

READING GROUP GUIDE

Dancing to “Almendra”

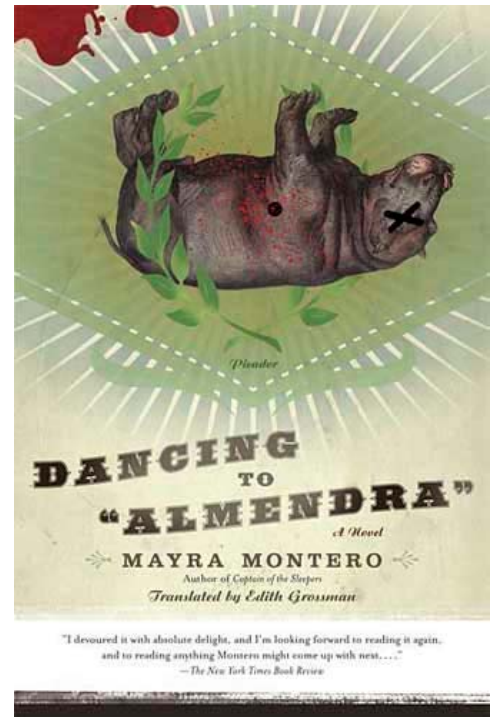
A Novel

by Mayra Montero

Translated by Edith Grossman

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Dancing to “Almendra”* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Dancing to “Almendra”*.

About the Book

In *Dancing to “Almendra”*, Mayra Montero takes us back to the world (and the underworld) of pre-revolutionary Havana. It is 1957, and on the same day the gangster Umberto Anastasia is shot dead in New York, an escaped hippopotamus is killed at the Havana zoo. Joaquin, a young reporter annoyed by the never-ending string of celebrity puff pieces he has to write, is hungry to land a good story, and begins to poke around into Anastasia's murder. As a reward for his initiative, he is instead assigned the ostensibly boring story of the hippopotamus. But little does he know that the two stories are connected, and that his investigation will send him on a course for Havana's brutal criminal margins, where he finds the woman of his dreams, and ultimately disaster.

As Joaquin follows leads on the hippo and Anastasia, the consequences of his actions come back to haunt him, and he is soon entangled in the deeply entrenched mafia culture that shapes nearly all of Havana life. With communist revolution looming ever closer, that culture is threatened by forces which will soon overturn mafia control of Cuba. Caught in the middle of this great struggle, Joaquin merely wants to write serious stories and to satisfy his childhood fascination with American gangsters, but he finds that he is in over his head as secrets are revealed and the mystery unfolds.

Praise for *Dancing to “Almendra”*

One of *The New York Times* 100 Notable Books of 2007

"I devoured it with absolute delight, and I'm looking forward to reading it again, and to reading anything Montero might come up with next."—*The New York Times Book Review*

"Montero exploits true crime, romance, family drama, cabaret, and even danzón. . . . Her new novel is a hell of a song."—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"[Montero] has crafted a story of pre-revolutionary Havana that crackles with violence, mystery, and a truly eccentric view of love. Imagine Raymond Carver crossed with Oscar Hijuelos's *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*."—*O, The Oprah Magazine*

"An extremely stylish novel . . . Montero is an energetic writer and Grossman's translation renders her prose into a wry, bawdy, delicious rhythm. . . . Here is a story of [Montero's] native country, marching toward the future one murder, one one-night stand, one dead hippo at a time. It's even more fun than it sounds."—*The Star-Ledger* (Newark)

"Montero has delivered a well-written, cinematic story that fairly steps off the page. Think *Chinatown* set in the late 1950s, pre-Castro Cuba."—*The Plain Dealer*

"Masterful . . . What a story! Montero has played her usual sleight of hand."—*Houston Chronicle*

About the Author

Mayra Montero is the author of a collection of short stories and of eight novels, including *The Messenger*, *The Last Night I Spent With You*, and *Captain of the Sleepers*. She was born in Cuba and lives in Puerto Rico, where she writes a weekly column in *El Nuevo Día* newspaper.

Discussion Questions

1. What kind of a person is Joaquin? Describe his voice. Does he seem idealistic to you, or does he strike you as cynical? Or both?

