacity, she discovers that one of her supervisors, Dan Mitrione, teaches Uruguayan police officers how to torture prisoners. Magda and Ramiro plan to kidnap Mitrione and use him to gain the release of political prisoners.

Magda discovers, in chapter 17, that Gabriela had been tortured to death by some of Mitrione's men. She gains permission from her grandmother to bury Gabriela's body at Caupolicán. Magda, Gervasio, and Cora bring Gabriela's body to the ranchland. In the meantime, Mitrione's body is found in the back of a car.

## Chapters 18-19

The Tupamaros decide to kidnap the British ambassador, Geoffrey Jackson. In an attempt to gain information about Jackson, Magda must befriend his assistant, Peter Wentworth. Emilia meets Wentworth when she and Magda audition for a play that Wentworth is directing. Emilia and Wentworth fall in love.

The ambassador is kidnapped, Ramiro is arrested, and Cora goes into hiding. Magda and Emilia are invited to Wentworth's home, along with Emilia's parents, who believe that Wentworth is about to propose marriage to their daughter. After they arrive, however, the police show up and arrest Emilia, convinced that she became involved with Wentworth only to find out the comings and goings of the ambassador. Magda confesses that it was she who was a Tupamaro and that Emilia is innocent. The police do not believe her.

Emilia is released three days later. Wentworth, who had set up the arrest, refuses to talk to her. The Uruguayan military is called into force to take over the struggle against the Tupamaros. Marco, now a captain, continues to work with the Tupamaros while keeping his cover as an army officer. He helps political prisoners escape.



## Chapter 20-Epilogue

Ramiro escapes prison, and Magda is told where he and Cora are hiding. She brings them food. Emilia insists on helping her. Shortly thereafter, Magda is arrested. She is put in isolation. She often hears, in a room above her, the moans of people being tortured. At one point, she is taken out of her room and brought to a gathering of some old friends, including Ramiro and Cora, whom the police have allowed to be officially married.

Magda remains in her cell for several months. One day Marco, now a colonel, shows up and secretly releases her. He takes her home and Magda's father takes her to Caupolicán.

Marco appears at Caupolicán the first night. He and Magda make love, and then he leaves. Marco is arrested shortly afterward. Magda learns that Ramiro has died and that Cora has disappeared. The next day, Magda escapes to Brazil.

In the Epilogue, Magda and Emilia are waiting for Marco to appear. When he does, he looks frail and tells Magda that he does not have much more time left to live.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

*The Tree of Red Stars* takes place in Montevideo, Uruguay which was named in the 1520s when a Portuguese sailor cried, "*Monte vide eu*," "I see a hill." Montevideo now has spread out along the riverbanks and the only people remaining at the Cerro, an old neighborhood at the base of the tallest hill, are the poor and the soldiers who protect the city.

Magdalena is a small girl who tells the story in a first person narrative. She views her *barrio*, or neighborhood, from a window masked by a poinsettia tree at her parent's house. Magdalena is a very observant little girl and is always curious about the happenings in the village. Her best friend, Emilia, is also very curious. Magdalena notices that she is very smart and sensitive about human nature. Magdalena admires this in her friend.

As the story opens, the two girls are together observing their village through the window where the *estrella federal* is always in view. Gabriela, a woman from the Cerro, pulls into their village with her horse and wagon. She is making her daily rounds through the village to see if anyone can spare food, clothing or other useful items. Gabriela has just given birth to a baby and the girls' mothers had been following her pregnancy. Emilia goes to announce the arrival of Gabriela and her baby.

Magdalena decides that she and Emilia will hide out in the back of Gabriela's wagon under some old bags until Gabriela returns to her village so that they can see where the woman lives. After the girls' mothers bathe Gervasio, Gabriela finally boards the wagon with her baby son. The women have given her some fruit and fresh croissants. Gabriela, Gervasio, and the two girls hidden in her wagon, follow the Rio de la Plata for a long way until the girls no longer know where they are.

When they reach Gabriela's village, the children gather to see what she has brought back. The girls are discovered in the wagon and Gabriela is not pleased. She invites the girls into her home so they will not be spotted by the soldiers who will think Gabriela has kidnapped the girls.

Gabriela offers to feed the girls. Magdalena and Emilia are both very hungry since they have not eaten since breakfast. Magdalena admits this hungry but Emilia pulls on her sleeve to remind her if they do accept Gabriela's food they will be eating the very food their mothers has just given the poor woman. Magdalena then makes up a story about having had a big breakfast and some chocolates. When the children of the village hear of the *chocolatines*, they surround her thinking she may have some to give out. Magdalena feels badly, for she does not.



Gabriela's home has a dirt floor. The girls see that she keeps a clean house and makes do with what she has, although it isn't much. Gabriela shows Emilia fabric her mother had given her and tells Emilia of her plans for it. Magdalena is shocked to realize her mother had given Gabriela the clay plates she made in kindergarten. Her mother told her they were broken in an accident. They hang proudly on the wall and Gabriela tells Magdalena how beautiful they are. Magdalena is touched by this.

Gabriela arranges for a man and a horse to take the girls back to their own village. At the last minute, Gabriela decides to go along so there will not be any misunderstanding about the girls' disappearance since girls' mothers have always been so good to Gabriela.

When they arrive back in the girls' village, people are looking for the two girls. Gabriela tries to explain what happened, but everyone, especially the mothers, are so happy they are back that there are no hard feelings.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

In fiction, it is important to note the backdrop, or setting, in which the story takes place. In this case, Bridal puts the reader in Montevideo, Uruguay in the 1950s and 60s. During this time, Montevideo still had two distinct classes of people. We are introduced to both during the first chapter of the book by the development of the relationship between the girls' families and Gabriela's village. It is important to ask why we are introduced to these people. Bridal uses the two different classes to foreshadow the tension that is developing. Another important aspect of the setting is the author's use of Spanish intertwined with English. The author uses this to place the audience more fully within the culture.

It is also important to understand the point of view from which the story is being told. Magdalena is the narrator and the reader sees this story through her innocent eyes. This point of view allows the reader to question things for the first time, as Magdalena does.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

In this chapter the writer introduces another young character, Cora. Cora's family moves into Magdalena's *barrio*. Cora is a Jewish girl who is about the same age as Magdalena and Emilia. Cora spots the girls looking at her from behind the poinsettia tree and waves at them.

Bridal makes reference to Alice and Wonderland while describing Cora's house. The big *tipa* tree that shades the house adds a sense of intrigue while covering the front lawn of the house with yellow flowers so that everything appears golden. Magdalena and Emilia, are known in the neighborhood for playing pranks on people but have been afraid to approach Cora's house. Magdalena tells the reader, "We would no more have unwrapped Cora's ice then we would our own."

The dynamics of Magdalena's neighborhood are introduced as she describes how she shares her *barrio* with Czechoslovakians, Russians, Jews, and Italians. Her father once told her that Montevideo is an island of local anarchy in a sea of diplomacy.

Another dynamic in Magdalena's world is her relationship with her maid, Josefa. Josefa often tells Magdalena mythical stories that Magdalena writes down word for word in an old notebook she keeps by her bed. One story is about the moon leaving the sky and coming to Earth. The moon takes the shape of a young girl who is followed by a tiger that would have eaten her if not for the generosity of a man who invites her into his home for *tortias fritas*. The moon met the man's daughter, who wanted desperately to visit the sky. The story's moral is that people want what they cannot have. Josefa uses this story to calm Magdalena as Josefa makes *tortias fritas* and *mate* for Magdalena's mother and aunts.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

An important focus is the scope of Magdalena's narrative. She has neighbors from all over the world and is allowed to view them through the tree branches that covers both her window and Emilia's window. Bridal creates this stage for the reader to view the rest of the story. It is also important to note that the title is based on this image. The "tree of red stars" is the red poinsettia tree that covers the two girls' windows. It is a symbolic and foreshadowing title since the "red stars" of the tree represent communism.

One story line the writer continues to build is that of the current political condition of the area. It is symbolized by the *estrella federal*. This federal star was always visible from the girl's *barrio*; it oversaw everything in the neighborhood.

Through the introduction of the Allenbergs, Magdalena learns of Nazi Germany. The story of the Allenberg family teaches the reader of the nature of Uruguay's politics and

the general political climate of the world after WWII. Also, using the descriptions of the characters, the author lets us know how each fits in socially. Where does Cora's family fit? Where does Josefa fit? With this young girl's narrative, Bridal has allowed the reader an unbiased world in which to view these particular characters.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

This chapter starts with the description of a scene with Magdalena's *tias*, aunts, which paints a glamorous picture of her mother and also of Magdalena's father's sisters. All of them delicate, they eat the food that Josefa prepares and Lucia, another maid in the household, serves. They speak of people and politics. They mention that Fidel Castro is visiting Uruguay because of an incident involving a dead Nazi soldier. There is talk that perhaps Cora's father is involved in the incident. The bulk of their conversation is based around what they call *piropos*, the practice of men calling after women in the street with compliments and lewd gestures, which is supposed to be complimentary. It is an old custom and the women are not sure that they appreciate it anymore. However they feel they can do nothing about it. An American woman in their neighborhood yells back at the men and the women criticize her secretly for her behavior. They are scared for her because some of the men have gotten aggressive with other women.

The reader becomes aware of Magdalena's cousins, twins named Sofia and Carmen, who live with Magda in her parent's house. The twin's parents are dead. Sofia and Carmen are teenagers and have boys come to visit them in the garden with Josefa as a chaperon. Sofia's name comes up in conversation at the *tia's* tea party. One of the aunts saw Sofia coming out of *la casa de cita*, which meant literally the house of the date, a hotel, with a boy. This disgraced Magdalena's parents since they are Sofia's legal guardians. Magdalena and Emilia hear them yelling about it when they are next door in the poinsettia tree. The girls listen to the argument between Javier, Magdalena's father, and Sophia. It almost becomes violent when Javier goes to Sophia's room with a belt yelling about this disgrace but then thinks better of it when Sophia insults him.

The chapter ends when the girls notice the first full blooming poinsettia in the tree.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

The politics of women emerge from the writer's use of the aunt's tea party. The women's conversation is mainly based around *piropos*. This is an important conversation because of the women's feelings about this old custom of "cat calling." They recognize it as part of their history and understand that it is supposed to be taken as a compliment but some of the women have developed feelings of contempt for this custom. One of the women in the neighborhood, who is American, has even started yelling back at the men. This woman, Miss Newman, believes it is her right to walk down the street without men calling after her. The tension developing between genders is shown in this conversation, development, especially when Bridal ends the with a description of the physical abuse resulting from this custom.

Magdalena and Emilia notice a brand new bloom on the poinsettia tree. This is a symbol for new life to come, foreshadowing a change.





# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Emilia lives in an apartment with her parents. Her mother, Lilita, is a maid. Lilita wants Emilia to grow up to marry a proper man, a man with money. To insure Emilia's future, Lilita uses her extra money from cleaning houses to pay for lessons for Emilia; piano lessons, dance lessons, exercise classes, and English lessons. Emilia would rather spend the money on a dog.

In 1959, the girls turn twelve. Cora, the girl in the neighborhood who Magda and Emilia want to befriend, also turns twelve. Magda learns of this when flowers are mistakenly delivered to her house instead of to Cora's. Although Magdalena's mother had specifically asked Josefa, the maid, to take the flowers to Cora's house, Magdalena bribes Josefa to let her do it. Magda asks her friend Emilia to go with her to deliver the flowers.

As the girls approach the mysterious house, they watch through the window as Cora and her mother work on needlepoint together. Magda tells Cora's mother that the flowers were delivered to her house by mistake. Cora's mother leaves for a moment, giving Cora, Magda, and Emilia time to have a hasty conversation about their desires to be friends. Cora's mother does not let Cora see people outside their home. Mrs. Allenberg is afraid for her daughter because of the hatred of Jewish people that she experienced in Germany.

Emilia's mother often mysteriously leaves her home in the night only to return hours later. Emilia, who has night terrors, is frightened and angry with her mother for doing disappearing in the night but they never speak of these times.

Magda and Emilia visit their favorite fishing spot. There is a vacant shed on the river that they call their own. Roots and dirt cover the floor, but the girls do not care. This is a place they can come and feel safe. The girls collect everything the river washes up. Bridal tells the reader of the discarded white balloons that the girls gather. One day, Magda's mother discovers the collection of these white balloons and is shocked and disgusted at the used condoms that the girls have hidden away. Magda is told to throw them out at once.

