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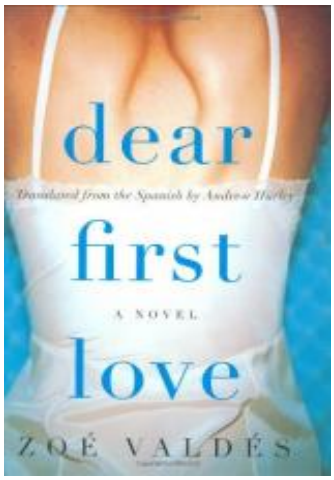
Dear First Love

by Zoe Valdes



About the Book

Zoé Valdés is one of Cuba's most original and imaginative writers. In **Dear First Love**, her third novel to appear in English, she spins a tale of one womans spiritual and sexual awakening under the soul-destroying Castro regime.

The numbing rhythm of daily life in poverty-stricken Havana has deadened Danae's mind and spirit. On the verge of a breakdown, she unceremoniously leaves Havana without explanation to her family. In search of her first true love, Danae retreats into the countryside of her adolescence, where the government of Fidel Castro had sent her and other teenagers in the late 1970s to work in the fields under a corrupt and sadistic overseer. It was here, surrounded by a natural world infused with spiritual wonders, that Danae met and fell in love with Tierra Fortuna Munda, a campesino girl her own age. And here the reader falls into the magic of Danae's late childhood, as a wooden suitcase, an ancient ceiba tree, a manatee, even light itself, narrate the gritty, irreverent, erotic, sometimes comic, often tragic life of the young adults in the work camps.

When the adult Danae finds Tierra, their lives are transformed, their love and its mysteries reborn. However, their return to Havana proves to be the ultimate test of love, not only for Danae and Tierra, but also for Danae's desperate family.

Dear First Love is a hymn to Cuba and to the soul and spirit of that beleaguered country. In sensuous language, Zoé Valdés renders daily life in urban Cuba and in its countryside, while at the same time exploring the universal themes of love and loss.

Discussion Guide

1. Valdés's unusual narrative technique employs a variety of narrators: a wooden suitcase, a ceiba tree, a palm tree, a manatee, Mandinga chichereku (a spirit) and the light of the city. How aware were you that the story was being "told" by these natural phenomena and artifacts? Why do you think Valdés chose their voices as opposed to human narrators?

2. What forces are responsible for the adult Dánae's disillusionment? Do you think she should be more willing to put up with the sacrifices of daily life? What, if anything, distinguishes Dánae from other women in her predicament?

3. How is the adolescent Dánae different from the forty-year old woman she becomes? Are these changes part of the typical maturing process? What is it about adolescence that makes Dánae susceptible to romance, poetry, and nature?

4. All of the girls in Dánae's brigade are given nicknames that identify personal or physical traits. There is an albino, a girl who won't stop talking, one who is promiscuous, another who assesses others on their physical appearance, and Dánae herself, who is called "duckbill lips" because of her wide mouth. How do the nicknames, and their associations, enforce the novel's lyrical and visual power? How do they enforce some of the novel's themes, such as the power of the state, the fragility of the individual, and the power of nature?

5. How did you respond to Valdés's use of grotesque imagery and scatological detail? Were these passages distracting? Did their frequency lessen or augment their impact? Why do you think she described the camp's repulsive conditions, human anatomy, excrement, and other bodily functions in such detail?

6. Tierra's mother gave birth to her at the root of a majestic ceiba tree that is also one of the novel's voices. These giant trees, whose trunks are "more solid than walls and revolutions," are often given mythological status. In parts of the country, these trees are left standing in otherwise deforested areas. How is the significance of this tree reflected in the novel?

7. Tierra and her family are part of a community of peasants who are known for their physical abnormalities -- the result of inbreeding. They have been working the land for generations, and have been largely overlooked by the revolution. The government considers them "aberrations of nature" and "outlaws," even though they are living on land they have farmed for centuries. How does the existence of this freakish community compare with the camps, with the "higher-ups" who want to evict them and sell their land, and with those living in the city completely unaware of their existence? How are they a threat to the state? What do they offer Dánae?

8. Why do you think Tierra chose to leave the country and return to Havana with Dánae? What does the city offer Tierra?

9. How does Valdés set up a dialogue between what is natural and what is un-natural? Discuss this in relation to Dánae's love for Tierra, her life in and escape from Havana, the novel's narrative structure, and its various endings.

10. Dánae spends much of her life as an outsider. Even when she marries, the relatively "normal" life she adopts with Andres leaves her feeling deprived and depressed. Wouldn't it have been easier for her to give in to her desires early on and go live with Tierra? What might have Dánae's life been had she never gone to La Fe?

11. Why do you think Valdés chose different endings for the story? Which do you think is the "real" ending?

Author Bio

Zoé Valdés was born in 1959 in Havana, where she wrote poetry and fiction and worked as a cultural critic. In 1995 she fled Castro's regime and moved to Paris where she continues to write. She is the author of nine novels, many of which have been bestsellers in Europe. Ms. Valdés writes a monthly column for the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo*.

Critical Praise

"Valdés spins a steady tale of passion ? [and] pulls beauty out of a world she paints full of puss, phlegm, vomit and excrement, among other things."

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