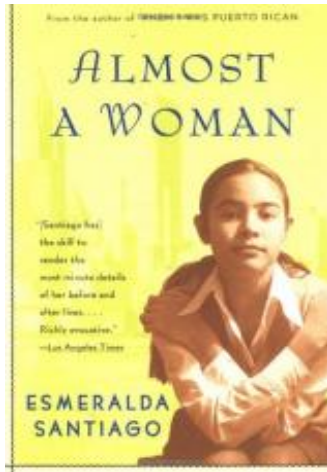


# Almost A Woman

by Esmeralda Santiago

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## About the Book

The questions, discussion topics, and suggested reading list that follow are designed to enhance your group's reading of Esmeralda Santiago's **Almost a Woman**, the sequel to her moving and powerful memoir **When I Was Puerto Rican**. We hope they will provide you with a number of ways of looking at--and talking about--this vibrant story of an ambitious, headstrong teenager as she moves slowly out of the loving and safe but constricting grip of her Hispanic family and community and into the large and unimaginably different world of Manhattan.

At the age of thirteen Esmeralda must leave the familiarity, warmth, and vibrancy of Puerto Rico to live in a three-room apartment in Brooklyn shared by ten family members. Challenged by language barriers, cultural stereotypes, and her strict and fiercely protective mother, Esmeralda begins her triumphant struggle for identity and independence. By day she studies acting at Manhattan's Performing Arts High School and interprets for the family at city welfare offices; by night she accompanies her mother and sister to Latin dance halls, but on such a short leash that she does not have her first date until age twenty. Undaunted, she makes up for lost time in a romantic apprenticeship at once hilarious and heartbreaking. Filled with wisdom and humor, Esmeralda Santiago's story is both universal and personal: the immigrant's search for belonging, the adolescent's search for identity, and the daughter's fight, often at a great cost to herself, for independence from a beloved but too powerful parent.

## Discussion Guide

1. "In the twenty-one years I lived with my mother, we moved at least twenty times" [p. 1]. Santiago feels that this fact kept her and her family from attaching too much importance to possessions, or even to friends. What other effects did the family's many moves have on their outlook on life, their relationships to one another and to outsiders, and, in particular, on Esmeralda's developing character?
2. After her discussion with a neighborhood child soon after her arrival in Brooklyn, Esmeralda reflects, "Two days in

New York, and I'd already become someone else" [p. 5]. What does the two girls' conversation reveal about categories of identity? Is group identity, in a multicultural place like New York, seen to be primarily racial? National? Linguistic? Regional?

3. What different groups does Esmeralda identify herself with during the course of her narrative? How do her experiences at the Performing Arts High School change her ideas about hierarchy and group identity? How does she define herself at the memoir's end?

4. Mami says that Esmeralda's cousins Alma and Corazon are Americanized. "The way she pronounced the word *Americanized*, it sounded like a terrible thing, to be avoided at all costs, another *algo* to be added to the list of 'somethings' outside our door" [p. 12]. What does Mami mean by "*Americanized*," and why does the word have such negative connotations for her? Why is she so afraid of Esmeralda's becoming Americanized too? Isn't it true that she also *wishes* for Esmeralda and her siblings to enter into American life and to succeed there?

5. Listening to Mami, says Santiago, "had taught me that men were not to be trusted" [p. 14]. The same could be said of Esmeralda's observations of her father, and of some of the other men in her community. What mixed messages about men, women, and love does Esmeralda pick up, as a child, from her parents? How does her mother's example affect her own early relationships with men and boys? Does it make her more passive? Wary? Fearful? Impulsive? Why does she never feel "affection" for any man outside her family until she meets Allan--although she is not in love with him--whereas she *has* been in love with several other men?

6. What does Esmeralda learn about "another United States--the trim, horizontal suburbs of white Americans" [pp. 26-7]--from **Archie** comics? How much of the imaginary picture she constructs of the white suburbs is a true one, and how much is simple fantasy? In what ways is Esmeralda's life deeply different from those of real suburban teenagers?

