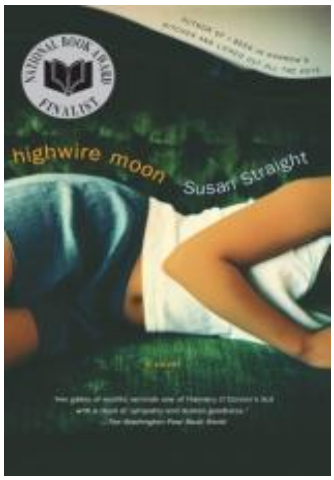
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Highwire Moon

by Susan Straight



About the Book

Serafina Mendez, a Mexican Indian, is fifteen when she sneaks across the border into California looking for work. Only days after she gets a job at Angeles Linen, immigration officials sweep through the laundry in search of illegal workers. Larry Foley, a handsome truck driver, comes to her rescue. He gives her a home and fathers Elvia, a child Serafina raises with a fierce, unrestrained love. Larry's mockery of her peasant ways and strange language, along with his drug binges and frequent disappearances, finally force Serafina to flee with Elvia. Stopping at a church to seek guidance from the saints, Serafina is seized by the police, and, unable to explain that she has left her three-year-old daughter in her car, is summarily deported. After twelve long years she makes the treacherous journey back to California in hopes of holding her child once again.

Elvia spends her childhood moving from one foster home to another, until Larry suddenly appears to reclaim her. But Larry's desire to be a good father is not enough to temper his wayward impulses or defeat his personal demons, and when Elvia becomes pregnant at fifteen, she is determined to find the mother she believes intentionally abandoned her so long ago. Her search takes her to the slums of Tijuana and to the grim camps of migrant workers on this side of the border, places still steeped in the violence and desperation described so powerfully by John Steinbeck in **The Grapes of Wrath**.

Nominated for the National Book Award, **Highwire Moon** is an illuminating journey into the dark corners of American life and into the hearts and minds of the people trapped in the shadows.

Discussion Guide

1. Why does Elvia refuse to speak when she is placed in foster care [pp. 8?10]? How do Elvia's reactions to her foster families shed light on the emotions hidden beneath her stoic exterior?

2. Elvia "liked looking strange, like someone no one would want and no one would want to mess with" [p. 15]. Do you think this is a common attitude among children who grow up in foster homes? From what you have read about foster care and the way many children are treated, what role does the system itself play in creating this sense of alienation and defiance?

3. In explaining why he finally comes for Elvia, Larry says, "I got un-lost" [p. 14]. What insights does this explanation and other conversations Elvia and Larry have about Serafina [p. 67, for example] offer into Larry's image of himself and his approach to life? Do his actions in the novel support or belie the advice he gives Elvia: "Don't set yourself up. Don't expect anything. Ever" [p. 68]? Does the story of his own childhood make it easier to understand both his good intentions and his inability to stick to them?

4. What draws Elvia to Michael? In what ways is he similar to her father? Is Michael better able to cope with his situation ("Half Mexican, half Indian. Half the year here, half in Dos Arroyos" [p. 24]) than she is, and if so, why?

5. What is the significance of Elvia's interest in geology? Why is her collection of stones so important to her?

6. During her travels with Michael and Hector, Elvia comes to realize that "Michael was good at dreams. But Hector was good at the rest of life" [p. 174]. Discuss how the author conveys this distinction, not only in descriptions of their behavior but also through the observations they make and the stories they share with Elvia throughout the journey. What particular events or incidents demonstrate Elvia's naiveté about the historical and cultural forces that define California's social divisions? How does the knowledge she acquires about the dangerous, often fatal migrations of illegal workers, and her own back-breaking experience picking fruit, change her outlook on the world and her sense of her place in it?

7. Serafina makes her journey in the company of two men, Florencio and the coyote. To what extent is Florencio's role parallel to the roles Michael and Hector play in Elvia's journey? Does Serafina undergo changes comparable to Elvia's?

8. The focus of the narrative alternates between Serafina and Elvia. Is this merely a device to increase the suspense of the story? What else does Straight accomplish by juxtaposing these two tales?

9. Do your feelings about the three main characters change during the course of the novel? Which of them did you find the most interesting? The most likeable?

10. Straight portrays several parent-child relationships in **Highwire Moon**, from Serafina's devotion to Elvia and to her own mother when she returns to Mexico to Callie's blatant and sometimes dangerous neglect of Jeff, to Elvia's complicated feelings about Larry and Sandy Narlette and her longing for the mother she barely remembers. What do these different examples convey about the reality of parenthood, as well as the effects of culture and tradition on raising a child? Are any of the relationships easily classified as either "good" or "bad"?

11. Hector's aunt says, "the one feed you, take care of you, take you to la clinica for sick, wash the clothes, who is the mother" [p. 158]. How do you think Serafina would react to this statement? How does it relate to Larry's description of his role in Elvia's life [p. 73], as well as his memories of his treatment of Serafina, who is just Elvia's age when he meets her [p. 81]?

12. Elvia and Serafina visit several of the same places. Did you find this series of coincidences credible? Did you hope

that the two would cross paths? What do you think would have happened if they did find each other?

13. **Highwire Moon** is in many ways a book about traveling: Serafina's harrowing trek northward, Elvia's journey to find her mother, and Larry's restless wanderings in search of jobs and drugs. How does this motif enhance the novel's themes? What does **Highwire Moon** share with other classic American novels built around journeys?for example, Mark Twain's **The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**, John Steinbeck's **The Grapes of Wrath**, and Jack Kerouac's **On the Road**?

14. One reviewer comments, "[Straight] puts identity politics to shame. She explodes the fiction, fashionable as it now is, that white folks ?get' white folks and only black folks ?get' black folks and the experiences of raped women is comprehensible only to other raped women" (Christina Nehring, *Washington Post Book World*, 8/12/01). Do you agree with this evaluation? How does Straight capture the distinctive qualities of the various ethnic groups she writes about? Are the portraits equally convincing?

15. From the first page of the book, when Serafina feels Elvia's "small hands fluttering like moths on her shoulders" to Elvia's decision to get a tattoo of three moths [p. 117], references to moths, both metaphorical and literal, occur throughout the book. What do they symbolize? What other recurrent images does Straight use? Do they evoke consistent associations (either positive or negative) or do they represent the ambiguity inherent in even the most ordinary events and objects?

16. Straight includes both Spanish and Mixtec words throughout the book. What effect does this have on your experience as a reader? How does language help to define each character?

17. The title of the novel comes from a conversation between Sandy Narlette and Elvia [p. 70]. Why is the image of the moon briefly "balanced" on a wire an appropriate metaphor for the way life unfolds for Elvia and her parents?

Author Bio

Susan Straight has published 10 novels, including MECCA, A MILLION NIGHTINGALES and HIGHWIRE MOON, and one memoir, IN THE COUNTRY OF WOMEN. She?s been a finalist for the Kirkus Prize, the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, and the National Book Award, among other honors, and received the Lannan Prize, the O. Henry Award, the Edgar Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Robert Kirsch Award for lifetime achievement from the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prizes. Her fiction has been translated into 10 languages. She was born in Riverside, California, where she lives with her family.

Critical Praise

"Her gallery of misfits reminds one of Flannery O'Connor's?but with a dash of sympathy and human goodness.

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