Magda is sure her cousin, Carmen, has told the whole *barrio* about the condom incident but apparently she refrained because Christina, a very wealthy and sickly girl in the neighborhood, invite the girls to her home to watch a movie. The girls greatly enjoy these occasional invitations and go to wash their hands and brush their hair before entering Christina's home. To the girls' delight, Christina invites Cora, too. After the movie, Cora invites Emilia and Magda over to her house, because she knows her mother is out and that her mother would not turn away company who was already in their home. The girls have lemonade on the patio and make plans for the next time that



Cora's mother will be out of the house. Cora plans to give them a signal from her window and the girls promise to look for it every day.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Doom surrounds Emilia. This is illustrated through Basco's character. He is a dirty old man living below Emilia's family. He looks at Emilia when she walks past and rubs his thighs and licks his lips. When Emilia's father is with her, Basco does not even look at the little girl. Bridal uses Basco's character, Emilia's family's financial state, and Lilita's mysterious nighttime absences to give the reader a sense of unstableness when reading about this character.

The only stable surroundings Emilia knows is within her relationship with Magda. Symbols point this stability out to the reader. One symbol is the girls' secret shack by the river where they go to fish. Everyone else has abandoned the shack. The girls make chairs on the dirt floor with stumps and roots which symbolize the stability of their relationship. The girls value things that no one else does. This gives the reader a sense of acceptance that the girls have for themselves and for each other. They can show each other the true colors that they can not show anyone else. This is another way Bridal uses the girls to bring her readers to a stable place.

Cora's character was used to build the romance in the book, especially through the narrator's eyes. Magda and Emilia look at Cora with awe. She is never readily available to them because her mother is afraid that people will be cruel to her daughter. Even her house seems mysterious when Magda and Emilia finally get to visit it after Christina's movie. When they have lemonade with her in the patio, the plants and furniture seem foreign. Cora's character brings a sense of the unknown to the book and even a sense of longing for something unattainable.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

*Senora* Francisca, *senor* Ruben, and their two daughters Margot and Raquel live across the street from Cora's family. *Senor* Ruben wears a suit to work and seems to be a respectable man who tips his hat to the ladies and says hello to the men on the street. Their daughters wear expensive clothing and are not allowed to wear makeup in public. *Senor* Ruben makes sure of this by beating his daughters with a belt if ever he sees them in makeup. *Senora* Francesca is not accepted by the women in the community because she thinks she is better than the others.

One rainy night Magdada spots Emilia's mother, Lilita, sneaking over to *senora* Francesca's home. Magda runs to get Emilia so they can spy on the women. The girls are surprised to see that there wasn't any furniture in *senora* Francisca's home except for a table with four chairs in the middle of the dining room. Even the kitchen has no stove. The girls hear voices coming from a room upstairs. They creep up the stairs and listen to the women talk. The women speak of fighting and guns and wonder aloud when the time will come that they will be able to join the fighting. Emilia pulls Magda out of the house and across the street to her own home.

Magda can not believe what she just heard but Emilia is less concerned. She knows her mother and *senora* Francesca are involved in the revolution. She tells Magda of a time when two men in suits stopped her on her way home from school asking her questions about her mother. To lighten the mood, Magda suggests she and Emilia go out and play pranks in the *barrio*. Emilia tells her that their pranks are silly and they should stop doing such things. Magda is scared and very hurt. She runs home in the rain leaving her friend alone in a dark home.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

A revolution is taking place against the current government and Emilia's mother is involved. This accounts for her mother's absence on those nights she leaves her daughter scared and alone in their home.

Emilia was aware of her mother's secret and kept it from her friend. Magda had always thought that some sort of sadness surrounded Lilita. Instead, Emilia's mother lives a secret life and her daughter despises her for it. When Magda tries to lighten the mood after this discovery, Emilia wants no part of it. The girls are becoming less innocent and more knowledgeable. Their relationship is about to change.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

A stranger appears unexpectedly in the *barrio*. It is a young, beautiful woman dressed very elegantly in black clothing. The Perez brothers are working on a car in the street and freeze when they see the beauty. Yet they do not yell after her because they are in awe of her. She walks to *senora* Francesca's house and knocks on the door. In a few minutes she is admitted and a few seconds after she enters the house, she exits hastily. *Senora* Francesca yells and throws her husband's things out of the windows.

Lilita runs to calm her friend's cries. Magda's mother and *senora* Marta, who Magda thinks also visits *senora* Francesca in the night, soon join the other women. They learn the woman in black is *senor* Ruben's "kept" woman whom *Senor* Ruben has left for a younger mistress. She came to tell *senora* Francesca this so she would become angry and kill her husband. Instead, *senora* Francesca throws all of *senior* Ruben's things out and, so he could not spend any more money on his mistresses, buys all new furniture and has the bill sent to his office. She also changes the locks and gets a job so she and her daughters will not have to compromise their lifestyle because of this man's disgraces.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

*Senor* Ruben's mistress is introduced to further develop *senora* Francesca's character. This shows the reader a woman who is out on her own, scared, and even more different than her neighbors. Why does the writer do this with Francesca and not a character more closely related to Magda? It allows Magda to again be the reader's unbiased witness to a relationship. If this situation had been written using Magda's mother and father, the narrator's story would change dramatically. This way, she remains just an observer.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Magda notices Cora's handkerchief waving from her front window. Magda is excited when she sees the sign for she is on her way to Emilia's house for an outing to the zoo. Magda runs to Cora's window to ask her if she would join them. Cora is able to go because her maid, Hannah, is in charge of the household.

Magda and Cora arrive at Emilia's house excited about their outing together. Emilia looked tired and showed no enthusiasm for the girls' arrival. Magda notices the bags under her friend's eyes. She wonders if Emilia's mother, Lilita, had been on one of her all night outings again. Magda worries about her friend's health.

The zoo is a short bus ride away. When the girls arrive, they feed the birds. Magda decides to go visit the elephant. Magda, and the other elementary children in the barrio, had been at the zoo to witness this elephant's birth and had named it Tomasito. Magda jumps the fence to go feed the elephant. She seems to understand the animal.

A few days later, Emilia tells Magda that she no longer likes Cora. She says she doesn't need another person in her life who is dangerous and adventuresome like her mother and Magda. Those people closest to Emilia are in the most danger of having something bad happen to them, and this scares her. Emilia has no interest in being involved with somebody like Cora. As far as Emilia is concerned, all they had in common is their desire to have a dog as a pet.

Magda goes to see her neighbor, *senora* Marta, whose home she loves to visit. *Senora* Marta greets her with a big hug and insists she stay for lunch. Magda agrees because *senora* Marta makes delicious pizza.

*Senora* Marta has three sons named Marco Aurelio, Orsino, and Basanio. She read Shakespeare during her three pregnancies to insure that her sons experience great literature even before they were born. She named her sons after Shakespeare's characters. The boys had gotten into fights because of the names their mother so lovingly gave them.

Magda takes notice when Marco enters the room. She has never seen a person so beautiful except in pictures. He doesn't seem to be conscious of his beauty; instead his thoughts lay deeply in the political state of his country. He doesn't want to go into the army as his father had, but instead wants to help the poor of his country. His mother accuses him of wanting to change Uruguay into a communist country instead of accepting loans from the United States designed to help Uruguay out of the Third World. Marco believes the United States wants to enslave his country with the false hopes and the unrealistic dreams capitalism brings. Magda and he have a long talk about this and about Marco's marches with the sugar cane workers on the Cerro.



Magda joins Marco and his mother after lunch for a visit to Gabriela's neighborhood. Magda hasn't seen the neighborhood in years. The last time she visited Gabriela's house was when she and Emilia hid in the wagon. Gabriela has many children now and has lost a lot of her teeth. Magda found just the right gift to give Gabriela; a huge bouquet of paper flowers. When she presents them, Gabriela runs over to show the neighbors how beautiful they are. Magda sees in Gabriela's home all of the gifts she had given her in the past.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

The reader should note the continual shift of focus to the political state of this country. This shift is congruent with the shift in the narrator's relationships, especially with her best friend Emilia.

Another relationship developed more in this chapter is the relationship that Magda and Emilia have with the Jewish girl, Cora. Bridal gave these relationships to her readers to develop a difference, or tension, between Magda and Emilia. Emilia thought Cora would be more like she is. Instead she ends up being just as reckless as Magda, and her mother, Lilita. This worries Emilia immensely and her refusal to befriend Cora shows the audience how desperate she is to protect herself from any more pain. She does not understand her friend's need for wild adventure.

Magda develops a crush on Marco, one of *senora* Marta's sons. Magda thinks he is beautiful and brilliant. Marco's character is used, not to tell a love story, but to tell the story of the people in this country. He understands the political state of the country. His view is sensitive, powerful, and cynical. He does not want his country's power turned over to the United States. He rejects the poverty that his country is experiencing. He believes he is meant to help Uruguayan people. He desires an education so that he can make changes within his country.

Bridal chooses this character to tell the story of the people because of his relationship to the narrator. Marco tells his story second hand through the narrator's love-struck eyes, which gives a deeper dimension of compassion for the people. Bridal does not want her readers to distinguish between the two; one is used to accent the other. Also, she does not let her readers see the entire courting period of this relationship. Instead, she uses the device of foreshadowing to tell her audience that the two will be together in the future. Bridal does not leave the reader with any question of this.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

Magda and Marco are fighting over Magda going to listen to a speech on the University campus. Marco has now attended the University for about a year and thinks it better if Magda does not come because there is going to be a riot. Marco said that the Americans will make sure of it.

Che Guervara is speaking at the university. He is a revolutionary who is against Americans colonizing South America and the rest of the world. Magda wants to go to hear him speak not only to learn more about politics, but also to be with Marco. The police know Marco and want him arrested for his acts against the government. Magda convinces Emilia to sneak in with her. Emilia only agrees to go so she can see if her mother had been lying to her about her involvement with Che's stay in Uruguay.

The crowd loved Che Guervara. They applaud many times, so loudly that Emilia and Magda cover their ears. During the speech someone in the crowd is shot. This disturbs the crowd and a riot starts. The crowd is too strong for the girls' young bodies and they are carried away with it. People get hurt and stomped on as the police try to get in to see exactly what is taking place.

Magda and Emilia help a young girl who fell and hit her head on the street. The girls are amazed to see that it is Cora. Magda tells Emilia to stay with Cora and she will get help. She sticks her head out the doorway and starts down the dark streets. Before she finds help, Magda is stopped by a police officer. Magda tries to reason with the officer but he will not listen. Instead he grabs her and throws her to the ground. He feels her everywhere and finally reaches under her skirt and thrusts his fingers inside of her. She hits him with all her might and he falls back surprised by her strength. Magda hears voices calling her from a building and disappears from the street.

One of the men who called to Magda from the building escorts her back to her friends and the girls make it home from there. It is a long, hard journey all the way from the University to their *barrio*, especially with Magda's pain and Cora's head wound.

After Lilita tries to commit suicide, Magda tells her mother exactly what happened at Emilia's house. Magda and her mother wait for Emilia's father to return to tell him that his wife is in the hospital. He does not seem shocked. Instead, he is embarrassed about the inconvenience it caused Magda and *senora* Rita.

Emilia promises Lilita that she will not involve her daughter in the revolution any longer. Lilita recognizes Magda and Marco's conflict, even if Magda does not see or feel it yet. Lilita realizes that it will be necessary to make changes in Uruguay, but she does not want Emilia involved, nor does Emilia want to be involved.



## Chapter 8 Analysis

"And then Che came." Because of his efforts for working class people and his role as a revolutionary, Che Guevara is an icon among many American high school and college-age students. Cora sympathizes with Che's work as a socialist since she herself is a socialist. Because Cora is a European Jew, she knows about government-sponsored cruelty. She goes to the rally to show support for Che Guevara's cause and to witness the historic event. Cora's character is used to compare the current administration in Uruguay to the most recognizable, evil government known to the audience in recent history, Nazi Germany. Through this comparison, Cora gains the audience's sympathies.

Bridal persuades the reader's sympathies even further with the police attack on the narrator. The sexual assault the police officer commits against Magda further convinces the reader to find fault within this government and its employees. The assault against this innocent is used as a symbol for corruption and distrust of authority. By taking it to such a personal level the writer deeply involves her readers in this struggle against the government.





# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

In Latin culture, the fifteenth birthday is a young woman's coming out party and the girls will soon turn fifteen. After this, Magda will be allowed to date and attend parties. Because of hard economic times, Senora Rita and Lilita agree to have Magda and Emilia's party together. The planning continues for months.

Magda feels unclean after her encounter with the officer and hopes that the upcoming tradition of *carnival* will wash away her feelings of shame and guilt. She looks forward to putting on a mask and costume and losing herself in the moment. When the drummers finally arrive on their street, Magda and Marco dance together so wholeheartedly they could not distinguish themselves from one another. The dancing helps Magda feel whole again, at least for the moment.

The scene of *carnival* leads right into the girl's party. Since Magda's father is away on business, he can not lead her in the first dance so one of her uncles does. Then the boys cut in. The girls dance all night and have a wonderful time until Marco and Magda quarrel. Marco seems to know that Jaime, Marco's friend from the military, is not right for Magda. Magda is angered by his words and after Marco leaves for his training camp, Magda starts dating Jaime. Magda doesn't believe that someone like Marco could be in love with someone like her, although he is.