7. How, according to Santiago, do race relations and racial consciousness differ between Puerto Rico and New York? Have the racial attitudes and stereotypes encountered by Esmeralda in the 1960s changed over the ensuing decades? Are things better, worse, or much the same?

8. How does Mami's trip to the welfare office [pp. 43-4] make Mami look? Does this image that Mami presents to the welfare agent resemble the real Mami that we have come to know from the book? Does this scene, and your knowledge of Mami's character, change or affect your ideas about welfare recipients and the welfare system?

9. Mami has high expectations for her daughters: that they will remain virgins until marriage, that they will find good and responsible husbands, and that they will get married in a church. Esmeralda is not even allowed to date until the age of twenty. Yet the example Mami herself has provided is very different: eleven children by three different men, none of whom has married her. "Whenever we discussed it at home, it was agreed by the adults around the kitchen table that 'the Pill' was nothing more than a license for young women to have sex without getting married. The fact that my mother, grandmother, and almost every other female relative of ours had sex without marriage was not mentioned" [pp. 156-7]. Is Mami entirely unreasonable and exasperating on this subject? Do you have any sympathy for her and the discrepancy between her standards and her behavior?

**10.** Why, as an actress, does Esmeralda refuse to venture into her deeper self [p. 74]? What is she afraid of finding? Is there any part of her teenage life during which she does not feel it necessary to act a role?

**11.** Jaime, who acts with Esmeralda in **Babu**, is a political activist who promotes Puerto Rican culture in New York. What is it in Esmeralda's life and experiences that make her resist his perorations, and to believe that "I could be of no help to 'my' people until I helped myself" [p. 288]?

**12.** How can you explain the fact that Esmeralda accepts the marriage proposal of Jurgen, a man she has known only a few hours, when by her own admission she is deeply distrustful of men in general?

**13.** "Why him?" Esmeralda asks after losing her virginity to Ulvi. "Why not Otto or Avery Lee or Jurgen" [p. 272]? Can you answer her question? What of her special needs does Ulvi, alone among all the men she knows, meet? Why does she go along with his dominating manner, his wish to separate her from family and friends, his rules and regulations? Does Iris have a point when she says Esmeralda's bracelet, a gift from Ulvi, reminds her of shackles? Or do you agree with Santiago's own retrospective opinion that Ulvi served as a substitute father for her?

**14.** "Esmeralda's observations of her own family and community have taught her that "love was something you get over. If Ulvi left, there would be another man, but there would never, ever be another Mami" [p. 310]. Why, then, does she opt to leave with Ulvi? Does this move amount to an out-and-out rejection of Mami? What else is she leaving behind when she leaves her mother and family?

**15.** How has the lack of a father during her formative years affected Esmeralda's life, her character, and her dealings with the rest of the world? How might her life have been different if her father had been present? How might she, as a person, have developed differently?

**16.** The relationship between Mami and Esmeralda is a complex one: in some ways it is the classic mother-daughter story, while other elements of it are more unusual. "I felt guilty," Santiago remembers, "that so much of what little we had was spent on me. And I dreaded the price" [p. 86]. What price does Mami, in fact, try to exact? What does she expect of Esmeralda, and how far is Esmeralda willing to go to please Mami? What concessions does Esmeralda *refuse* to make when it comes to her own life? Do you find that the relationship between Mami and Esmeralda resembles that between Tata and Mami? In what ways is it different, and why?

## Author Bio

Esmeralda Santiago is the author of the novels *LAS MADRES* and *CONQUISTADORA* and the memoirs *WHEN I WAS PUERTO RICAN* and *ALMOST A WOMAN*, which was adapted into a Peabody Award-winning movie for PBS's "Masterpiece Theatre." Born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, she lives with her husband, documentary filmmaker Frank Cantor, in New York, and Port Clyde, Maine.

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