2. As the story unfolds and we see Joaquin's character develop, how does he respond to situations as they become more serious? Does he seem childish? Might one get that impression from Yolanda's narration? Does her estimation of him seem accurate, or do you think she might have a bias?

3. Toward the beginning of the novel, there is a flashback of Joaquin and Julian as children spying on gangsters, and Joaquin believes that they are somehow invisible to detection. Julian tells him that it is really the gangsters who are invisible. Then later, when Joaquin is at Juan Bulgado's house, Joaquin feels a little nauseous, and then says: "...it occurred to me that I'd become invisible, everything was so unreal, it was a passing moment and, to a point, a pleasant one, I'd never felt anything like it before, and I'd never feel it again." What does he mean by this? What causes him to feel this way? Do you see any connection between this scene and the earlier one with the gangsters? Is there something about this feeling that makes Joaquin feel connected with the gangsters?

4. What is the "Almendra"? What does it symbolize to Joaquin? Does it have a larger significance? How might the dance symbolize Cuba? Why do you think the book has this title?

5. On page 86, Joaquin is laying in his hotel room at the airport. As he tries to fall asleep, the image of Yolanda comes to his mind and immediately blends together with Aurora, Julian's mother. Why do these images meld together? What is it about Yolanda that fascinates Joaquin so much? And what about Yolanda reminds him of Aurora? Where does Joaquin's attachment

to Aurora come from? What does it say about his character if he still holds on to it from when he was a boy?

6. When Yolanda is narrating, she tells the story of how she fell for Rodrico (pages 83-84).

What are the reasons she gives for falling in love with him? Do they seem plausible to you, or is Yolanda somehow fooling herself? Is there something else about Rodrico that makes him desirable in spite of his physical appearance and coarse manners? Or is it rather something about Yolanda which makes her susceptible to him? Does his unavailability make him more interesting to her? Why do you think someone like Yolanda, who goes for men like Rodrico and Trafficante, would be interested in Joaquin?

7. How does the shifting narration between Joaquin's point of view and Yolanda's shape the way the story is told? What would the story have been like if it were only told from one point of view? Which voice do you think is more truthful? Which narrator do you think is more honest with him/herself? What is different about the way Yolanda advances the story from the way Joaquin does?

8. What do you think drives Joaquin to keep pursuing the newspaper story? Does his fascination with mobsters play into his attraction to Yolanda? Is he right to cut his losses and quit at the end? Should he have gone further? What would you have done if you were in his place? Why?

9. What kind of a relationship does Joaquin have with his family? Why does his mother seem to annoy him to no end? How does Joaquin feel about his sister and her being a lesbian? Is he

tolerant of her? Or is he merely indifferent? Does Joaquin love his family? Is he capable of love?

10. Why do you think that Joaquin's brother Santiago fell in with the communists? How are Joaquin and Santiago different? How are they similar? In the shaking-up of life that was happening in Cuba at the time, why do you think that Santiago would choose the path of change, and Joaquin would prefer to learn about the forces which try to prevent change? Why do you think that Santiago was a *participant* in events, but Joaquin preferred to be an *observer*?

11. How did Santiago's death affect Joaquin? How did it alter the manner in which he viewed his mission as a journalist? Did Santiago's death reveal Joaquin's inner strength, or did it display a latent frailty? Do you think Santiago's death led Joaquin to feel differently about events happening in Cuba at the time? Would you have become more politically involved if you were in Joaquin's place? Which side would you have aligned yourself with? Why?

12. What do you think about Montero's depiction of Joaquin? How does she portray his masculine characteristics? Is Joaquin a man's man, or is he more tender?

13. How does having only one arm alter Yolanda's perception? How does it affect her love life? If you were to have a similar accident which left you disfigured, would you take it like Yolanda did?

14. Do you think that the ending of the book was sad, or was it uplifting because Joaquin's life

was saved? Is there something tragic about Joaquin's life? How might his life have been different had there been no revolution in Cuba and things had remained pretty much as they were? Do you think that things would have turned out better for him, or worse?

15. Does the story in *Dancing to "Almendra"* (which is based on actual historical events) change the way you view Cuba? Did you learn anything that you didn't know about the revolution in Cuba? Does the kind of historical background provided in *Dancing to "Almendra"* lead you to reconsider America's political and cultural relationship with Cuba? How?

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