Jaime is using Magda to gain social status from his association with her family. Senora Rita makes plans for the girls to study in the United States through an exchange program in order to put a stop to Jaime and Magda's relationship. Emilia is especially excited; this is her only chance to visit the states. Senora Rita sees through Jaime and bribes him with her connections so he will stop seeing her daughter. He finally accepts when he receives the offer he wants. But he must wait until Magda returns home from her visit abroad before he can go to the United States to pursue his dreams.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

In the Latin culture, *fiesta de quince* symbolizes a girl coming of age. The author plays with this symbol as she describes the party. She uses colors and flowers that are in full bloom not only to describe the festivities but also to symbolize that the girls are becoming women. They are in some way "ready."

Jaime is used as a symbol for another aspect of Magda's coming of age. He plays with Magda's emotions to get what he wants from her mother. His deceitful actions, along with his poor relationship with the mother, are used to bring Magda out into the real world. This takes away some of the romantic ideas that she has about love and helps her mature. It illustrates that Magda has come of age even more than her party does.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Magda's *tias* visit the house when they hear of her visit to the United States. They give her advice and describe American men who will only talk about their cars and American women who speak terrible English. Magdalena wonders if she should go.

Magda goes to visit her grandmother for input on the trip. Her grandmother and grandfather's families did not approve of her grandparent's relationship and her great-grandmother did not approve of the embraces and touches of the Uruguayan culture. This English woman thought it beneath her son to behave in such a way. *Mamasita's* family was surprised by this attitude, for they were well established in Uruguay. The families agreed never to get together again. *Mamasita* and her English lover, Magda's grandfather, did not care; they continued to meet for naked swims and lovemaking. Magda's grandmother is embarrassed when she let this piece of information slip and makes Magda promise that she will never tell a soul. It will be their bond. In fact, Magda is *Mamasita's* favorite grandchild and Magda loves her.

*Mamasita* and Magda discuss Jaime. Magda tells her of *senora* Rita's disapproval of Jaime's family and that she hopes that Magda will forget about him during her visit to the States. *Mamasita* asks Magdalena what she would give up to marry Jaime. Magda did not know. *Mamasita* tells her that when she does know, she will be ready for marriage. Magda's grandmother shows great wisdom as she speaks of Magda's studies and her loves. Magda and her grandmother agree that her *tias* and Magda's mother are very spoiled and rude. They joke that intelligence sometimes skips a generation. Magda's grandmother hopes that Magda will be able to redeem her family by getting an education and will follow in *Mamasita's* footsteps by pursuing her dreams even if others do not approve.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

Magda's grandmother represents wisdom and kindness. *Mamasita* and Magda have similar souls. *Mamasita* tells Magda to go on her trip to the United States without regard to the judgment of others; a character trait the writer often shows the reader within this narrator.

By learning of *Mamasita's* past, the character is revealed. This woman did not heed her relative's concerns for the man that she loved. She lives by her own rules and encourages her granddaughter to do the same. This relationship with her grandmother gave Magda's character more momentum in that direction.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

Emilia and Magda board a plane for the United States along with several other exchange students. They have received letters from their American families welcoming them and wishing them happy travels. They leave their little airport with farewells from all of the Uruguayan families who have come to the airport to say goodbye. Their first view of New York City awes them. It isn't until they leave the city and are in the countryside that they relax and started talking again.

The students arrive at a small stone church where Emilia takes her leave of Magda and heads south on a bus to New York. Magda heads north to Michigan. Their American families meet them shortly after their arrival. Magda feels fortunate to get a very loving "mother" and "father." Magda enjoys the freedom her American family allows her. Her American sister, Janet, and she do not agree on politics and often speak of their differences.

Magda arrives in America two months after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Janet does not seem concerned about the state of her country or her studies. Magda thinks she and most American students are passive and oblivious about their country. She cannot believe that students trust the government and do not hold protests against them. *(Just a few years later Janet would write to Magda and question her own trust in her government. Janet had friends who would die in the Vietnam conflict and she shared her regrets with Magda.)*

Emilia has seen differences in the Uruguayan and the American cultures as well. She lives with a very devout Catholic family who attend mass daily. Emilia does not understand why Americans take their religion so seriously or the way they unquestionably take direction from the church when it is so rigid and has unrealistic views of the world and its people. Emilia writes to Magda daily and Magda reciprocates.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

It is not a coincidence that Bridal takes the main character and narrator of her story into the United States in the 1960s. This was an unsettled period for the country and especially for the youth of the country, with radical uprisings against the government. The writer's placement of Magda in this setting is a perfect way for this young girl to uncover the same truths she seeks in her own country.

Janet's character is used to begin a dialog between the two girls and ultimately between the two countries. The audience is familiar with the setting the author creates for the characters when they are in America. This familiarity with the setting is used to create the mood or tone of this part of the story.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

The reader experiences Magda's life in the United States through her letters. She writes to Emilia daily and Emilia does the same. She also receives a letter from Jaime who tells her of the political climate in Uruguay. Jaime proposes marriage in the letter but Magda does not respond. Instead she writes to Marco.

Marco writes about the news in Uruguay because he is involved with the student demonstrations. His father's military connections keep him out of trouble with the law. When the state is taken over by a dictator who is not sympathetic towards the people, his connections help to keep Marco alive.

Through their correspondence, Magda and Marco continue to grow closer. They miss each other and speak of Magda's return to Uruguay and their plans to go to the Beatles movie *Help!* when she returns.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

In this chapter, the author uses her character's letters to one another to communicate with the audience. This distances the audience from the narrator in a way that is similar to the way that the narrator is experiencing distance from other characters during her stay in the United States.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

After nine months in the United States, Magda returns to Uruguay and sees that the economic state of the country is not good. Magda's father had to sell more of his land and other families had to do the same.

Jaime is excited to see Magda and wants to get married. He plans to tell Magda's mother that they won't get married so she will keep her promise of giving him a visa to the United States. Then, after she fulfilled her promise, he and Magda will elope and move to the States where he will become a pilot and Magda can attend the university. Magda is hesitant about the marriage proposal and unsure if Jaime will be able to support her academic endeavor, even though she would love to go to the university. Jaime is upset over her hesitation. He realizes that she may in fact be in love with Marco, even if she can not admit this even to herself. When Jaime breaks up with her; Magda is relieved.

After being home for a long while, Magda discovers a coat in the back of her closet that she purchased for her friend Gabriela while in the United States. She decides to make a trip out to the Cerro to drop off the coat. Magda asks for Gabriela's advice about Marco. Gabriela is happy to hear that Magda has discovered her love for Marco and tells Magda that he would be a hard person to love and that Marco has to fulfill his mission in life.

A romance has devolved for Cora who, every day, meets a handsome boy outside of her house. The two met at a political rally and it was love at first site. Cora blushes when she speaks of the relationship. Her parents will never approve of the relationship because he is not Jewish. They arrange for Cora's engagement to a Jewish lawyer. The appearance of the Allenberg house becomes gloomy when Cora dishonors her parents and elopes with the handsome boy who brings her notes every day. The neighbors assume there will be a baby soon.



# Chapter 14

## Chapter 13 Summary

Magda seeks advice from Gabriela, an uneducated woman in the poor part of town. Magda sees people as friends and does not hold biases against them. Gabriela is a mystical woman who reads palms. This symbolizes her unconventional knowledge and the trust that Magda has in her. Magda does not speak to anyone but Gabriela about Marco, her true love. The writer shows the audience that all people possess knowledge even if it isn't gained through formal education.

Bridal uses three different stories of young women in love to demonstrate how this decision affects their lives. Magda is used, albeit not successfully, by Jaime for her mother's connections in the United States. Cora is used as a tragic figure, giving her true love and then taking it away because of her position in life. *Senora* Francisca and *senor* Ruben's daughter Raquel, has the hardest question. Does she want to help her family more than she wants respect and true love? All of these young women pick true love over financial success. Cora runs off with her true love leaving behind her stable family life. Magda rejects Jaime leaving behind her dreams for a higher education in America. And Raquel throws away her family's stabilities for the truth. All of these strong women show the audience that the truth is more important than anything else.



# Chapter 15

## Chapter 14 Summary

Orsino finally gets over the loss of his girlfriend and invites Magda and Emilia to a dance at the military base. Orsino assures Magda that Jaime will not be there, but he is. Jaime and Magda dance and make up enough to be friends after their fight. Magda even offers her mother's help to get Jaime a visa to the states. Jaime still wants to marry Magda but realizes this can never happen. The officer who kills his friend challenges Jaime to a duel, one of Uruguay's out-dated traditions, after Jaime refuses to shake the officer's hand. Jaime accepts and will not let this man win just because he is of higher rank.

There are weeks of preparation for the duel. Magda sneaks out of her house to go since her mother has forbidden her to get involved. She arrives just as shots are fired. The taxi driver and Magda run through the woods to see who won. Jaime is dead and the officer is alive. Magda hurries to Jaime's side and brushes the sand from his empty eyes. The taxi driver takes Magda home at Marco's request. Her neighbor's watch from their windows, wondering what had happened.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

Magda's character suffers a great loss when Jaime dies. Bridal has finally given the narrator a tragedy of her own. Through the tragedy, the cab driver becomes Magda's friend and symbolizes the strength she needs to get through the devastation. After the duel, he advises her to get married to a true love and have babies that will brighten up a day like she had done for him. The author uses this man as a sign of hope for Magda.



# Chapter 16

## Chapter 15 Summary

Pictures of Magda's bloodstained face cover the local newspapers the next day. Her mother is horrified. *Mamasita* takes over and brings Magda to Caupolican, her family's land in the countryside. *Mamasita* wishes for one of her family members to embrace their heritage in the as she has. No one, especially *Mamasita's* four girls, have the least bit of interest in running the ranch. It means nothing to them but money.

Magda hears from Marco during her recovery. He sends her a poem Jaime had written her before his death.

While Magda is recovering from Jaime's death her father offers to send her to school in the United States, something Magda has always dreamed of. Magda is overwhelmed by the offer but with *Mamasita's* help, the Caupolican will eventually become her home. She enrolls in the University at Montevideo to take classes in business and land management. To her delight Ramiro is in her classes. They met for coffee and speak of Cora. She is expecting a baby and Magda asks to see her.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

Magda takes after *Mamasita* and the author alludes to Magda's nature in many instances throughout the novel with the use of animals and her difference from her family. Magda's character has now grown enough to realize her true nature. This is a "coming of age" moment. With this, the author gives the audience rest for the focal character.

The narrator's dream only came true after a great loss. If she had not experienced the loss, she would not have realized the dream. This is a bittersweet moment built within the novel.





# Chapter 17

## Chapter 16 Summary

"I saw myself for the first time as a member of that group." Magda talks with her old friend, Cora, who is a member of a group called the Tupamaros, a well-organized group dedicated to taking down Uruguay government. They tell her of the small group of wealthy people in the country who have all the land and are benefitting from other people's work. That is when Magda realizes that she is part of the wealthy group. She decides right then to become part of the Tupamaro organization. She works for the USIS as a translator; a position that will help the Tupas gain knowledge and move toward their goal.

Magda works hard to become the best translator in the Tupamaros. Dan Mitrione requests Magda to do some of his translating work. Mitrione is the head of torture for the USIS. Magda arrives at his house and overhears Mitrione talking with one of his colleagues about the philosophies of torture. What she hears is awful and when the men leave the room she goes in and sees disturbing photos taken during such torture sessions.

Magda leaves Mitrione a note saying she is sick and goes straight to Ramiro to tell him what she had heard. She can now tell them how to capture Mitrione and keep him as a hostage to force the government to let some Tupas free from their "jails."

## Chapter 16 Analysis

The author uncovers the last romantic mystery of Cora's character. Cora's life runs parallel to the main character during the entire novel. Magda says everything is now clear to her. Many people in her life have been trying to tell her of the Tupamaros and the need to take over of the government. She now understands that Lilita, *senora* Francesca, and many others have tried to be her teachers all along. This enlightenment is a pivotal point in the novel.



# Chapter 18

## Chapter 17 Summary

Magda helps to plan the successful kidnapping of Dan Mitrione. Ironically, the capture tortures Magda mentally. She wants the evil man dead and is even willing to pull the trigger. One of the beggars Mitrione pulled off the streets for his experiments in torture was Gabriela, who is now dead. Magda is infuriated and does not understand why Ramiro and the other Tupas are prolonging his life. She wants justice for Gabriela.

