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# Cellophane

by Marie Arana




## About the Book

Don Victor Sobrevilla, a lovable, eccentric engineer, always dreamed of founding a paper factory in the heart of the Peruvian rain forest, and at the opening of this miraculous novel his dream has come true?until he discovers the recipe for cellophane. In a life already filled with signs and portents, the family dog suddenly begins to cough strangely. A wild little boy turns azurite blue. All at once Don Victor is overwhelmed by memories of his erotic past; his prim wife, Doña Mariana, reveals the shocking truth about her origins; the three Sobrevilla children turn their love lives upside down; the family priest blurts out a long-held secret....

A hilarious plague of truth has descended on the once well-behaved Sobrevillas, only the beginning of this brilliantly realized, generous-hearted novel. Marie Arana?s style, originality, and trenchant wit will establish her as one of the most audacious talents in fiction today and **Cellophane** as one of the most evocative and spirited novels of the year.

## Discussion Guide

When her memoir, American Chica, was released, Marie Arana garnered rave reviews that compared her to literary giants ranging from Isabel Allende to John Cheever to Joseph Conrad; the book also became a National Book Award finalist. Cellophane marks Arana's fiction debut, and the result is no less spectacular. Both a sizzling family saga and the riotously entertaining story of a commercial obsession gone awry, Cellophane transports you to a world where nothing is what it seems, and the ordinary always succumbs to the extraordinary.

At the heart of Cellophane is patriarch Don Victor Sobrevilla Paniagua, a lovable, eccentric engineer who always dreamed of founding a paper factory in the most improbable of locales?an uncharted pocket of the Peruvian rain forest. Yet his dream is fulfilled, and over the years he builds a comfortable life for himself and his quirky family, always mindful of ominous predictions he received as a boy. When he discovers the formula for cellophane, this diaphanous product ushers in a new era of plagues for Don Victor: a hilarious plague of truth, an erotically charged plague of desire,

and a sinister plague of revolution. Love lives are toppled, new romances are ignited, and Don Victor is finally forced to weigh the price of pursuing a dream to its final conclusion.

The questions, discussion topics, and author biography that follow are intended to enhance your reading of Marie Arana's Cellophane. We hope they will enrich your experience of this stunning, vibrant novel.

**1.** Cellophane opens with images of Don Victor's boyhood, including his fascination with Swedish ball bearings and Señor Urrutia's perpetual-motion machine. What were your first impressions of Don Victor? What was the significance of his early fascinations?

**2.** When Don Victor travels to the interior in his early twenties, he has his first experience with the small-statured Serrano Indians. What is his attitude toward South America's indigenous populations? Whom does he trust more: his curandero or his priest?

**3.** What was the effect of knowing the details about Doña Mariana's experiences in labor? Do her three children have many traits in common?

**4.** Don Victor uses equipment made available after the suicide of William Randolph Meiggs to establish his paper factory downriver in Floralinda. How do Don Victor and the other Peruvians in the novel seem to feel about American investors?

**5.** What is supernatural about Basadre's cough? What predictions did you derive from the encounter between Miguelito and the terrier? Were the ingenious tin-cup braces a success?

**6.** Pedro's migrant tribe avoids him, considering him to be tainted by the "termites." Do many of the novel's characters gain acceptance in more than one culture, or is segregation required? In terms of class, who are the novel's true power brokers?

**7.** Near the end of Chapter Four, the initial, passionate months of Belén and Ignacio?s marriage are described. Marie Arana tells us that, reading Zola's pro-labor novel Germinal, Belén would "thank God that her legs were wrapped around a factory worker." What other literary references enhance the storytelling in Cellophane? What does Belén's taste in literature indicate about her personality?

**8.** Discuss the remarkable features of Tía Esther's affair with Lars, revealed in Chapter Five. What common threads run through the tales of lovers in Cellophane?

**9.** How would you have reacted to Padre Bernardo's revelation? If you were to engage in the litany of truth telling performed by Jaime in chapter six, what sorts of realities might be revealed?

**10.** Louis Miller wonders why Floralinda isn't on any map. Locate a detailed map of Peru and explore the remote region corresponding to Floralinda, noting its distance from Trujillo and Lima. What does a map exercise reveal about Don Victor in his quest? In what ways does landscape almost become a character itself in the novel?

**11.** How does Don Victor cope with the losses in his life, particularly the death of Chína, and the death of his mother at the hands of the military? Is there any similarity between the way he interacts with his brother (Don Alejandro, who still

lives in the ancestral home and ships away his castoffs) and the way his children interact with one another?

**12.** In Chapter Nine, as Don Victor concludes his conversation with Padre Bernardo, he says, "I wouldn?t have known how to tell Yorumbo what sin means in the context of his culture. Simple, ordinary sin." Is sin universal, or is it defined by culture?

**13.** What accounts for Don Victor's love affair with paper? What attributes of cellophane?transparent, shimmering, fragile, protective?make it an excellent metaphor for his life? In what subtle ways was he indeed a shape changer?

**14.** Chapter Ten marks the arrival of General Lopez from President Odria's army. Odria's rise to power through a military coup is based on fact. What other historical parallels exist between Peru's political state and the novel? What elements of surrealism and reality form the underpinnings of this novel?

**15.** What is Marcela's ultimate predicament? In what ways does she bring comic relief to the novel? Is she typical of most of the women in Don Victor's life?

**16.** Discuss the clever communication and translation jokes raised in the novel, and the way they shape the plot.

**1+.** In Chapter Eleven, Tía Esther tells the story of her parents, Homero Paniagua and Catalina Wong. What transforming powers does this story have? How would you characterize the power and significance of storytelling in general throughout Cellophane?

**18.** Is there a Tía Esther in your family, an unlikely heroine who repeatedly saves the day?

**19.** What do you predict for Don Victor's descendants, Graciela, Belén, and Jaime? Will Elsa and the General have a satisfying relationship?

**20.** Reread Victor's fortune, which forms the novel's closing image and whose full text appears in Chapter One. Did it capture the truth, or did his misplaced belief in the fortune lead to his downfall? How would its predictions have applied to your life?

## Author Bio

Marie Arana was born in Lima, Peru. She is the author of the memoir AMERICAN CHICA, a finalist for the National Book Award; two novels, CELLOPHANE and LIMA NIGHTS; and THE WRITING LIFE, a collection from her well-known column for *The Washington Post*. She lives in Washington, DC, and Lima, Peru.

## Critical Praise

"Rich in themes, symbolism, conflict and character?. It's also, for those who just want a good tale, a brilliant piece of storytelling that combines magical realism in the tradition of writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez with comedic looks

at human foibles and misunderstandings a la Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream"

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