

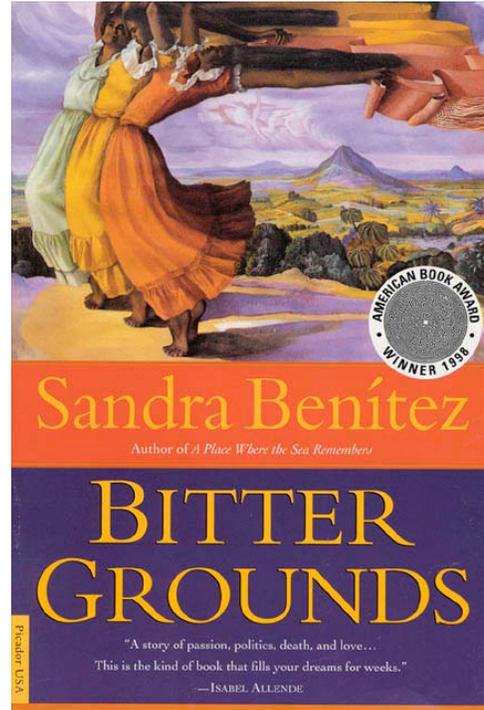
# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *Bitter Grounds*

*A Novel*

by Sandra Benitez

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### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Bitter Grounds* 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 *Bitter Grounds*.

### About the Book

#### Winner of the 1998 American Book Award

Spanning the years between 1932 and 1977, this beautifully told epic is set in the heart of El Salvador, where coffee plantations are the center of life for rich and poor alike. Following three generations of the Prieto Clan and the wealthy family they work for, this is the story of mothers and daughters who live, love, and die for their passions.

## About the Author

**Sandra Benitez's** first novel was *A Place Where the Sea Remembers*. She grew up in El Salvador, attended high school and college in Missouri, and now divides her time between Edina, Minnesota, where she teaches creative writing, and Mexico.

## Discussion Questions

1. How do the generations change, in their attitudes, beliefs, aspirations? Consider the world events surrounding these characters during the span of the novel, from 1932 to 1977: How are outside forces (economic depression, war, worker rebellion, civil unrest) reflected in their daily lives?
2. What is the significance of “Los Dos,” the daily radio soap opera-both its content and the rituals of its audience?
3. Coffee provides a way of life in El Salvador. What is its role in the lives of these characters, symbolically and literally?
4. There are elements of magic realism to this story. Discuss examples of magic realism and their role in the story: do you think the departure from reality adds to or detracts from your belief in these events? Why do you think the author chose to include them? Other writers (Laura Esquivel, Isabel Allende, Gabriel García Márquez, to name a few) have also used this effect; if you've read their work, compare it to *Bitter Grounds*, or discuss if or why Latin American writing lends itself to magic realism. Do any North American writers try their hands at it?
5. “In years to come, when she thought of this moment, Elena would know that it was here, at this time-standing around the bend of Cecilia's lake house, the dying sun pouring itself into the blue bowl of the lake-that her life was forever divided into its own before and after.” (page 130) Discuss other characters whose lives take equally dramatic and irreversible turns.
6. *Bitter Grounds* depicts the sharp differences between the lives of the rich and the poor. But the two classes also shared much in common. In what ways were they alike?
7. As the poor turned to the left for help politically, the rich turned to the right, and this polarization eventually led to a tragic civil war. Who do you think is to blame for the failure to find a middle ground?
8. Women writing about women are sometimes accused of doing so at the expense of their male characters. Discuss the role of men in this novel and how you feel they are portrayed.
9. What did you find interesting about mother/daughter relationships in Latin America? And how do these differ, if at all, from the way things work in our country?
10. In the final analysis, who were the winners and who were the losers in *Bitter Grounds*?

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