Magda receives her wish as Dan Mitrione is put to death with two shots to the head. Magda is not as moved by his death as she thought she would be. She goes to visit *senora* Francesca, who is not surprised to see Magda. She had been expecting her for weeks. As the women talk, *senora* Francesca eases Magda's mind about the killing. She also questions if the Tupas should kill at all. She believes that the Tupas should either be completely peaceful, as the group was in the beginning, or completely a terrorist organization. The middle ground is hopeless.

Magda is scared to see Marco again since they are now on opposite sides of the law; Magda within the Tupas and Marco within the government military.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

The author uses symbolism to show the audience that Gabriela, and all that she was, has now become a part of Magda. Bridal does this by burying Gabriela at Magda's home. Gabriela has now becomes part of Magda's history. This fuels Magda's passion in helping with the capture of the torturer who killed her friend.

The audience is told of Magda's separation from Marco. This further symbolizes Magda's disconnection. She is anxious about seeing him again for she fears they can no longer be friends because of their different associations. Magda has truly changed because she can no longer relate to the person that had once made her whole.



# Chapter 19

## Chapter 18 Summary

Magda's next assignment from the Tupamaros is to get close to a British director named Peter Wentworth who works very closely with Geoffrey Jackson. Magda and Emilia try out for Wentworth's play and Emilia falls in love with him at first sight. Magda feels guilty about getting the information needed for the capture from her friend. Jackson disappears soon after Magda becomes involved and Peter stops calling on Emilia, who is devastated after having so much fun with the courtship. Finally, the girls, along with Emilia's parents, are invited to Peter's home. Emilia is sure that he would propose marriage during the gathering.

Peter did not propose to Emilia and instead has her arrested for conspiracy in Jackson's kidnapping. Of course it is Magda who is conspiring with the Tupas and not Emilia. The guards do not listen to Magda when she tells them this. Magda takes Lilita home in a cab. The driver, surprisingly, is Marco.

Magda tells Marco of her place within the Tupamaros organization. Marco tells her to never speak of this connection again or she may be arrested and tortured which will not help to free her friend. Instead, Marco instructs her to take care of the hysterical Lilita..

## Chapter 18 Analysis

Magda had always tried to protect Emilia. Putting her friend in harm's way shows the reader that Magda's priorities have now changed. Even if she isn't aware that her actions will harm her friend, Magda is no longer Emilia's protector although she still wants to be. When the guards do not listen to Magda's story about Jackson's disappearance, it symbolizes Magda's loss of protective power over her friend.

When Marco's character reemerges in the story, Magda's character loses even more control over her situation. Marco tells her what her duties should be. Marco has been a symbol of unconditional love for Magda throughout the story and again he puts his concern for her safety first, even if he did not agree with what she is doing for the Tupas.



# Chapter 20

## Chapter 19 Summary

When Emilia is released from prison three days after her arrest, she is furious with Magda and Lilita and wants them to tell her the truth of everything that has happened. She also wants to know why they had never involved her in their fight. Lilita and Magda explain about their connections with the Tupas. They also explain that they only did it because they want to protect her and all Uruguayans from unjust treatment. Lilita wants to do the fighting so her daughter will not have to; Magda does not know her excuse but asks for her friend's forgiveness anyway. Emilia is not ready to offer forgiveness yet.

Inside the military there is a secret negotiator between the government and the Tupas. Neither side has agreed to this but they still participate in the negotiations. Magda figures out that this negotiator has been Marco all along. He has been helping both sides meet their objectives peacefully. He even helps in the successful jailbreak of 104 Tupas.

## Chapter 19 Analysis

Magda and Lilita have done to Emilia what the government is now doing to so many innocent people; they use her to better their cause. Emilia is badly hurt, not only physically but mentally and emotionally as well. The author tells the audience of the suffering of a few for the improvement of the whole. This was a recurring theme throughout the novel. By using Emilia's character as the great example of this injustice, the audience is brought close to this experience in an emotional way.

Marco has never chosen sides in the conflict. He is working within the military system to help bring peace to both sides. Again, this shows the reader Marco's undying integrity and empathy for all people. It also puts the love interests, Magda and Marco, less at odds. Being on opposite sides of the law could have torn their close relationship apart but instead the characters are able to find some semblance of peace together.



# Chapter 21

## Chapter 20 Summary

After Ramiro's capture, Cora goes into hiding. Magda receives a letter from the Tupas that tells her to meet someone at the casino. Emilia wants to go with her on her next assignment and Magda was unable to talk her out of it. The girls arrive at the casino where a car is waiting to take Magda to her destination. The driver is unsure of Emilia until she showed him her scars, then she is viewed as one of them.

They arrive at a vacant apartment building. The driver tells the girls to go through a secret door in one of the walls. They do, and find Cora and others are hiding from the government. The hole smells of urine and excrement. Magda and Emilia bring the people food for days after so they will not starve. Magda makes arrangements for the next Tupas who will have to hide out there, leaving bread and extra water bottles. When she exits the building she is blindfolded and thrown into the back of a car.

They travel for several hours until Magda is drug into a building and put into a cell. She is there for weeks, and then months; she cannot be sure of how much time because her enemies keep the cell dark. She can hear people being tortured in the next cell and suffers along with them. She tries to collect their blood and sweat with toilet paper as it seeps into her cell so that their pain will not be just washed away by the big hose they use to bathe the prisoners.

Magda's cell is opened one day and she thinks her time has come to be tortured for information about the Tupa organization. She is determined not to reveal anything. Instead the guards have come to get her for Cora and Ramiro's wedding. She is one of their witnesses. Since they have a baby together the military has allowed the solemn ceremony to take place to give the baby a respectable name.

Magda returns to her cell to meet months and months of more silence. She plays games with her mind so she will not go completely mad. Magda repeats the same words to every guard that came into contact with her, "Tell Captain Pereira I'm here." They never respond.

## Chapter 20 Analysis

It is now the main character's turn to experience the torture that she had heard about and has been fighting to stop for so long. Since the narrator is the one experiencing imprisonment the reader can further understand the horror. Magda takes the reader through months of her thoughts and fears. Bridal creates negative anticipation by having Magda hear the torture that goes on right next to her. She suffers with her "friends" as they endure the torment she heard about from Emilia. Magda recalls hearing of the philosophies behind the torture from Mitrione himself.



Magda, with her steady fall into madness, signifies every prisoner's mind. By having Magda experience this prison firsthand, it is intensified and brought to a vibrant reality. The audience experiences the misery along with the narrator. This way the audience can further understand how unjust the military was to certain groups of people.



## Chapter 22

### Chapter 21 Summary

Captain Pereira has become Colonel Pereira. Marco is moving up in the ranks but still helping both sides. With his connections, he had been able to make sure no one laid a hand on Magda. This is why she had never been raped or tortured.

When Magda and Marco return to her home in the *barrio* Josefa answers the door and calls to everyone that Magda had returned alive. Marco takes his leave and Magda is left with her family and all the comforts of home. This does not last long because her father takes her to *Mamasita's* so the military will not find her. Magda apologizes to her father for her involvement with the Tupa's.

*Mamasita* welcomes Magda and the night she arrives, Marco visits. She and Marco hold each other and make love. Marco returns to his post in Montevideo that night to certain torture. Magda wants to help him for he is her love and her life. She does not want to go to Britain to help Marco as *Mamasita* suggests; instead she wants to stay in Uruguay to help.

*Mamasita* arranges for a private pilot tells her to go and appeal to Europe and expose to them what is going on in Uruguay. Magda realizes she has to use the power of her freedom to help Marco; the freedom that he has given her.

### Chapter 21 Analysis

In the final chapters two recurring heroes reemerge, Marco and *Mamasita*. Marco is Magda's hero as he finds her and releases her from jail, giving her back her freedom. *Mamasita* invites her once again to her home to hide from the military and recover from her horrible imprisonment. Both of these characters symbolize love and strength to Magda.

*Mamasita* and Marco are symbols for who Magda is becoming. She will become a strong hero as she takes leave of Uruguay to seek justice for those she leaves behind. By using her newly found freedom to free Marco and others from their torturers, Magda will grow into herself and become complete. Bridal leaves her audience with a sense of hope for Magda and also hope for her country, Uruguay.



# Characters

## Cora Allenberg

Cora is first introduced as a young girl who moves into Magda's neighborhood. She appears mysterious to both Magda and Emilia because she is always neatly dressed and, whenever she is outside of the home, she is always accompanied by her parents. Cora eventually is able to throw off the confines of her parents, but she does so through deceit, telling her parents one thing but then doing something quite different. She becomes a good friend of Magda's and Emilia's.

Cora elopes with Ramiro, a young man whom she meets at a political gathering. They both become involved with the Tupamaros and are arrested and tortured. Although they escape, they are recaptured. At the end of the story, no one knows what has happened to Cora. She is listed as a missing person.

## Mr. Allenberg

Cora's father, who is overly protective of Cora, afraid that people will offend or assault her because she is Jewish, mourns his daughter after she elopes with Ramiro.

## Mrs. Allenberg

Cora's mother, who together with her husband had to flee from Holland in a hearse in order to escape the Nazis, is very suspicious of Magda and Emilia, concerned that they will one day turn on her daughter and call her names because she is Jewish.

## Señora Francisca Arteaga

A neighbor of Magda's, Francisca is totally humiliated when her husband's mistress comes to her home and tells her about how much her husband spends on her. After that, Francisca goes out and spends a lot of money on her and her daughters' comfort. Francisca is also involved, covertly, with the Tupamaros. She represents a traditional woman who is going through a transition into a more modern and more independent stance.

## Jaime Betancourt

Jaime, Marco's friend, becomes involved in a relationship with Magda. Magda's mother believes that Jaime is trying to use Magda's position in society to make a better name for himself. Jaime's father is a tailor, a profession that Magda's mother looks down





upon. Although Jaime professes his love for Magda, he also encourages her to help him find a way to get a job as a pilot with an American airline.

One of Jaime's colleagues dies in a plane crash, which Jaime blames on his commanding officer and challenges him to a duel. Jaime dies in the contest. While Marco goes through his belongings, he finds a letter addressed, but never sent, to Magda. In the letter, Jaime's true feelings for Magda are revealed.

## Charrúas

The Charrúas are native people of Uruguay who initially posed a threat to all pioneering land settlers who came from Europe. One of the Charrúas supposedly had fallen in love with one of Magda's female ancestors, Isabel FitzGibbon, and made her a beautiful agate puzzle, which had been handed down from generation to generation in Magda's family.

## Emilia

Emilia moves into Magda's neighborhood while both girls are very young. She and Magda become lifelong friends, sharing their love of climbing into the poinsettia tree and watching people walk by. Although Emilia is included in all of Magda's childish pranks, as the girls grow older, Emilia becomes weary and very concerned that one day Magda's need for adventure will get them both into very serious trouble.

Emilia is described as being very nurturing. She worries about her mother, whose clandestine activities she does not understand. When Emilia's mother tries to commit suicide on the same day that Emilia has followed Magda to hear Che speak, she tells Magda that she no longer wants to be included in any more of Magda's activities. However, when Magda tells Emilia that she is auditioning for a play, Emilia insists on going with her. She meets Peter Wentworth at the audition and immediately falls in love with him. Later, when Peter's boss is kidnapped by the Tupamaros, Emilia is arrested as a suspect and is tortured. After this incident, she becomes involved with the revolution, helping Cora and Ramiro while they are in hiding. At the end of the story, Emilia is involved in the reunion of Magda and Marco.

## Charlie FitzGibbon

Charlie is the first male ancestor of Magda's to land in Uruguay from Ireland. Referred to as a "black Irishman," Charlie is Isabel's husband.



## Isabel FitzGibbon

The first female ancestor of Magda's to land in Uruguay, Isabel is married to Charlie but is said to have befriended a Charría native who fell in love with her and made a beautiful agate puzzle for her.

## Gabriela

Gabriela is a beautiful but poor young girl who lives on the Cerro, a tall hill outside of Montevideo, in a neighborhood of shacks. She is the mistress of a married man. She comes to Magda's neighborhood to beg for food and clothing for her children. During the revolution, she becomes involved with the Tupamaros, is caught, and is tortured to death.

## Gervasio

Gervasio is the oldest son of Gabriela. Marco befriends him and encourages Gervasio to attend college. When Gabriela is murdered, Gervasio assists Magda in finding his mother's body and re-burying it on Magda's grandmother's ranch.

## Carmen Grey

Carmen is one part of Magda's twin cousins. She comes to live with Magda's family after her parents die in a car crash. Because the twins are a little older than Magda, she watches them to see how they act with boys.

## Ernest Grey

Ernest is Magda's maternal grandfather, who came from London and fell in love and married Aurelia Ponce de Aragon, against his parents' advice. He and Aurelia reap the benefits of their parents trying to outdo one another in providing wealth to their children. However, his main interest is in sharing his love and life with Aurelia. He is never present in the story, having died prior to the time of narration.

