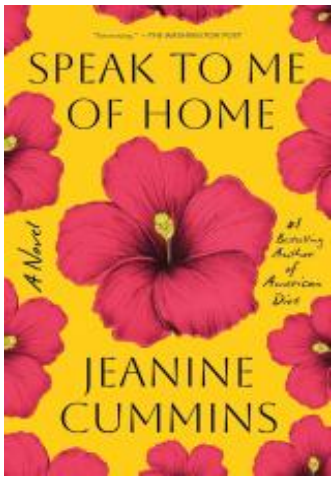
Speak to Me of Home

by Jeanine Cummins



About the Book

What does it mean to call a place home?

From *#1 New York Times* bestselling author Jeanine Cummins comes a deeply felt multigenerational family story.

On her wedding day in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 1968, Rafaela Acuña y Daubón has mild misgivings, but she marries Peter Brennan Jr. anyway in a blaze of romantic optimism. She has no way of knowing how dramatically her life will change when she uproots her young family to start over in the American Midwest, unleashing a fleet of disappointments.

In the 1980s, against the backdrop of her mother?s isolation in St. Louis, Missouri, Rafaela?s daughter, Ruth, wants only to belong. Eager to fit in, Ruth lets go of her language, habits and childhood memories of Puerto Rico. It?s not until decades later when Ruth?s own daughter, Daisy, returns to San Juan that her mother and grandmother begin to truly reflect on the choices that have come to define their lives.

When a hurricane ravages the island in 2023, leaving Daisy critically injured, Rafaela and Ruth return to the city where their story began. As they gather at Daisy?s bedside, we follow them back into the moments that brought them to this point: We watch as they come of age, fall in love, take risks, and contend with all the heartbreaks, triumphs and reversals of fortune --- both good and bad --- that make up a meaningful life. As old memories come to light, so do buried secrets, leaving everyone in the family wondering exactly where it is that they belong.

A striking, resonant examination of marriage, family and identity, SPEAK TO ME OF HOME is ultimately a story of mothers and daughters that asks: How can three women who share geography and genetics have such wildly different ideas of where they come from? And, more important, can they discover a common language to find their way back home?

Discussion Guide

Please note: In order to provide book clubs with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is necessary to reveal aspects of the story, as well as the ending. If you have not finished reading SPEAK TO ME OF HOME, you may want to wait before reviewing this guide.

1. SPEAK TO ME OF HOME opens with the following line: ?Afterward, Ruth will say she knew the moment the phone rang, even before she picked it up. She will say there was something calamitous in the sound.? It?s as if Ruth knew Daisy was in trouble. Have you ever felt tethered to a person in this way? How would you describe that bond?

2. In your life, which places have you called home? Do you think multiple places can be considered home? In your experience, what makes a place feel like home?

3. When she?s a teenager, Rafaela?s family experiences an extreme and abrupt change in fortune that has lifelong repercussions for all of them. Is this a blessing or a curse in Rafaela?s life? In what ways would her life have been better if this change never occurred? In what ways would her life have been worse?

4. Benny and Ruth?s childhood in St. Louis is largely devoid of any of the familiar cultural touchstones of their earlier years in Puerto Rico. Within that context, what role does Titi Lola play in their lives? What role do Eddy and his family play?

5. Within the parameters of his generation, culture and life experiences, is Peter a good husband to Rafaela? Is he a good father to Benny and Ruth? Why or why not?

6. Rafaela, Ruth and Daisy all have strong, complex and wildly different feelings about their connections to Puerto Rico. Does this kind of generational shift in identity exist in your own family? If so, which character most closely espouses the way you relate to your own heritage?

7. What role does language play in the story? How do the characters? relationships to their mother tongue and second languages reflect their senses of identity?

8. ?Like a boomerang, Rafaela had sailed out into the world, out across Ponce and Trinidad and St. Louis and New York, across turmoil and strife and sorrow and growth, and she had tumbled and whipped and arced and flown, and there were times when she couldn?t have said which way was up.? Over the course of the novel, each character experiences many transitions, including relocations. How did these moves shape the characters?

9. What do you think of the middle-school transformation of Daisy?s brother from Charlie to Carlos? What role, if any, do his gender and sexuality play in this transformation? What do you think of the way Ruth and the others respond to him as he navigates his identity in this way?

10. Near the end of the book, Rafaela reveals a bombshell that leaves her whole family reeling. What do you think of her revelation? Do you have empathy for the decisions she made as a young wife and mother, or are her actions unforgivable?

11. What is the role of food in this story? How integral is food generally, in the development of a cultural foundation and the ways it influences a family?s sense of identity and belonging?

12. SPEAK TO ME OF HOME follows the stories of three generations of women. How are Rafaela, Ruth and Daisy?s characters and trajectories influenced by the decade in which each of them is born? How do they influence one another? How might the milestones in these women?s lives be different if the novel had been set across another set of decades?

Author Bio

Jeanine Cummins is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of AMERICAN DIRT, which was an Oprah?s Book Club and a Barnes & Noble Book Club selection, as well as a #1 Indie Next pick. The novel has been translated into 37 languages and sold more than three-and-a-half million copies worldwide. Her other works include the memoir A RIP IN HEAVEN, and the novels THE OUTSIDE BOY, THE CROOKED BRANCH and SPEAK TO ME OF HOME. She lives in New York with her husband, their two daughters, and their dogs.

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