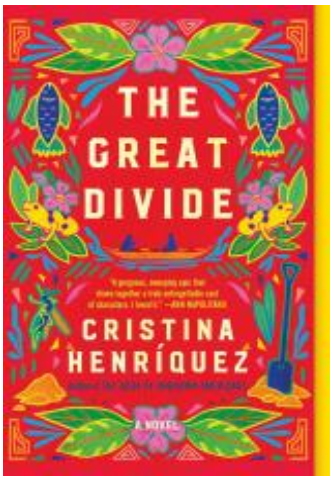
The Great Divide

by Cristina Henríquez



About the Book

A powerful novel about the construction of the Panama Canal, casting light on the unsung people who lived, loved and labored there.

It is said that the canal will be the greatest feat of engineering in history. But first, it must be built. For Francisco, a local fisherman who resents the foreign powers clamoring for a slice of his country, nothing is more upsetting than the decision of his son, Omar, to work as a digger in the excavation zone. But for Omar, whose upbringing was quiet and lonely, this job offers a chance to finally find connection.

Ada Bunting is a bold 16-year-old from Barbados who arrives in Panama as a stowaway alongside thousands of other West Indians seeking work. Alone and with no resources, she is determined to find a job that will earn enough money for her ailing sister?s surgery. When she sees a young man --- Omar --- who has collapsed after a grueling shift, she is the only one who rushes to his aid.

John Oswald has dedicated his life to scientific research and has journeyed to Panama in single-minded pursuit of one goal: eliminating malaria. But now, his wife, Marian, has fallen ill herself, and when he witnesses Ada?s bravery and compassion, he hires her on the spot as a caregiver. This fateful decision sets in motion a sweeping tale of ambition, loyalty and sacrifice.

Searing and empathetic, THE GREAT DIVIDE explores the intersecting lives of activists, fishmongers, laborers, journalists, neighbors, doctors and soothsayers --- those rarely acknowledged by history even as they carved out its course.

Discussion Guide

1. Francisco has raised his son, Omar, since his wife mysteriously disappeared at sea years ago. Despite Francisco's sacrifices, the relationship between them has been difficult, and Francisco disapproves of Omar working on the Panama Canal. How would you describe the different values between father and son? What do you think the Panama Canal represents to each of them?

2. Several characters make the trip to Panama because of work or family obligations or to leave behind a past life. Have you ever had a life event take you somewhere completely unexpected? If you had the chance, would you repeat your decision?

3. THE GREAT DIVIDE explores numerous forces that are integral in shaping the future of Panama --- politics, power, community, faith, family, love and more. Which do you think is the most powerful, and why?

4. After giving birth to Omar, Esme struggles to recover and eventually disappears with Francisco's boat. In what ways does she reappear throughout the novel? Do you think it's possible to maintain a connection to someone even if they are not present?

5. Valentina has a strong relationship to the town of Gatún, which becomes evident when she considers leaving it behind: "She needed him to understand that Gatún was her. That although she lived in the city, Gatún was the place whose air she had breathed, whose dirt she had walked barefoot upon, whose streets she could follow blindfolded, the place where she had learned how to cook and how to climb and how to argue and how to love, the place that had made her." Have you ever had a particularly strong connection with a place? What do you think it means to call somewhere home?

6. In the beginning of THE GREAT DIVIDE, Francisco has lost his ability to dream of the world to come: "Perhaps the problem, he thought, was that a person needed faith to be able to see things that did not exist, to imagine a world not yet made." What do you think it takes to believe in the future? What do you think is at stake if we don't?

7. Molly is a minor character, but when she takes photographs at the protest and shows them to an editor at *The Canal Record*, it leads to one of the most impactful lines in the book. The editor declines to publish the photographs, saying that they are "not right for the *Record*." What do you think the novel is saying about how history is or is not recorded? Are there other instances in the book that touch on this theme?

8. Miller, disgruntled by his lack of power, takes out his frustration on the men in his charge. To what extent do you believe Miller is responsible when one of them --- Berisford --- collapses in the Cut and dies?

9. Marian recounts a story about John stopping her from wandering off the path to look at an orchid. Instead, John brings a potted orchid to the house. Marian thinks, "It was always curious to her, though, how a flower like that could look better to John in a pot than it did growing free." For Marian, what is the larger meaning of that statement? Do you think any other characters in the book seek control, like John, or freedom, like Marian?

10. On its surface, THE GREAT DIVIDE refers to the physical divide of the canal itself, but what other divisions, whether physical or metaphorical, are present in the novel?

11. Omar feels that in Ada, he has found someone who understands him. In what ways do Ada's and Omar's situations

both mirror and differ from each other? In particular, consider each of their relationships with their families. How much do you need to have in common with someone in order to understand them?

Author Bio

Cristina Henríquez is the author of THE GREAT DIVIDE, THE BOOK OF UNKNOWN AMERICANS, THE WORLD IN HALF and COME TOGETHER, FALL APART: A Novella and Stories. She has been longlisted for the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction and was a finalist for the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. Her writing has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Real Simple*, *The Oxford American*, *The American Scholar* and elsewhere. She earned her undergraduate degree from Northwestern University and is a graduate of the Iowa Writers? Workshop. She lives in Illinois.

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