## Magdalena Ortega Grey

Magdalena ("Magda") is the protagonist of the story. It is through her that the story is told. Readers learn about her childhood, in which she was always looking for some form of adventure, whether it was soaping the sidewalk so she could watch her neighbors slip and fall or sneaking into her cousins' room to find novels that portray explicit references to sex.



Magda's closest friend is Emilia, whom she has known since elementary school. Magda usually drags Emilia with her, as she seeks out new adventures. Magda loves excitement and going against the sometimes stifling social constraints that her parents try to impose on her due to her family's high standing in the community. Her family can trace their lineage back to one of the oldest European pioneers. Because of their large possessions of land, they belong to the class of the moneyed elite. The family is, therefore, in a general way, the enemy of the Tupamaros, with whom Magda eventually becomes involved.

The first female ancestor of Magda's to land in Uruguay, Isabel is married to Charlie but is said can trace their lineage back to one of the oldest European pioneers. Because of their large possessions of land, they belong to the class of the moneyed elite. The family is, therefore, in a general way, the enemy of the Tupamaros, with whom Magda eventually becomes involved.

Magda's reunion with Cora and Ramiro introduces her to the Tupamaros. Since she works for the USIS as a translator, she has access to information that the Tupamaros need. She often bemoans her covert activities, as they are subtle. She would rather be involved in the actual kidnappings, the releasing of prisoners from jail, than the spying that she is told to do. When she does become involved in helping to feed Cora and Ramiro, she is caught and sent to jail. She is tortured there, not physically but psychologically and emotionally. She is secretly released by Marco.

Magda, from an early age, falls in love with Marco. However, because he is older than she and because she creates a romantic image of him in her mind, she has trouble letting her feelings be known. Instead, when she turns fifteen, she becomes involved with Jaime, a friend of Marco's. She is never truly convinced that she loves Jaime, but there is an attraction to him that she does not fully understand. After spending a year in the States, however, she returns to Uruguay and realizes that it is Marco whom she really loves. She breaks up with Jaime shortly before he challenges Prego to a duel in which he dies. Marco, in the meantime, becomes so involved with his rising role in the military and his dual role of working undercover for the Tupamaros that he seldom has time to see Magda. In the end, the two lovers finally admit their strong feelings for one another. However, their paths cross for only a brief time, as Magda is imprisoned and, upon her release, Marco is thrown in jail. They meet again, after a seven-year span, at the end of the story, with Marco having only a few months left to live.

## Sofía Grey

Sofía is one part of Magda's twin cousins. She comes to live with Magda's family after being orphaned at the age of seven. The twins are a little more than a year older than Magda. Magda learns about sexual relationships through her cousins by eavesdropping on them.



## Josefa

Josefa is Magda's family cook. She tells Magda local myths about love and the making of *mate*, a local tea. At one point in the story, when Josefa cries over a family incident, Magda relates, "Her tears were a gift of caring." Then Magda continues, "She gave because it was in her nature to give."

## Lilita

Lilita is Emilia's mother. She is involved with the Tupamaros from the early development of the movement. She tries to hide her activities from her daughter, but Magda sneaks Emilia into a neighbor's house so they can eavesdrop on a conversation that reveals Lilita's involvement in the revolution. She later talks to Magda about the revolution, warning her that one day she will have to make a decision about which side she wants to take. In the end, she feels bad about having kept so many secrets from her daughter and reveals the truth to her. At the end of the story, Lilita has died.

## Mamsita

See Aurelia Ponce de Aragon

## Dan Mitrione

Based on a true character, Mitrione was reportedly trained by the FBI and served as a chief of police in the States. He is sent by the State Department to Uruguay to train the local police force. His alleged specialty was torture. Mitrione is the first person that the Tupamaros kidnap. He is later found dead.

## Señora Ortega

Magda's mother is typical of the upper-class Uruguayan women of her time. She condescends to her husband, tries to keep her children innocent of adult activities, and wants only that her daughter grow up healthy, well educated, and contented with a rich man. Appearances are very important to her. Only once does she open up to Magda, and that is after her daughter is sexually accosted by a policeman.

## Colonel Pereira

The father of Marco, Colonel Pereira encourages his son to enter the army, believing that this will keep him out of trouble. He wields his political power to keep Marco from being put in jail, while Marco, still in his teens, demonstrates alongside of students and laborers who are fighting for more decent wages.



Geoffrey is the British ambassador to Uruguay, whom the Tupamaro kidnap.

## **Marco Aurelio Pereira**

Marco is a young neighbor and childhood friend of Magda's. He is several years older than she and, as a teenager, he is constantly seeking out ways to join the students and laborers in their protests against the dictatorship of the Uruguayan government.

Marco's father is a military man, and eventually Marco enters the army, thus appeasing his father. However, Marco's real aim is to undermine the army. He senses that it will be the military that will become the strong force of the government, and he wants to be able to inform the Tupamaros of the army's activities. He also wants to rise in rank so that he too will have power, which he will use in favor of the revolution.

Marco is very intelligent and falls in love with Magda at an early age. However, he does not reveal his feelings until Magda is much older. He does educate Magda about what is happening in the government and in the revolution. It is because of Marco that Magda becomes involved in the revolution, although Marco does not know this at first. When he does discover that Magda is working with the Tupamaros, he tries to convince her to stop.

Marco quickly gains the commission of colonel in the army and is responsible for helping political prisoners be released. He is also involved in the satisfactory release of the British ambassador that the Tupamaros have kidnapped. Marco gains the release of Emilia when she is wrongfully accused of having been involved in the ambassador's kidnapping. He also gains Magda's release at the cost of his own imprisonment.

## **Señora Marta Pereira**

Marco's mother, Marta Pereira, is "an ample woman" who likes to cook and to write poetry and dramas for soap operas. She names her sons after characters in Shakespeare's plays. She also befriends Magda when Magda needs someone to talk to.

## **Aurelia Ponce de Aragon**

Aurelia is Magda's maternal grandmother, Mamasita, who was married to Ernest Grey at the young age of seventeen despite her parents' objection. She is a very lively woman, even in her old age. She maintains a large home in the city as well as the ranch called Caupolicán, out in the country, several hours' drive away from Montevideo.

Aurelia rides horses, climbs coconut trees, and tells Magda family secrets and important details about life in general that no one else will convey to her. She speaks openly and honestly to Magda, her favorite grandchild, to whom she wills her estate. She shelters Magda when she is in trouble and encourages her in love.



## Captain Prego

Prego is Jaime's commanding officer who agrees to take part in a duel with Jaime, who slaps him in the face with a glove, displaying his anger over the death of a pilot, whom Jaime believes died in a crash due to Captain Prego's negligence. Prego ends up killing Jaime.

## Ramiro

Ramiro is a young man who meets Cora at a political rally. He falls in love with Cora, and the couple elopes when Cora's parents try to make her marry a young Jewish man. Ramiro joins the Tupamaros with Cora and becomes involved in two kidnappings, which eventually lead to his arrest. He is tortured and finally released from jail but dies shortly afterward.

## Mr. Stelby

Stelby is an English neighbor who is used to show the contrast between European culture and manners and Uruguayan ones. The narrator states, "for reasons no one could fathom, they [the Stelbys] had decided to remain in a country they never stopped reviling."

## The Tías

The tías are Magda's mother's sisters: Catalina, Josefina, and Aurora. They come to Magda's house for tea on several occasions, and Magda loves to eavesdrop on their conversations. It is through their talk that she learns inside stories about various neighbors, about men and sex, and about politics.

## Tupamaros

The Tupamaros are a group of people who secretly have come together to help to at least embarrass Uruguay's dictatorship. They are referred to as urban guerillas, and it is through them that the revolution against the government is conducted. Although they start peacefully with marches, speeches, and protests, they kidnap one of the men responsible for the torturing of political prisoners and kill him.

Peter works with Ambassador Geoffrey Jackson, and it is through Wentworth that Magda gains information about the ambassador. Wentworth directs the play that Magda and Emilia audition for. When he first sees Emilia, he is captivated by her and falls in love. However, after the ambassador is kidnapped, Wentworth falsely accuses Emilia of being involved and arranges to have her arrested. After she is found innocent, Wentworth continues to refuse to have anything to do with her.



# Themes

## Oppression

Oppression is a very strong theme in this book, and it is demonstrated to exist in several different areas of the Uruguayan culture. There is the oppression of females from the rules set by the patriarchal society, which encourages its females to gain an education but sets double standards for other aspects of the women's lives. For instance, to have sex before a woman is married is not only discouraged, it is grounds for punishment, possibly a beating. However, it is standard practice for men to have sex before marriage. Not only that, it is common for most married men to have one or more mistresses. For women, once they are married, they are encouraged to stay home; some are even told they must stay in the house all day and are not allowed out unless accompanied by their husbands.

Landowners, at the time of this story, rule in Uruguay. They wield both economic and political power. People who do not own land scrounge for poor-paying jobs, and the population of poor people is growing. Landowners enjoy their elite position and exclude others from their ranks. Daughters are expected to marry within their economic class or to better themselves by marrying into richer families. If a young woman falls in love with someone her parents believe is beneath her, that relationship is thwarted.

There is also the oppression of ideas. Students who have their minds opened to other types of political philosophies and who try to pressure their oppressive government to make changes are imprisoned and tortured. This not only gets rid of the so-called dissidents but attempts to suppress others from speaking out as well. The government uses fear as an oppressor to maintain control over the masses.

## Love

Magda comes of age in many different ways in this story. First, she goes through puberty, turning fifteen in the middle of the novel and awakening to the sexual desires of her body. She is aroused by Marco, but it is Jaime with whom she first encounters sex and mistakes it for love. With Marco, she develops into an understanding of mature love.

She also comes of age in her awareness of the culture around her. At first, she has very little understanding of her own social status. She lives in a privileged world and believes that everyone else does too. Although she visits Gabriela and sees her poverty, she does not fully grasp the hardships that Gabriela must face. Later, when she is rescued from the policeman who tries to sexually assault her, she realizes that the students who befriend her have offered her things that she takes for granted, like a pair of shoes, which she realizes might be the only pair that that particular student owns. When Jaime comments that he cannot afford to go to school, Magda finds the statement



unbelievable. School in Uruguay is free. Then she realizes that Jaime has no money to pay for books, housing, food, and the other necessary items that he will need.

In the area of politics, Magda learns to open her mind to different voices, not just those who hand her propaganda about the current government regime. She discovers there is corruption and greed among the officials, which has led to the oppression of many Uruguayans. She comes to a point in her life when she must decide whether to continue to ignore the hardships of those around her or to do something that might be of service to them. Her decisions are made in spite of the difficulties it may cause her own family.

Various forms of love are expressed in this novel. There is the strong friendship between Magda and Emilia that binds them together from their earliest years in elementary school to the end of the story, when Emilia witnesses the reunion of Magda and Marco.

In contrast is the tragic love affair between Magda and Marco, which is intense despite the fact that the two of them are rarely together. They feel their love for one another as teens but are too young to express it. By the time they are more fully matured, their roles in the revolution keep them separated. They make love only once throughout the telling of the story, and then they are torn apart again as Marco sacrifices his own life to save Magda. Once both of them are free, Marco's health is so deteriorated that he has only a few months to live.

There is also the love of country, as expressed by the young men and women who were willing to sacrifice their lives to bring down the dictatorship that was ruining Uruguay. Unable to close their eyes to the poverty and inequalities that existed as a result of the corrupt officials and the ruling elite, the students, the workers, and the poor risked everything that they had to bring about change.

Also represented is the love of the land as seen through Magda and her grandmother and their attachment to the family ranch. It is a love of the ways of nature and of the peace of the open space. It is also a respect for their ancestors who gave them the gift of the land.





# Style

## Point of View

The story is narrated in the first person, who readers can assume is Magda. Because of the first-person narrative, the story reads as if it has been written specifically for the reader, almost as if the author were writing a letter. The only time the first-person narration is altered is in chapter twelve, when the reader is privy to several actual letters, supposedly written by one character to another. However, even in the letters, of course, the point of view remains first person.

With the first-person narration, the story has a feel of a documentary, giving the plot of the story more authenticity. The narrator sounds as if she is merely relating events that have happened to her, and there is no reason to doubt her. The disadvantage of using the first-person narrator is that the reader has no access to the thoughts of all the other characters in the story. Every character and every event is seen through the eyes of the narrator. Although the narrator may be reliable, she might also be biased. However, the reader has no choice but to witness the events as the narrator remembers them and the way she perceives them. Since a large part of the story involves the memories of a young girl, there is a slight tendency to question some of the narrator's interpretations.

## Setting

The setting in *The Tree of Red Stars* is almost a character in itself. The political turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s in Uruguay affects all the characters in the story. It is the setting of the story, as well as the consequences of that setting, that moved the author to write the story in the first place. Most of the characterization is used to put individual faces on the huge conflicts and the chaos that were taking place. Although the reader is pulled in by the stories of the characters' lives, it is the setting that makes this story unique.

