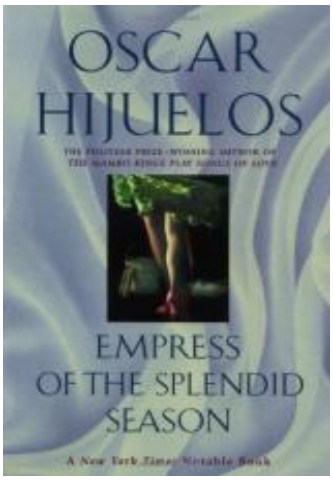
Empress of the Splendid Season

by Oscar Hijuelos



About the Book

Empress of the Splendid Season, Oscar Hijuelos' fifth novel, tells the story of the beautiful Lydia Espana, an emigre from pre-Castro Cuba who lives and works on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Once the spoiled, pampered daughter of a small town mayor, Lydia has been banished from Cuba by her father because of a youthful sexual indiscretion, and finds employment cleaning the apartments of New Yorkers much better off than herself. She is wooed and wedded by Raul, a waiter with a weak heart, who calls her "the Empress... of the most beautiful and splendid season, which is love." As Raul's health falters, Lydia--now the mother of two children, Rico and Alicia--must struggle to keep her family afloat. Amidst the turmoil of Spanish Harlem in the 1960's, Lydia attempts to hold her clan together and maintain her proud Cuban heritage. But as the years pass and her life of hard labor takes it toll, "Lydia the Empress" is forced to come to terms with the reality of her life as one of the working poor. As she goes from apartment to apartment uncovering her clients' secret lives, Hijuelos weaves a portrait--not just of one family's complex road toward assimilation, but of a pulsing, vibrant, and dangerous New York City . . . a city of music and dreams, a city of love and loss.

Discussion Guide

1. How does Lydia manage to hold on to her identity as a "proper girl from a good family" even as she endures a life of cleaning other people's toilets? What enables her to walk down Harlem's streets with so much pride that the neighborhood kids call her "Queenie" ?

2. What is Lydia's relationship to Cuba? Though not exactly a political exile, she shares many of the feelings of her Cuban neighbors. What measures does she take to retain her Cuban identity? What are the steps she takes to assimilate in her new country?

3. How does Lydia's relationship with her son Rico change as he grows from adoring child to rebellious teenager to successful adult? What are some of the struggles that Lydia faces in trying to maintain a cohesive family? How might

these struggles be applicable to all immigrant and first-generation Americans?

4. Lydia believes she has found a kindred spirit in Mr. Osprey and fantasizes about an adulterous affair. What is it that draws her to him, and what is it that restrains her from acting upon her amorous impulses?

5. Both Alicia and Rico are caught committing crimes. In both instances, Lydia's connections save her children from dire legal consequences. But what price do the children pay in terms of their mother's trust and affection? What are the long-term effects of their youthful indiscretions?

6. What has Lydia gained, and what has she lost, in her journey from being "the Empress of the Splendid Season," to becoming Lydia, the Spanish cleaning woman?

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.

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