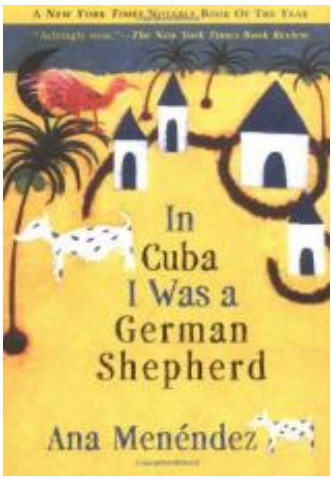
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In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd

by Ana Menendez



About the Book

Beautifully written and hauntingly evocative, Ana Menéndez's collection of interrelated stories **In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd** gives an unforgettable glimpse of what it is like for Cuban exiles to begin their new lives in Miami. Whether touching upon love, family, aspirations, or memories, these stories are full of gentle humor and trenchant observation, nostalgic remembrance and corrosive longing. Menéndez is masterful in gracefully demonstrating how our heritage and our origins continue to shape our lives, even when we are far away from home.

Discussion Guide

1. Nostalgia is prevalent in many of the stories, especially "Baseball Dreams," "Hurricane Stories," and "The Party." Think of some examples of its appearance in these stories or others. How is nostalgia characterized differently from story to story? Does it exhibit certain qualities that are always the same?

2. After reading these stories, what do you think it means to be an exile? Does it mean the same thing to different characters in different stories? Talk about the various qualities of exile as it appears in "In Cuba . . ." (pp. 5-7), "The Story of a Parrot," and "Confusing the Saints." What is the experience of leaving like? What is it like for the ones who stay behind (pp. 112-116)?

3. Menéndez describes Miami as very tropical, lush, and sensual (p. 78). Do you see Miami this way? How are your impressions of the city different? What images are there of Cuba, both past and present? Are depictions of the two locations similar? What's different about the two places?

4. The story "Miami Relatives" discusses the notion of "skeletons in the closet." How does this appear in the story (p. 177), both literally and figuratively? What about the notion of a family tree?what twist on this concept appears in the story (p. 178)?

5. At one point, memory is characterized as being "full of sugar and acid" (p. 168) What examples from the stories can you think of in which memories have this distinctly bittersweet quality? Are there any instances where the characters' memories are completely happy? Completely bitter?

6. In "Story of a Parrot," how is the parrot symbolic of the stage career that Hortencia dreamed of but never had? What is the importance of the fact that she insists on chasing it away, blames her husband for its departure, and wants it back?

7. What comments do the stories make about the fate of immigrants' dreams and ambitions in their new home? How does leaving Cuba affect their lives and change their prospects for the future? Are they better off in Miami? How? Consider the situations of the characters in "In Cuba" and those in "The Story of a Parrot" and how leaving Cuba changed their lives.

8. Consider where the book's title appears: Maximo is telling jokes to his companions in the park. What is the significance of the punch line of his joke (p. 28), and how is it relevant to the characters in this story? What about the other jokes he tells in the story?do they serve the same narrative purpose?

9. What role does miscommunication play in "Hurricane Stories"? What point is the woman trying to make with her hurricane story, and how is it misinterpreted (pp. 47-48)? What does this have to do with the fact that, after we hear the tale, we learn they're breaking up?

10. Comment on the statement, "In Cuba, the stories always began, life was good and pure. But something always happened to them in the end, something withering, malignant" (p. 7). Think of examples where this comment applies to the stories in the book. What does it mean that this is so?

11. In the story "The Party," what do you think has happened in the past between Ernesto and Joaquin? Is this related to the old woman who follows Ernesto around? Who do you think she could be?

12. What do the banana trees in Matilde's backyard in "The Perfect Fruit" represent for her? Why is she so upset about her husband Raul planting them? What is the significance of her transforming every last banana into some different dessert, and then offering them all up to her husband? How does she relate this to her son and the fact that he is about to get married?

13. In "Why We Left," seasons figure prominently in the story, as do their associations with particular locations. Miami represents an endless summer, bursting with life and activity, while the frozen northern city to which the couple moves is related to the winter of their discontent. How are these depictions symbolically related to the central event in the story: the narrator's miscarriage (pp. 83-84)? How do the seasons in each location relate to the idea of places be life-giving or lifeless?

14. The narrator of the story "Baseball Dreams" says, "I am a little girl who wants a life of baseball rules: nine innings, pads on the catcher, may the best team win" (p.133). What does she mean by this? How would her life be different if it

had "baseball rules"?

15. The Cuban immigrants in the stories create a new community for themselves in Miami, but do you think they succeed in re-creating a home? Given the description of the lives they lead, is Miami or Cuba home for the characters in "In Cuba . . ." "The Perfect Fruit," and "Miami Relatives"? What about in the other stories? Where is home for the second generation, the children of the immigrants?Cuba or Miami?

Author Bio

Ana Menéndez is the daughter of Cuban exiles who fled to Los Angeles in the 1960s before settling in Miami. She worked as a journalist for six years, first at *The Miami Herald* where she covered Little Havana, and later with *The Orange County Register* in California. Menéndez is a graduate of NYU's creative writing program where she was a *New York Times* fellow.

Critical Praise

"Menendez focuses on the regrets and loneliness of Cuban exiles, offering a nuanced view of people who are, she says, often stereotyped and pigeonholed. 'But one book is too small a thing to change people's ideas,' she says."

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