## Proselytization

The only criticism that has been made against the writing style of this novel is Bridal's occasional slips into a type of proselytization, a seeming attempt to persuade the reader to accept certain beliefs. As the story unfolds, Bridal occasionally ventures into political discussions between her characters. Sometimes these sections read as if she is trying to convince the reader rather than relate a discussion between two characters. The conversations are much longer than other dialogues. The same theme of U.S. intervention in Uruguayan politics is repeated in these specific discussions. Because of this, the discussions feel as if they have been inserted into the story artificially. It is the type of material that is more often found in a documentary than in a novel.



# Historical Context

## Early History

Uruguay's original populations consisted of the Charrúa Indians. They were a group of huntergatherers and, according to most historical accounts, they disliked outsiders. In 1516, when Spaniards first stepped foot into Uruguay, the Charrúa Indians killed Spanish explorer Juan Díaz de Solís and most of his party. Later, in the seventeenth century, the Charrúas became somewhat more friendly and set up trade with the Spanish explorers.

By the latter part of the seventeenth century, a settlement called Colonia was established by the Portuguese at the mouth of the Rio de la Plata. The Spanish, who did not approve of this settlement, built a citadel in Montevideo and later fought the Portuguese and won and then exiled José Artigas, an early Uruguayan hero. In 1828, the Uruguayans, inspired by Artigas, rose up against the Spanish and claimed Uruguay as an independent state.

During most of the nineteenth century, Uruguay had to fight either the Argentines or the Brazilians to maintain their independence. The British arrived in Uruguay and established several new industries, including importing British-raised cattle. Internal politics were made unstable by the two warring political parties, the Blancos and the Colorados, who were responsible for a civil war and several dictatorships.

## Modern History

At the beginning of the twentieth century, José Batlle y Ordóñez was elected president. It was under his leadership that Uruguay became what is often referred to as the only welfare state in South America. He served two terms, during which he initiated a wide range of social welfare programs and abolished capital punishment.

Unfortunately, due to Uruguay's lack of natural resources and a slump in the demand for wool and meat, the two principal exports, to refurbish its economy, the country slowly became weighted down by the heavy expenses of Batlle y Ordóñez's social programs. By the 1960s, there was mass unemployment and inflation. Added to this was an overgrown government riddled with corruption. These factors led to a loud outcry from the Uruguayan population who was most affected by the decline in the economy—the unemployed workers, the poor, and the student population. It was during this time that the urban guerrilla movement was created.

At the beginning of the creation of this group, Uruguayan military and police membership was very low. Uruguay had enjoyed several decades of peace, and it was believed that there was little need to reinforce either establishment. The early goal of the Tupamaros was to embarrass the Uruguayan government. They stole from banks and gun shops. As their membership grew, they began to kidnap government officials.



As the economy grew worse, Montevideo often experienced student rioting. By 1968, a national emergency was declared. In 1970, Dan Mitrione, an American policeman who had been sent to Uruguay from the United States reportedly to teach Uruguayan police forces how to control the rising chaos, was kidnapped and later killed when the government refused to release political prisoners.

The Tupamaros, after the government made it illegal for any radio broadcast or any other media to mention their name, began their own underground media and produced much print and broadcast propaganda. As they grew stronger in force, they made the police look inept. After several policemen were killed, the police force went on strike, demanding better pay and more protection. As the economy continued to fail and after a series of corruption scandals, public support for the government began to diminish.

In 1971, a more liberal political party called the Frente Amplio gained support and looked as if they might actually have a chance to win the election. However, when the Tupamaros came out in favor of the Frente Amplio, the Uruguayan population, still stunned by the murder of Mitrione, turned away from the party and elected Juan María Bordaberry, who immediately suspended civil liberties and declared a state of internal war with the Tupamaros. Toward this end, the army was called into action, and mass arrests, torture, and free-handed search operations ensued. By the end of 1972, the Tupamaros ceased to be a threat.

Once in power, the military demanded that all left-wing political activity be suppressed and the legislature dissolved. For the next eleven years, Uruguay was ruled by one of the most repressive dictatorships in South America.

In 1984, Julio María Sanguinette won the presidential election. Under his leadership, Uruguay returned to democratic traditions. The government issued a massive political amnesty, but no other far-reaching reforms were made. Luis Alberto Lacalle was elected in 1990 but proved unpopular due to his attempts to restructure the economy. In the following election, Sanguinetti was returned to office.

The year 1999 saw the election of Jorge Batlle, who has promised a return to progressive social programs. He is the first president to call for a search for those people who disappeared during the reign of the Tupamaros. Although the Uruguayan government begins to show signs of a return to democratic rule, there still remain severe restrictions on the Uruguayan press to refrain from publishing any stories that speak out against the government and can be viewed as inciting violence or insulting the nation. Stiff penalties for such crimes range up to a possible three years in jail.



## Critical Overview

Bridal realized, upon traveling outside of Uruguay, that the story of her country was little known. Not only did people not know exactly where Uruguay was located, they had little idea of the terrible tragedy that was unfolding there. In writing *The Tree of Red Stars*, Bridal hoped, as Sybil S. Steinberg noted for *Publishers Weekly*, to create a "memorial to lost lives."

Bridal's debut novel won her the Milkweed Prize for fiction, and the overall reaction by critics has been one of praise. Steinberg, for instance, appreciated Bridal's storyline, which she described as "an unblinking exploration of the way absolute power can destroy civilized existence." She also referred to Bridal's "understated prose," which she found capable of permitting "large moments to occur without melodrama, and small ones to build into potent revelations."

In a review for *Library Journal*, Ellen Flexman likened Bridal's first novel to that of Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*. Allende is a fellow South American author, whose family also suffered during an oppressive political regime in Chile. Flexman recommended Bridal's book for its "simple, straightforward plot," which captured "the terror of modern despotism as well as the hope necessary to overcome it."

In general reference to authors from South America, Friedman, in her article for the *New York Times*, stated that Bridal brought "a fresh voice to Latin American literature." Bridal relates her story, Friedman contended, "with a chillingly understated sense of inevitability." A critic for the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Isabel Schon, called Bridal's story, a "moving, sometimes witty account" of growing up in Montevideo. Schon continued, "this tender story of love and friendship provides an insightful view into the realities of Latin American politics and life."

# Criticism

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



# Critical Essay #1

*Hart has degrees in English literature and creative writing and focuses her writing on literary themes. In this essay, Hart examines the connections between the protagonist Magda and the character Gabriela. Although the two women appear to live worlds apart, the author has built a very strong relationship between them.*

In Tessa Bridal's *The Tree of Red Stars*, Magda, the protagonist of the story, grows up in the midst of many female characters. Those closest to her include Emilia, a young girl Magda's age, whom the protagonist has known since elementary school. Emilia has a gentle soul that attracts Magda to her. It is through her that Magda learns to see people as creatures with emotions, people who need to be nurtured, whereas Magda had tended to view the people around her as mysterious puzzles or strange machines that she would like to take apart to better understand how they work. Emilia is a caretaker, whereas Magda is a scientist. Magda is also an adventurer, often including Emilia in her escapades, with Emilia usually giving in but reluctantly so.

Another childhood friend who influences Magda's early life is Cora, whose exotic family culture lures both Magda and Emilia to want to get to know her. They are awed by Cora's strong connection with her father, something neither Magda nor Emilia enjoys. They soon learn, however, that because of her father's overprotection, Cora remains somewhat a prisoner in her home, denied the free rein that Magda and Emilia enjoy to casually play in the river or to pull childish pranks. It is from Cora that Magda learns a new form of defiance, as Cora slowly moves away from her father's control, deceiving him in order to establish her own identity. Magda also celebrates Cora's decision to elope with a young lover of her choice rather than to marry a man whom her parents have chosen for her.

These girls share Magda's childhood with her on an almost daily basis. They live in her neighborhood, enjoying the same easy lifestyle of comfort afforded by wealth. That neighborhood is many miles away from the Cerro, the tallest hill in Uruguay, abandoned by all but a few soldiers who are stationed at the museum on the summit and "by the city's poorest residents, who lived on the hillside in houses made from the city's leftovers." It is on this hill that Gabriela lives in a house made of cardboard and newspapers, a drastically different environment from that in which Magda lives. However, despite the disparate economics that influence their lives, there are strong similarities that drive Magda toward Gabriela, that make her want to get to know her.

Gabriela is introduced in the first chapter of the novel and is described first by the color of her hair, the only other "redheaded young woman" in the story besides Magda; and, next, there is mention of the fact that she is "driving a rather fine horse," which stands in stark difference to the normally "tough and dusty" horses that other people from the Cerro drive, thus immediately setting Gabriela in a somewhat elevated position. Gabriela is also said to have physical features that "in a different time and place would have made her a movie star." The fact that, immediately following her introduction, Magda devises a plan in which she and Emilia will hide in the back of the young



woman's wagon in order to go back to the Cerro to see where Gabriela lives makes the reader aware that this redheaded eighteen-year-old holds great significance. Gabriela carries. In many ways, Gabriela represents exactly the opposite of Magda's potential. Gabriela is the mistress of a married man. She will give birth to several children over the course of the story. For Gabriela, being the mistress of a man of money and social standing might be the most that she can wish for. Her options in the Uruguayan society, during the time of the novel, are slight.

Magda, on the other hand, will fall in love with a neighborhood boy, with whom she will never have children. Her only other sexual relations will be protected, it is subtly suggested, as the issue of condoms is somewhat obliquely mentioned. Magda also not only has the option of going to college, but it is assumed from childhood that she will eventually attain a degree. Magda's options are multiple, given to her because of her family's connections and high standing in a society that at one time was considered one of the most successful welfare states in the world. It is therefore through a comparison of Magda and Gabriela that Bridal characterizes the political, social, and economic changes that have occurred in Uruguay between the early decades of the twentieth century and those of the 1950s through the 1970s, the setting when most of the drama of this novel takes place. The disparity that exists between Magda and Gabriela is the stimulus of the student riots, the labor strikes, and, ultimately, the revolution, the main focus of the story.

However, there is more than just the obvious dissimilarities between Magda and Gabriela. As already mentioned, they both have red hair, a simple fact that could easily be overlooked except that it is so emphasized. Gabriela's red hair is multiplied by her children, a fact that Magda uses later in the story to help her pinpoint Gabriela's whereabouts. She revisits the Cerro but cannot remember where Gabriela lives. Then she notices the redheaded children. She uses the color of their hair as a beacon. In the beginning of the story, it is Magda's red hair that is referred to as a beacon, one that might catch the eye of the soldiers, whom Gabriela fears. So it is with the color of their hair that Bridal first creates a link. Next, it is with a plate that Magda made in school, while quite young, for her mother. Magda's mother gave it away but told Magda that it had broken and had to be discarded. When Magda visits Gabriela, she finds the plate hanging on the wall. Gabriela is proud of the plate, whereas Magda's mother was ashamed of it. Through the plate, Bridal deepens the connection between Magda and Gabriela. With the color of hair, she establishes a sort of sisterhood between them. With the plate, Gabriela takes on a somewhat maternal role.

Magda and Gabriela also share a love of Marco. Once established in the army, Marco provides health benefits to Gabriela and her children. He also helps her children obtain an education. It is through Gabriela that Marco, in turn, understands on a personal level the elements of poverty. They both share political philosophies and are both involved in the revolution.

Magda's love of Marco is on a different level. She is attracted to him physically and emotionally. She is in awe of his intelligence and his commitment. Although it takes Magda a while to recognize her love of Marco, Gabriela notices it immediately. "The two



of you are meant for one another," she tells Magda, upon Magda's admission that she loves him. However, she warns Magda that Marco "has a mission" and that such men "are difficult to love." In this role, Gabriela acts as older sister to Magda. She is mature enough to understand love and to recognize not only Marco's personality but also his passion. It is Gabriela who also predicts (and in that way warns Magda) that Marco will never have children and that "a piece of his lifeline is missing." She also tells Magda that his love is very strong.

Although Magda's visits to Gabriela's house cease as she matures into a woman, Gabriela's presence remains throughout the story. While working for the USIS as a translator, Magda is called to the home of Dan Mitrione. While there, acting in her capacity as spy for the Tupamaros, Magda overhears Mitrione discussing techniques of torture and his suggestions of using poor people to practice the new methods on. Later, she discovers photographs of people who have been his victims, and it is through these pictures that she learns that Gabriela has been murdered by Mitrione and his men. Prior to this, Magda had somewhat halfheartedly become involved with the Tupamaros. Once she discovers that Gabriela has suffered a horrendous death, her commitment changes. At first she is outraged and extremely passionate, wanting to kill Mitrione with her own hands. Later, she tempers her emotions, but Gabriela sustains the personal image in her mind, the image that makes Magda willing to sacrifice her own life in order to create changes in her government and in her country. Magda locates Gabriela's body and takes it to Caupolicán, Magda's family ranch in the wilderness. Here she reburies her friend, paying her the highest compliment that is possible, given the circumstances. Caupolicán is a place of great beauty and peace for Magda. It represents the part of Uruguay that she most loves. Magda has committed herself to this land, promising her beloved grandmother that she will care for the land in a way that no one else in her family understands. By burying Gabriela here, Magda relays the message to Gabriela's son that she will also care for his mother, giving her peace in her death that she could not give her while she was living.

