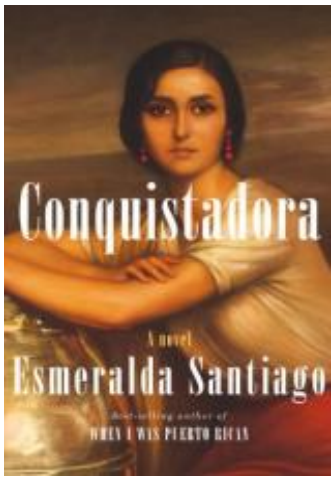
Conquistadora

by Esmeralda Santiago



About the Book

An epic novel of love, discovery, and adventure by the author of the best-selling memoir **When I Was Puerto Rican**.

As a young girl growing up in Spain, Ana Larragoity Cubillas is powerfully drawn to Puerto Rico by the diaries of an ancestor who traveled there with Ponce de León. And in handsome twin brothers Ramón and Inocente --- both in love with Ana --- she finds a way to get there. She marries Ramón, and in 1844, just eighteen, she travels across the ocean to a remote sugar plantation the brothers have inherited on the island.

Ana faces unrelenting heat, disease and isolation, and the dangers of the untamed countryside even as she relishes the challenge of running Hacienda los Gemelos. But when the Civil War breaks out in the United States, Ana finds her livelihood, and perhaps even her life, threatened by the very people on whose backs her wealth has been built: the hacienda?s slaves, whose richly drawn stories unfold alongside her own. And when at last Ana falls for a man who may be her destiny --- a once-forbidden love --- she will sacrifice nearly everything to keep hold of the land that has become her true home.

This is a sensual, riveting tale, set in a place where human passions and cruelties collide: thrilling history that has never before been brought so vividly and unforgettably to life.

Discussion Guide

1. Santiago?s epigraph is an excerpt from ?Adam? by William Carlos Williams: ?Underneath the whisperings/of tropic nights/there is a darker whispering/that death invents especially/for northern men/whom the tropics/have come to hold.? Why do you think she chose this passage?

2. How familiar were you with the history Santiago provides in the opening section of the novel --- ?El Encuentro/The

Encounter: November 19, 1493??

3. Santiago?s first book was the bestselling memoir **When I Was Puerto Rican**, which told an entirely different sort of history: that of her own journey from Puerto Rico to the United States. Yet **Conquistadora** also makes the personal historical. How do fact and fiction play off one each another in this story? How is reading historical fiction different from reading a nonfiction historical account of a time period?

4. As the book begins, how do you feel about Ana? Is she a likable character? What one word would you use to describe her?

5. What draws Ana to Puerto Rico? What opportunities exist for her there --- as a woman of a certain class, a señorita de buena familia --- that weren?t available in Spain? What about Severo? What brings him to Puerto Rico, and what is he able to accomplish there that might have been impossible in Spain?

6. How does Ana?s attitude towards slavery, and her own slaves, change over the course of the novel? How does she change in general, and why?

7. Discuss Ana?s relationship with Elena. What draws these women together --- and what drives them apart? How do their motivations for getting married differ?

8. Why do you think Ana agrees to sleep with both Ramón and Inocente? Does she have a choice in the matter?

9. On page 73, Ana considers a proverbphrase: ?We are all a bit of a poet, a bit of a musician, a bit mad, she agreed. But she thought that Severo Fuentes, who could quote Cervantes with uncanny precision, was perhaps the maddest of them all.? Do you agree with Ana about Severo? Why or why not? How are ?madness? and a sense of mission linked for Severo, and for Ana?

10. Why does Los Gemelos become so important to Ana? Why won?t she leave --- and why would she be willing to go so far as to trade her son for the plantation? Did you understand her motivation for this? Why or why not?

11. Why does Ana refer to her slaves as ?nuestra gente? (?our people?)?

12. Discuss the characters of Conciencia and Meri, and their relationships with Ana. How does Conciencia function as a conscience for Ana? Why does Ana feel that she must save Meri from her burns? And, why do you think Ana is able to act maternally toward her slaves in some ways, but is unable to be a mother to her own son?

13. Why does Severo want Ana as his wife, although it is Consuelo who makes him happy? Do you think he can love these two women at once?

14. What is the significance of the house Severo builds for Ana? Why does he name it El Destino?

15. On page 319, Santiago tells us that, three generations later, Miguel?s paintings would wind up stored in a warehouse and forgotten. How do you think this connects to the larger story of Puerto Rican history, and Ana?s endeavors at Hacienda los Gemelos?

16. Discuss Miguel?s fate. What do you think he would have said to Ana, had he had the chance?

17. As the novel ends, the US American Civil War has already begun to change life in Puerto Rico --- perhaps especially for the hHacienda?s slaves, who are inspired by ?el libertador Abrámlincon.? How is the history of slavery in Puerto Rico similar to, or different from, the history of slavery in America? What surprised you most about Santiago?s depiction of the slaves? daily lives?

18. How does **Conquistadora** compare to other postcolonial literature you?ve read --- stories that take place in Africa, Asia, and the Americas?

19. Does Ana earn the designation ?conquistadora?? If she were alive today, what do you think she would do for a living?

20. What do you think lies ahead for Ana and Severo? What about Segundo, who will inherit their land and the hHacienda? And the slaves at the Hacienda?

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.

Critical Praise

"The multitalented author of **When I Was Puerto Rican** offers a big, bold novel about life on a Caribbean sugar plantation in the mid-19th century. Ana Cubillas, the descendant of Latin American conquistadors, is unhappy with the confined life of a young woman in Spain. She marries Ramon Argoso and encourages him and his twin, Inocente, to take over their family?s plantation in Puerto Rico. So begins the saga of Ana?s determination to revive the plantation in the face of all obstacles, from hurricanes to cholera epidemics to slave revolts. Is Ana an admirable example of female endurance, or does her relentless ambition only bring tragedy to her family? Can we have any sympathy for someone whose success comes from the backbreaking slavery of others? These are the questions Santiago poses in this lively, well-researched historical novel. With drama, adventure, and even a bit of magical realism, Conquistadora may remind readers of Isabel Allende?s novels of Latin America. Highly recommended."

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