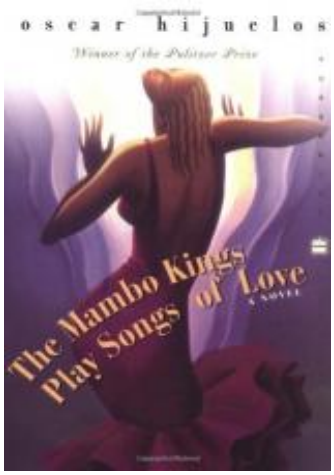
The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love

by Oscar Hijuelos



About the Book

It's 1949. It's the era of the mambo, and two young Cuban musicians make their way up from Havana to the grand stage of New York. The Castillo brothers, workers by day, become by night stars of the dance halls, where their orchestra plays the lush, sensuous, pulsing music that earns them the title of the Mambo Kings. This is their moment of youth--a golden time that thirty years later will be remembered with nostalgia and deep afection. In The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love,Oscar Hijuelos has created a rich and enthralling novel about passion and loss, memory and desire.

Discussion Guide

1. Why do you think Hijuelos would endow Cesar with such exaggerated sexuality? Why does he stretch the limits of believability? Is he satirizing or celebrating traditional Latino machismo?

2. What role does the I Love Lucy show play in the lives of the Castillo brothers? What is the effect of its frequent recurrence throughout the novel? Does the emotional resonance of the episode change over the course of the novel? How so?

3. The novel appears to be a series of temporally disconnected vignettes remembered by a dying Cesar Castillo. And yet there are times when the novel "loses" the sense that the events it is portraying are Cesar's memories. Why do you think Hijuelos employs such a loose structure for *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*? Does the lack of a traditional plot structure serve the subject matter? How so? What insights are provided into Cesar's character by the use of such a non-linear structure?

4. What do the two brothers sacrifice by coming to America? What have they each left behind in Cuba? What role do memories of their homeland play in their lives in America? Which brother is best able to leave their past behind? Which brother best assimilates in the U.S.?

5. What is each of the brothers' relationship to the American dream? Do they achieve it? To what degree? How does the American dream fail them? What does the pamphlet, Forward America, mean to Nestor?

6. Is Nestor a good father? Is Cesar? What ideas of fatherhood were passed down to the brothers from their father? How would you characterize their relationship to their father?

7. Do you think *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* is a tale specific to Cuban immigrants, or is it applicable to all immigrants? Or to all Americans of that generation? What aspects of the story transcend the Cuban immigrant experience? Which are unique to Cuban Americans?

8. What is the role of women in Cesar's life? Why does he have sex with so many? Does he love any of his sexual partners? Is Lydia an exception? Why does she seem to dominate his memories? Why doesn't Cesar ever make love to Delores?

9. Throughout the novel are occasional footnotes with historical details. Who is the voice of these footnotes? Hijuelos? Cesar? Eugenio? How did the footnotes affect your reading of the novel? Why do you think Hijuelos employs this device?

Author Bio

Oscar Hijuelos, the son of Cuban immigrants, was in New York City in 1951. He is a recipient of the Rome Prize, the Pulitzer Prize, and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. His novels --- MAMBO KINGS, OUR HOUSE IN THE LAST WORLD, THE FOURTEEN SISTERS OF EMILIO MONTEZ O'BRIEN, MR. IVES' CHRISTMAS, EMPRESS OF THE SPLENDID SEASON and A SIMPLE HABANA MELODY --- have been translated into 25 languages.

Critical Praise

York Times "One lush, tipsy, all-night mambo of a novel about Cuban musicians in strange places like New York City. "

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