For Magda, Gabriela was someone to be admired. She was beautiful and self-determining. She was like a goddess of motherhood, fruitful and giving. She was also mature and understanding, qualities that were not dependent on social status, education, or money. However, Gabriela also represented suffering, both from the daily hardships of poverty and from the extreme inhumane conditions of warfare. It was because of these details of her life that she brought Magda out of her sheltered cocoon of privileged prejudice and taught her about the world of inequality and lack of opportunity. Despite the cultured differences of their childhoods and their consequential roles as adults, in the end they shared very similar perspectives on life.

It was through Gabriela that Magda learned to give without expecting anything in return. It was also through her that Magda comprehended that although money provided certain comforts, it was not the highest goal to reach for. Love and friendship went much further. Had Magda not jumped onto that wagon and ridden with Gabriela to the Cerro, poverty might have remained a distant cliché, something talked about but never fully understood. Through Gabriela, in some ways her exact opposite, Magda found herself.



**Source:** Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on *The Tree of Red Stars*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.



## Critical Essay #2

*Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and literature at several colleges in Illinois. In this essay, Kelly explores the ways in which Magda's gender and social class make her the ideal narrator for the story that she tells.*

The triumph of Tessa Bridal's 1997 novel, *The Tree of Red Stars*, is not that it introduces contemporary American readers to the political upheaval in Uruguay in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, the political situation surrounding the events of the book is somewhat under-explained, left to function as a frightening shadow and not really examined in much detail. Like much in totalitarian countries, the political dynamic that drives the actions of the characters in this novel is shrouded behind a veil of lies and destroyed evidence. Read as a novel about Uruguayan history, this book can only hope to sensitize readers to the signs of what a government is like when it is in the process of turning against its citizens. However, the book is of even more immediate relevance to readers than that. It presents a universal story of how individuals are drawn into revolutionary causes. The natural process that the novel's protagonist, Magdalena Ortega Grey, undergoes is parallel to a political maturation that readers around the world can relate to in their own lives.

At first glance, Magda might seem to be a weak choice to be the narrator of a novel about social upheaval. She comes from a wealthy family, and her parents and extended family make certain that she is trained in the bourgeois values that fit upper-middle-class Uruguayan society. Because of her elevated social status, it would have been very easy to ruin the novel by portraying Magda's concerns falsely.

In every social movement that entails fighting for the rights of the oppressed, there are purists who have a difficult time accepting outsiders who have benefited from the rules made by the oppressors. The rich, according to them, could never experience the social outrage needed of true revolutionaries. Doubtlessly, many who have suffered from brutal regimes like the one described in this book would dismiss Magda. Bridal gives an example of this thinking in Laura, the girl who gives up her only boots when Magda is fleeing from the police. While mocking Magda's wealth, Laura sarcastically and correctly guesses that the rich girl's parents would never let her come to the area of town where Laura lives. She sees Magda as someone who is dabbling in revolution but is free to flee back to her own sheltered world when things turn bad. Magda, in fact, seems to feel the same way about herself: at the end of the story, when her grandmother tries to convince her that the best way to help free Marco is to go to Europe and publicize the events in Uruguay, Magda feels that leaving the country would be a cowardly act of abandonment.

While a wealthy character in a novel about revolution might be accused of being superficial, there is also the danger that a writer might be tempted to use a wealthy protagonist to overstate the revolutionary cause. A protagonist from the ranks of the oppressed might not allow a writer to bring out the vibrancy of the situation. An impoverished narrator would be familiar with the tactics that are used to keep all of her



or his peers from revolting, but such characters would show less dramatic change when taking up the cause. Oppressed people tend to take a world-weary, jaded view toward their own situations, having gradually grown familiar with oppression on a daily basis. For a child raised in privilege, however, the moment of suddenly becoming aware of evil comes as a great shock. It is easy for novelists to shake up their readers by exposing governmental repression to the book's bourgeois protagonist (which, to some extent, actually is the structure of *The Tree of Red Stars*) who then becomes a zealous convert to political activism.

Wisely, Bridal manages to make Magda a credible observer and participant, showing her commitment to political change to be something that, despite her upbringing, she is in fact able to feel sincerely. Used as she is here, the character of an upper-middle-class girl can be an excellent tool for showing readers what is involved in many levels of a society in turmoil.

For one thing, Magda's social position makes her an outsider from the revolution, which is started by the poor. She is only vaguely aware of its existence as a child, putting together the pieces that explain it to her throughout the course of the novel. As a structural technique, Magda's growing awareness of the problems of Uruguay's poor follow the standard "fish out of water" pattern: just as some stories follow a person from a foreign land, or, more recently, an extraterrestrial, learning about a new culture, so Magda's observations about the revolutionary movement are used to introduce the details of the revolution to the book's readership.

Perhaps the greatest benefit that Magda's position offers to the book's narrative structure is that it gives her access to many different aspects of Uruguayan society. Throughout the course of the novel, Magda becomes familiar with people of her own social class but also with poor people such as Gabriella and with the revolutionaries of the Tupamaros movement. If Bridal had written Magda as a member of a poorer class, her options for social interaction would have been limited. One of the privileges of wealth is that it is used, in most cases, to shut out those of poorer classes. Bridal shows this in the way that Cora is raised in seclusion, locked away from the rest of the world for her own protection because of her family's experiences as Jews in Europe in the forties. Though the protective shield they throw around her is notably

extreme, it is a reflection of the way that all Uruguayan families shelter children of their class. The distinction between the middle class's security and the lower class's defenselessness is actually made clear in the book's very first chapter. When Magda and Emilia disappear to the poor section of town, search parties are formed, and the residents of the Cerro rush to return them home before the situation becomes violent, whereas a few pages later, when Gabriela's baby is missing in the middle-class neighborhood, there is nothing she can do but cry. The social position of Magda's family allows her to cross over into the homes and lives of the poor, but a poor person does not have equal access into the homes of the rich.

If the protagonist of *The Tree of Red Stars* had been poor, Bridal would not have had the means for showing readers how the ruling class thinks. She does this in the form of



Magda's gossipy aunts, who consider themselves to be the bearers of traditional standards. In addition, Magda has the opportunity to travel to America as an exchange student and observe firsthand what life is like in a consumer society, where the government is left to carry on unquestioned. Her superb education, including special tutors whom only a few Uruguayans would be able to afford, gains Magda entry into a government position that will eventually expose her to the reality of torture as it is viewed by the torturers: as some sort of game. She lives in the area of town known for its embassies, a fact that in itself gives her a global perspective from her earliest childhood. One final aspect of her social position is her grandmother, a strong-willed landowner, who has ties to the country that are deeper than those of temporary political alliances.

These are the reasons why Magda's social class makes her uniquely qualified to tell this story. The ways in which her social class affects the book's plot are, on the other hand, discussed openly within the novel. An early example of this comes when she is escaping the riot that breaks out during Che Guevara's speech. The young revolutionaries who rescue her, while mocking her for being from a rich family, also recognize how helpless she is in the unfamiliar situation of police brutality and protect her. Much later, after she is released from jail, Magda's family has the means to send her out of Montevideo and, eventually, out of the country. She is sent to Europe with an heirloom worth a half million dollars and the skill to earn a living in a strange land. If Magda had come from a poor family, Bridal would have had to take her down different paths.

While examining how this novel's narrator allows Bridal to tell a story that could easily have turned too sensationalistic, angry, or superficial, it is important to note the significance of the narrator's gender. Using a girl to tell the story may not even have been a conscious choice: it is quite likely that Bridal did not write about a girl in Uruguay as a storytelling strategy but simply because that is what she knew best and understood. Still, the book makes much about the roles of women and men in the society that it examines, and viewing mid-century Uruguay through the eyes of a maturing woman allows this book to explore its subject to its fullest.

At the time of this novel, change was sweeping through Uruguayan society, redefining gender relationships. This change in gender politics preceded the political revolution and may have been responsible for it to no measurable degree. Regardless of the historical accuracy of the role of women's liberation in bringing about social revolution, the fact that Bridal made such splendid use of their convergence is a mark of extremely intelligent writing. The first third of the book is not explicitly about revolution: it is dedicated to Magda and Emilia's girlhood adventures, and the role models who shaped their views of who they were and could be.

The Uruguay of Magda's youth is a traditional Latin American society, with a double standard regarding sexuality. Men, such as Francisca's husband in the book, are expected to have both a wife and a mistress, while women, like Magda's older cousin Sofía, have their reputations carefully guarded, so that they will not lose their value as material for marriage. This logical inconsistency is obvious to Magda and Emilia, who joke about it.



As the girls grow, they see the double standard change. One force for social change is the progressivism of other countries, particularly America. Magda's aunts pretend to be shocked at the behavior of Miss Newman, an American woman who wears pants and objects openly and violently to the Uruguayan "tradition" of men shouting sexual suggestions at women in the street. Their pretense at disapproving is betrayed by the fact that they talk so much about her, betraying a fascination with Miss Newman's fiery self-assurance.

Though Miss Newman is only a shadowy, vague, talked-about character, Emilia's mother Lilita is quite real in the novel and a strong influence on both girls' lives: she tells Magda outright that she hates men because she is jealous of their freedom. Sofía, chastised because she has been seen in public with a boy, openly flaunts her sexuality, daring Magda's father to beat her again and again if he wants, vowing that the beatings will not change her behavior.

It is easy to see how these role models from the early part of the book influence Magda's behavior in the later chapters. Without them, and the numerous skirmishes against social expectations that Magda and Emilia go through as girls, there would be little point to the novel relating their childhood exploits. As it is, the daily struggle for women to earn a place in society foreshadows the struggle of the poor that turns into a life-or-death struggle by the book's end.

Novels told in the first person are limited by the experiences of their narrators. In addition to its other virtues, *The Tree of Red Stars* has a narrator who has access to a variety of social situations and the drive to explore them. Ultimately, the aspects that make Magda a useful narrative tool trip her up, leading her into situations that endanger the lives of those she loves. She is so uniquely adventurous and capable that Emilia and Marco are unable to keep up with her and are trapped in webs that she has escaped. For readers, the world of this novel would not be as fully realized if it were witnessed through the eyes of any other character.

**Source:** David Kelly, Critical Essay on *The Tree of Red Stars*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.



## Critical Essay #3

*Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses the key images in the novel, examines the political context in which they appear, and offers some thoughts about the relevance of the story to the contemporary political world.*

Bridal's *The Tree of Red Stars* is a novel of almost infinite delicacy that also possesses the force of a sudden, hard punch in the stomach. Its poetic richness includes a few key images—especially the tree and the river—that encapsulate the essence of the novel, while the plot gives much food for thought about the phenomenon of terrorism and the relations between Latin America and the United States.

It is the images that remain indelibly imprinted in the mind long after the reader has finished the novel. The most prominent is that of the old poinsettia tree, which is the "tree of red stars" of the title. This is a reference to the fact that in winter the tree flowers red. Magda thinks it looks like "a hundred small fires holding the cold at bay." This image of the tree that flowers red reverberates at so many levels that it comes to embrace the totality of human life, in pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, even life and death. It carries the subtlest themes of the novel.

As a young girl, Magda spends many hours sitting in the branches of the poinsettia tree, spending many of those hours with her friend Emilia. The tree is Magda's favorite place, and it is associated in her mind with many of the most important things that have happened in her life, especially the time when she and Emilia "started our journey together into young adulthood." Significantly, these events are often heralded when the tree begins to produce its red flowers. It is in winter, for example, when Magda and Emilia spot from the tree their future friend and Tupamaros comrade, Cora. It is also when the tree flowers red that they first see Ramiro, Cora's future husband, also a future member of the Tupamaros.

What is the significance of the image? The color red is traditionally the color of passion, and it is also the color of blood. The red blossom of the tree therefore symbolizes love and suffering (passion also means suffering, as in the passion of Christ on the cross). This suffering is both mental and physical. Love and suffering are inextricably linked as the two qualities that dominate Magda's life and the lives of the other main characters. It is Magda's love for the beggar Gabriela, and her outrage at the woman's cruel death by torture, that deepens her involvement with the Tupamaros. During Magda's imprisonment, it is her love for the men whom she can hear being tortured in the cell above that sustains both her and the men (as she finds out when she encounters one of them many years later on the riverbank). It is Marco's love for Magda that precipitates his arrest and his premature death, seven long years later, from the injuries inflicted by torture. It is Magda's love for him that motivates her to go into exile to fight for his release. The love of Ramiro and Cora is also presented in romantic terms. Theirs is an ideal, passionate love that endures separation and torture. In every case, love and suffering of the most extreme kind are linked.



