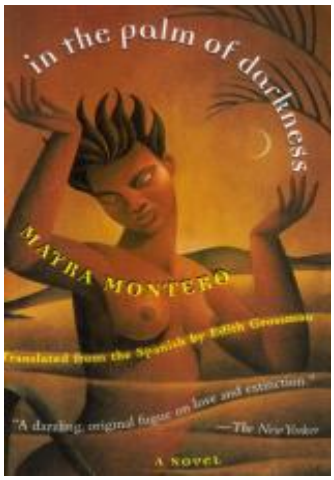
In the Palm of Darkness: A Novel

by Mayra Montero



About the Book

In the Palm of Darkness brings together two men, each of them hunters, from different worlds. Victor, a respected scholar and expert on amphibians, has come to Haiti in search of what may be the last existing eleutherodactylus sanguineus, or blood frog. Thierry is a local Haitian guide who grew up hunting zombies, or ghosts, in the jungles and hillsides of his native country. As the two men traverse Haiti's desolate landscape, they tell each other of their past life and loves, entrancing one another other with their stories. But in the quest for their elusive prey they stumble upon gruesome evidence that the area they're searching is a hideout for murderous macoutes, Haitian thugs and drugrunners who are using the hillside to store their shipments.

While Thierry tries to dissuade Victor from pursuing his frog, the scientist tries to apply some logic, some natural order to the threat they face from these men. "Nothing very serious," he says, "can happen to a man when all he looks for, all he wants, is a harmless little frog." But in this dangerous country, murder and violence are part of the natural order. Montero parallels this truth with another mysterious phenomenon, including the sudden worldwide extinction of various types of frogs. These disappearances are beyond the comprehension of even the most learned herpetologists and ecologists. But in Thierry's world, life and death, magic and science, love and hate, are all seamlessly intertwined. Montero's exploration of the seemingly disparate realms of science and spirituality shows us how each has its hold on the human and natural world.

Discussion Guide

1. In this novel, two men from completely different societies are brought together by their common interests. How does Montero contrast the lives of Victor and Thierry? How do their similarities and differences play into the novel's themes of love, extinction, violence and tragedy?

2. Montero uses as a leitmotif the mysterious disappearance of certain amphibian populations throughout the world. How

is this phenomenon an apt metaphor for the troubles that have plagued the Haitian people?

3. How does Montero portray the scientists who come to Haiti? Are they pursuing their own self-interests at the expense of the Haitian people?

4. Victor and Theirry's quest for the "blood" frog ends with a sad and ironic twist. From its beginning to its end, how does the story of the hunt for the frog illuminate man's relationship to the natural and supernatural worlds?

Author Bio

Mayra Montero was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1952, but has lived in Puerto Rico since the mid 1960s. She studied journalism in Mexico and Puerto Rico and worked for many years as a correspondent in Central America and the Caribbean. She is presently a highly acclaimed journalist in Puerto Rico and writes a weekly column in El Nuevo Dia newspaper. Montero's first book was a collection of short stories, Twenty-Three and a Turtle. Her second book, a novel titled **The Braid of the Beautiful Moon**, was a finalist for the Herralde awards, one of Europe's most prestigious literary awards. Each of her subsequent books -- **The Last Night I Spent With You**, **The Red of His Shadow**, **In the Palm of Darkness**, and **The Messenger** -- has been published in the United States in translations by Edith Grossman, as well as in several European countries. Her other nonfiction work appears frequently in scholarly and literary publications throughout the world.

Critical Praise

"Primal sorcery and modern agony ... A voyage into the heart of darkness .... Montero confronts the modern Western way of knowing with an older more universal kind."

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