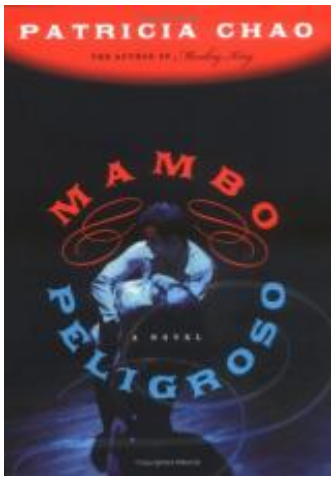
Mambo Peligroso: A Novel

by Patricia Chao



About the Book

When thirty-two-year-old Catalina Ortiz Midori walks into a shabby New York dance studio for her first mambo class, she has no idea that her life is about to change. Mesmerized by El Tuerto, the one-eyed teacher who smells of sandalwood and is a titan of the New York mambo scene, Catalina is also drawn to the dazzling technique of Wendy Cardoza, a Bronx mambera who is one of its reigning queens. Catalina is a Japanese-Cuban immigrant who has lost touch with her Cuban roots and finds it difficult to understand Spanish. Her apprenticeship with El Tuerto and Wendy, and her growing obsession with the world of mambo -- the music, the dancers, and the seductive dance itself -- will bring her back to her origins with a passion she didn't know she possessed.

Mambo Peligroso carries the reader from New York to Miami and eventually to Cuba, where the music began. Along the way, Catalina inadvertently becomes involved, through her cousin Guillermo, in a sinister Miami exile scheme.

Patricia Chao is the author of the highly praised novel **Monkey King**. In this new book, her second work of fiction, readers have a unique opportunity to enter an intriguing and exotic milieu and emerge with an insider's sense of the experience. With its vibrantly drawn characters -- and a narrative rhythm born of mambo itself, **Mambo Peligroso** is an irresistible read -- hot-blooded, fast-paced, and written with an intelligence and poetry that are the province of a magnificently gifted writer.

Discussion Guide

1. One of the themes in this novel is identity: male and female, Cuban and American, northern WASP and Miami Cuban, rich and poor. Chao writes, "She wasn't a party girl and although her background was Cuban she hadn't danced or really listened to Latin music since she was a teenager spending summers down in Calle Ocho with her relatives. Growing up in a white Boston suburb, attending a Seven Sisters college, those years with her ex-boyfriend Richard the uber-WASP -- all that had bleached her to the point where she could hardly call herself Latina at all" (Page 16-17). Are those

parts of Catalina's past that she identifies as WASP invalid once she reconnects with her Cuban heritage? Is one side of her more real or alive than another side? Why or why not?

2. Catalina's whole life in a way revolves around the power of language. She loses and regains her first language, Spanish. She teaches English as a second language, helping her students to enter American culture. (She and Guillermo also share a "sign language.") In what ways is Mambo also like a language to her? Learning to dance allows her to enter a culture, but how does it also change her view of herself? Does it change the way she relates to others? How does she learn to use this "language" as a means of communication?

3. Catalina's friendship with Wendy seems as important as her affair with El Tuerto, maybe more so in some ways. How does this story show the power of both friendship and sexuality between women? Are same sex relationships shown as being different than heterosexual relationships? What does Catalina learn from Wendy?

4. Catalina has an affair, in her youth, with her cousin Guillermo. Is this disturbing in any way? Is their relationship wrong, or understandable? What draws them to each other so powerfully? Why does Guillermo see Catalina as his "one pure thing?"

5. What is the nature of El Tuerto's relationships with women? Why are they so attracted to him? What kind of hold does he have on Catalina?

6. Chao's characters feel a passion and a need for dance, and sometimes for each other, which is like an addiction. She writes about Catalina's affair with El Tuerto, "He turned her inside out. August, September, October -- she'd remember nothing about that time afterwards except fucking and dancing and dragging herself downtown every week-day afternoon to teach. She had no social life except for El Tuerto and occasionally dinner with friends. She knew that, like mambo, the intimacy of sex was an illusion but she'd never felt like this in her life and she'd do anything to keep on feeling it" (Page 159). What is it that Catalina is feeling? Why is the intimacy of the dance an illusion, and why does she need it so much? In what ways is this like an addiction?

7. One of the author's challenges in this novel is to make a world of music and movement come alive on the printed page. Does she succeed? What are some of the ways in which Chao makes this happen? For instance, she returns again and again to the importance of the clave, the rhythm that the dancers must find and enter. She writes, "The clave itself never changes. It's the arrangement that changes over the clave" (Page 167). This is both straight dance instruction and a metaphor for the shifts in the lives of the characters. What does it mean?

8. When Catalina goes to Miami, the whole tone of the narrative shifts. Chao writes, " ... she listened to a Cuban hip hop mix and thought about El Tuerto?not love, but something more potent?how he had left her bruised and full of craving. Time, Miami, and the company of her cousin were healing her. Now she could wear low cut tanks and midriff tops and even bikinis if she pleased. She was glad to have her body back" (Page 173). Why is Miami a "cure" for Catalina? What is the difference between her feeling for her cousin, and what she feels for El Tuerto? What does she gain from each of them?

9. In this novel Chao chooses to move between the view points of the four main characters: Catalina, El Tuerto, Wendy, and Guillermo. How does this technique affect the reader's experience of the story? Does it deepen your understanding of the characters? Does your opinion of Catalina change when you see her through El Tuerto's eyes, or Wendy's?

10. In Miami, Catalina moves from the intense world of Mambo into the intense world of Cuban politics, in which her cousin is entangled against his will. Are there similarities between these two worlds? She is drawn to both of them by passion, but is her motivation different? With El Tuerto, Catalina feels that she doesn't have much choice but to go along with his wishes, his style. Is she more empowered in her relationship with Guillermo?

11. Guillermo moves right from his early romance with Catalina into a marriage where he feels trapped, which leads him into the dangerous world of political conspiracy. He never seems able to make any choice about where he is or what he does. How do you feel about this character? If each of the characters in this novel can be said to have addictions, weaknesses, or passions, what is Guillermo's? What motivates him?

12. During their illicit excursion to Cuba, even though their lives are in danger, several times Catalina thinks to herself, "I am awake" (Pages 240, 242). Is it being in Cuba, or being with Guillermo, that causes her to feel this way? In what ways has her prior life been like a dream? The border between dream life and reality is one of Chao's favorite themes. How do you see it working in this story?

Author Bio

Born in California and raised in New England, Patricia Chao has traveled widely and feels most at home in Latin countries. She reviews Latin dance music for *Global Rhythm* magazine, and her poetry has appeared in various journals. She has taught creative writing at Sarah Lawrence College and New York University. Her first novel, **Monkey King**, was critically acclaimed and was a Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers finalist. She is at work on a new novel set in Brazil, Japan, and Argentina. Patricia Chao lives in New York City.

Critical Praise

"An entertaining, sometimes intoxicating read. Like the passionate dancers she portrays, Chao writes with heart and soul."

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