The significance of the image of the red-flowering tree does not end there. The young girls perceive the flowers as they gaze upwards from their perch in the lower branches. For Magda, it appears as if the red blossoms are stars in the heavens. After one incident in which she overhears a quarrel between her cousin and her mother, she and Emilia take refuge in the poinsettia tree and happen to look up, where they see that "One perfect star had bloomed a bright, piercing red." This evocative image suggests that if love, suffering (passion), and blood are inextricably mixed, as the two maturing girls will shortly discover, those qualities are also exalted, raised up and woven into the very fabric and heart of life. They express a kind of unshakable, eternal, even glorious perfection, for which the appropriate image can only be a bright red star shining in the heavens.

It might also not be superfluous to mention Magda's comment that whatever sex education she ever had came as a consequence of sitting in the tree, since from her perch she was able to eavesdrop on the conversations of her two older female cousins. The quarrel between Magda's mother and Sofía, which immediately precedes Magda's moment of epiphany when she sees the "red stars," is over sexual matters, and Sofía dares to raise the previously forbidden topic of female sexuality and female sexual needs. This suggests yet another layer of meaning for the color red, since the emergence of sexuality is inseparable from the female menstrual cycle, which is itself a marker of the passage from childhood to adulthood. Since one of the novel's themes is Magda's coming-of-age, and she directly associates this with the hours spent in the poinsettia tree, there is clearly an association between the physical emergence into womanhood and the condition of exalted love and suffering that the "red stars" represent.

By making the tree of red stars such a significant symbol in the novel, Bridal also taps into a complex of mythological and religious associations conjured up by the tree image. With its roots in the earth and its branches reaching heavenwards, the tree is an apt symbol for human and cosmic life and has been used as such for millennia in Western and Eastern sacred art. In Christian mythology, the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden is linked to the tree (the wooden cross) on which Christ was crucified. Bridal's red-flowering poinsettia tree provides a close secular equivalent. (In Christian art, the color red is always associated with Christ's passion.) There is also a legend that on the night Christ was born, trees bore fruit and flowers blossomed. Not for nothing, then, from the point of view of the symbolism of the novel, does the poinsettia tree bloom red in early winter—the time of Christ's birth.

If the tree of red stars symbolizes the nobility of love endured through physical and mental suffering, another recurring image in the novel, that of water, represents cleansing and healing. It is associated with the Río de la Plata, the river in Montevideo that Magda has loved since she was a child. She, Emilia, and Marco would often walk along its banks to lighten their cares: "Something about the river's changeable colors and the music of its movement against sand and rock soothed and comforted." At the end of the novel, as Magda walks with Marco along the riverbank, she comments, "It would take time, but the river would heal me, as I had known it would throughout those lonely years of exile." The image of the healing river is also contained in Magda's



unforgettable, if distressing, account of the time during her imprisonment when bodily fluids emanating from the men being tortured drip through the wooden ceiling of her cell. Overcoming her natural revulsion at the odor, she comes to regard the liquids as holy, part of a sacred idealism that she reveres. She mops up the liquid with scraps of toilet paper, imagining the faces of the tortured men and repeating their names. Then she shreds the paper slowly, one scrap at a time, and washes it down the sink: "I imagined those scraps being borne down to the river; water to water returned."

The use of the image of the healing river, like the tree image, touches on a vein of religious practice and symbolism common to East and West. Hindu pilgrims, for example, bathe in the waters of the sacred river Ganges as a purification rite. In Christian scriptures, water is used as an image of healing in the New Testament's Revelation, in which John is shown a vision of the new Jerusalem, the redeemed holy city. He sees "the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city" (Rev. 22: 1-2). Bridal's Río de la Plata is a secular version of this holy, healing river.

These two powerful images, of the tree and water, cannot be fully appreciated, however, apart from the political context in which they occur. Although it might be tempting to feel that political events in Uruguay in the 1960s and 1970s have little relevance for today, closer examination suggests otherwise. While the United States is currently engaged in a global war on terrorism, it is sobering to note that *The Tree of Red Stars* might also be called "The Making of a Terrorist." It might also be noted that perhaps never before have terrorists been presented in such a sympathetic light. Magda, Marco, Ramiro, and Cora are all deeply appealing figures. They are idealistic, concerned for justice, and remain true to their cause despite torture and death. Yet terrorists they certainly are. Magda is instrumental in the kidnapping of Dan Mitrione, the man she believes to be a FBI agent responsible for training people in the use of torture. Mitrione is then murdered by the Tupamaros.

Mitrione is not a fictional character. He was head of the U.S.-funded Office of Public Safety in Montevideo from 1969 to 1970 and was in charge of a program that trained Uruguayan police officers in counterterrorism methods. These practices included methods of torture, which was widely practiced by the Uruguayan government. In this respect, although it would be comforting to report that Bridal's description of the death by torture of the beggar woman Gabriela is a fictional flourish to enhance the drama of the story, unfortunately this is not so. The Uruguayan government really did test their methods of torture on beggars snatched from the outskirts of Montevideo. It is one of Bridal's most moving achievements that in the character of Gabriela she gives a face to those poor forgotten wretches who were treated like vermin to be experimented on and then disposed of when they had served their purpose.

The military government of Uruguay that crushed the Tupamaros in 1972 was supported by the United States. With the Cold War against the communist Soviet Union at its height, the United States opposed revolutionary socialist movements such as the Tupamaros because it did not want to see left-wing governments established in South America. Unfortunately, the Uruguayan government during the 1970s happened to be





one of the most brutal regimes in the world. It had the highest per capita rate of political prisoners in the world (about sixty thousand people, or 2 percent of the population), and torture was practiced as a routine measure. In addition to being brutally tortured, Tupamaros leaders were kept in solitary confinement for more than a decade.

Supporters of American policy might argue (as they do in different circumstances today) that in a war on terrorism, one cannot be too fussy about who one's friends are. Critics, on the other hand, might say (again, as they do today), that in a war on terrorism, it is all the more important to uphold the principles one claims to be defending, and therefore one must be extremely careful about the regimes one supports. In terms of the novel, resentment of what is perceived as American interference in Uruguayan affairs is a prominent theme among the characters who support the Tupamaros, such as Marco and Emilia's mother, Lilita. It is expressed even before the revolutionary movement gathers momentum. Marco, for example, believes that American financial control of many Uruguayan institutions amounts to exploitation masquerading as help. Once again, as with the question of what is an appropriate response to terrorism, this is not a dead issue. Perceptions similar to Marco's about the nature of American involvement overseas are common today in many countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Many Americans may regard such suspicions as unjust, insisting that America's purpose in the world is to defend democracy and promote economic growth. In the novel, this point of view is given a voice in the character of Magda's mother, who does not share Marco's anti-Americanism. She believes that the United States genuinely wishes to help Uruguay.

Seen in this light, *The Tree of Red Stars* not only delves deeply into the spiritual dimensions of suffering and love in a context of political oppression, it also raises issues that remain important for anyone seeking to understand today's complex political world.

**Source:** Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on *The Tree of Red Stars*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.



## Topics for Further Study

U.S. intervention in Uruguay is a topic that is often brought up in Bridal's *The Tree of Red Stars*. Research the role of the United States in Uruguay during the 1950s through today. What kind of investments has the United States made? What, if any, Uruguayan resources are the United States interested in? Has the United States influenced the political climate? Use a broad range of research sources, including, but not exclusively, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, both liberal and conservative news magazines, as well as any publications from Uruguay that are available. The Internet might also offer some rich sources.

Read the book *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life* (1998). Then research the student uprising and the activities of the Tupamaros in Uruguay during the 1960s and 1970s. What kind of speech do you think Guevara might have made at the student gathering mentioned in Bridal's book? Remember that it is Guevara's speech that most inspired Magda. Write and deliver such a speech to your class.

There have been several reported incidents of police brutality in the United States during the twentieth century. Research some of those incidents and write a report on your findings. You might want to look into the period of time in the South during the Civil Rights Movement. The Rodney King case might also provide material, or do a general search on the Internet for "police brutality." Are there similarities between these cases and what was happening in Uruguay? How are they alike? How are they different?

Choose one of the more dramatic scenes or events in Bridal's book, and write a poem from the principal character involved, expressing that character's emotions at that time. Suggestions include Emilia after her ordeal in jail, including the loss of John Wentworth's love; Magda while she is in the United States witnessing the differences between the American culture and her Uruguay culture; Marco, sometime during his seven-year prison sentence; Cora, as she sits at her window, wanting desperately to go out and play with Magda and Emilia.

## What Do I Read Next?

Isabel Allende wrote her famous work *The House of the Spirits* in 1985. It was her first book and was originally published in Spain. In it, she tells the story of a Chilean family, focusing on three women—a young girl, her mother, and her grandmother—as they struggle to keep their family together during chaotic times. The story is part fiction and part truth, as Allende herself suffered from political oppression while she lived in Chile. Her writing style is highly praised, and she is often referred to as a gifted storyteller.

Felisberto Hernandez, a Uruguayan, wrote his *Piano Stories* in 1993. This is a collection of tales written in the style of magic realism. The tone of his writing is quite different from that of Bridal, but for a male perspective and another take on creativity from a fellow Uruguayan, his book offers an interesting read. Hernandez is one of the favorite writers of fellow author Gabriel García Márquez.

*Cane River* (2001) by Lalita Tademy is a family saga that traces the lives of four generations of women born into slavery. The stories are a combination of oral family history and the author's imagination as she pieces together the details of her own Louisiana matriarchal family. The story begins at the early days of slavery, continues through the Civil War, and ends during the fight for civil rights. Tademy, who was a successful corporate executive, quit her job to write this story because she became obsessed with researching her roots. The book includes photographs and reprints of actual documents to attest to its authenticity.

Rosy Shand wrote the novel *The Gravity of Sunlight* (2001) about life in Uganda, Africa, during Idi Amin's rise to power. Through the telling of the lives of two couples, their successes and failures in love, Shand examines cultural and political conflicts in that country.

*Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1997) by Anne Moody relates the true story of a young woman living through the 1960s and the beginnings of the Civil Rights movement in the South. The story relates Moody's difficulties in trying to gain a successful education as well as to help others achieve the right to vote in the oppressive political environment of the Deep South.



## Further Study

Anderson, John Lee, *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life*, Grove Press, 1998.

A dashing and dramatic figure, Che Guevara was the son of an aristocratic Argentine family, whose sympathies for the poor and the oppressed turned him into a socialist revolutionary, a friend of Fidel Castro, and a leader of guerilla movements throughout Latin America and Africa. Anderson, a journalist, spent several years gathering research for this book, including gaining access to some of Guevara's personal diaries.

Evans, Malcolm D., and Rod Morgan, *Preventing Torture: A Study of the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*, Clarendon Press, 1999.

This documentary details the work of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment (the CPT), established in 1989, which represents a new phase in international human rights intervention. The authors, an international lawyer and a criminologist, bring their different analytical perspectives to bear on this innovative human rights mechanism.

Feitlowitz, Marguerite, *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture*, Oxford University Press, 1999.

Feitlowitz spent several years interviewing victims as well as those responsible for what has been called the "dirty war" that took place in Argentina between the years of 1976 and 1983, during which an estimated thirty thousand people were tortured and killed. The political history of Argentina during this time period is similar in some ways to that of Uruguay.

Kimball, Roger, *The Long March: How the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s Changed America*, Encounter Books, 2001.

From a conservative point of view, Kimball analyzes the cultural revolution of the 1960s, critiques the major players, such as the Beats, Susan Sontag, Norman Mailer, I. F. Stone, Miles Davis, and liberals in general, and shows how the ideas of this period took hold in the United States and changed the lives of its citizens.

Mandela, Nelson, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, Little Brown & Company, 1995.

Most of this book was written during the twenty-seven years that Nelson Mandela was held as a political prisoner on Robben Island in South Africa. The story of his life demonstrates the strength of his spirit, which remained unbroken despite his imprisonment, his broken marriages, and lack of family life.



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Schon, Isabel, Review of *The Tree of Red Stars*, in *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Vol. 41, No. 6, March 1998, pp. 501-502.

Steinberg, Sybil S., Review of *The Tree of Red Stars*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 244, No. 21, May 26, 1997, p. 65.



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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose of the Book**

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) 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, NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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 NfS 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

NfS 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 Novels 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 NfS series.

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

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

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels 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 NfS, 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 Novels 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 NfS, 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 Novels 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](mailto:ForStudentsEditors@gale.com). Or write to the editor at:

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