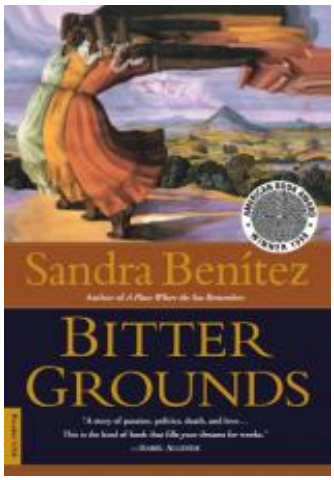
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Bitter Grounds

by Sandra Benitez



About the Book

Winner of the 1998 American Book Award

Spanning the years between 1932 and 1977, this beautifully told epic is set in the heart of El Salvador, where coffee plantations are the center of life for rich and poor alike. Following three generations of the Prieto Clan and the wealthy family they work for, this is the story of mothers and daughters who live, love, and die for their passions.

Discussion Guide

1. How do the generations change, in their attitudes, beliefs, aspirations? Consider the world events surrounding these characters during the span of the novel, from 1932 to 1977: How are outside forces (economic depression, war, worker rebellion, civil unrest) reflected in their daily lives?

2. What is the significance of "Los Dos," the daily radio soap opera-both its content and the rituals of its audience?

3. Coffee provides a way of life in El Salvador. What is its role in the lives of these characters, symbolically and literally?

4. There are elements of magic realism to this story. Discuss examples of magic realism and their role in the story: do you think the departure from reality adds to or detracts from your belief in these events? Why do you think the author chose to include them? Other writers (Laura Esquivel, Isabel Allende, Gabriel García Márquez, to name a few) have also used this effect; if you've read their work, compare it to **Bitter Grounds**, or discuss if or why Latin American writing lends itself to magic realism. Do any North American writers try their hands at it?

5. "In years to come, when she thought of this moment, Elena would know that it was here, at this time-standing around the bend of Cecilia's lake house, the dying sun pouring itself into the blue bowl of the lake-that her life was forever

divided into its own before and after." (page 130) Discuss other characters whose lives take equally dramatic and irreversible turns.

6. **Bitter Grounds** depicts the sharp differences between the lives of the rich and the poor. But the two classes also shared much in common. In what ways were they alike?

7. As the poor turned to the left for help politically, the rich turned to the right, and this polarization eventually led to a tragic civil war. Who do you think is to blame for the failure to find a middle ground?

8. Women writing about women are sometimes accused of doing so at the expense of their male characters. Discuss the role of men in this novel and how you feel they are portrayed.

9. What did you find interesting about mother/daughter relationships in Latin America? And how do these differ, if at all, from the way things work in our country?

10. In the final analysis, who were the winners and who were the losers in **Bitter Grounds***?*

Author Bio

Sandra Benitez has spent her life moving between the Latin American culture of her Puerto Rican mother and the Anglo-American culture of her father. She was born March 26, 1941 in Washington D.C., one of a pair of identical twins. Her sister, Susana, died just 37 days after their birth. A year later, her father, who worked for the U.S. State Department, was assigned to Mexico, where her sister, Anita, was born. Not long after, the family transferred with him to El Salvador and this is where Sandra lived for most of the next 20 years. In Latin America, she learned that life is frail and capricious; that people can find joy in the midst of insurmountable obstacles; that, in the end, it is hope that sustains.

When Benitez reached high school age, her parents, in part to ?Americanize? her, sent Sandra to her paternal grandparents? modest dairy farm in northeastern Missouri. She attended Unionville high school, returning each summer to El Salvador. In Missouri, she saw the back-breaking work and quiet self-reliance required to extract a living from the land and its animals. She learned that life is what you make it; that satisfaction comes from a job well done; that, in the end, it is steadfastness that leads to goals accomplished and dreams realized.

Benitez returned to Missouri for her college years, eventually earning a master?s degree in literature from what is, today, Truman University in Kirksville. Later, she taught literature at both the high school and university level. Later, she did a four-year stint in the international division of a major training corporation and traveled extensively throughout Latin America.
In 1980 she began to write fiction. It was not until 13 years later that her first book, A Place Where the Sea Remembers, set in Mexico, was published. It won wonderful reviews and a number of prizes including the Barnes and Noble Discover Award, the Minnesota Book Award, and selection as a finalist for the Los Angeles Times? First Fiction Award. Her second book, Bitter Grounds, set in El Salvador, won an American Book award and a nomination for Great Britain?s prestigious Orange Prize. Both books, and her third as well, have been published in more than half a dozen languages.

Sandra?s third novel, The Weight of All Things, also set in El Salvador, tells the heart-breaking story of a nine-year-old

boy caught up in a vicious civil war. While it won no awards, it garnered plenty of praise from reviewers. Her latest novel, Night of the Radishes draws on her unique bi-cultural background. In it, a Minnesota woman, plunged into depression by a series of family tragedies, finds a long-lost brother and redemption in the mystical atmosphere of Oaxaca, Mexico. Published by Hyperion Books, it is due for release in January, 2004.

Benitez?s work has also appeared in a number of magazines and anthologies. Most notably, A Place Called Home: Twenty Writing Women Remember, Mickey Pearlman, editor, St. Martin?s Press, and Sleeping with One Eye Open, Marilyn Kallet, editor, University of Georgia Press.

Sandra?s work has earned her nearly two dozen honors, awards and grants (see below), and she is much in demand as a teacher and speaker. In 1997 she was selected as the University of Minnesota Edelstein-Keller Distinguished Writer in Residence. In 1998 she did the Writers Community Residency for the YMCA National Writer?s Voice program. In the spring of 2001 she held the Knapp Chair in Humanities as Associate Professor of Creative Writing at the University of San Diego. Other teaching residencies include Bread Loaf Writers Conference, Flight of the Mind, the University of Minnesota Split Rock Arts Program, and Hamline (Minn.) University.

Sandra is the recipient of the 2004 National Hispanic Heritage Award Honoree for Literature.

In December, 2006, Benitez received one of the first United States Artists Awards, being named a USA Gund Fellow.

2006 Central Region Winner. ConvaTec and Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of America GREAT COMEBACKS AWARD.

2006: "Rockford Reads One Book," Rockford, IL
A Place Where the Sea Remembers and Alli Donde El Mar Recuerda
all-city book read selection.

Benitez has lectured at colleges, high schools and professional organizations coast to coast. All of her first three novels, but especially A Place Where the Sea Remembers, are used extensively in classrooms through the country and are book group favorites as well.

Benitez lives with her husband, Jim Kondrick, in Edina, Minnesota, and has completed her first non-fiction Bag Lady: A Memoir of Illness and Recovery. The book is an account of Sandra's 30 year struggle with Ulcerative Colitis, and her acceptance of the ileostomy surgery that changed her life.

Sandra Benitez is the 2004 National Hispanic Heritage Foundation Honoree for Literature, as well as listed by Hispanic Business Magazine as one of the U.S.'s 100 Influentials.

Critical Praise

" Grabs us at the most visceral level . . . .Benítez's clear writing and considerable imagination enable her to make the political personal, luminous, and even comic. "-***Ms.***"Packs an emotional punch . . . .A compelling read. "- ***Boston Globe***

"Explores passion, politics, love, death, and betrayal in an intricately plotted mystery . . . . Moving and lyrical. "- ***Minneapolis Star Tribune***"Engaging and involving . . . .Packed with exquisite detail . . ..entirely captivating. "- ***Austin American-Statesman***"It's hard not to get hooked. "- ***St. Louis Post-Dispatch***"A story of passion, politics, death, and love . . . .This is the kind of book that fills your dreams for weeks. "- ***Isabel Allende***" A vivid chronicle of strong women facing the challenges of living in sad and violent times. "- ***Kirkus Reviews***

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