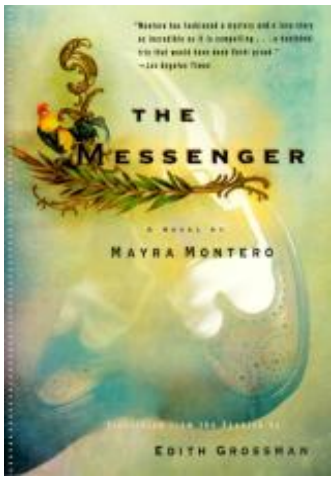
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

The Messenger: A Novel

by Mayra Montero



About the Book

In 1920, opera singer Enrico Caruso came to Havana as part of a worldwide tour. An afternoon performance of Aida was interrupted by a bomb explosion inside the theatre, and Caruso disappeared, inexplicably, for several days. Already ill when he came to Cuba, the beloved tenor would die soon after. No one knows what happened to Caruso during the time he was lost in Cuba, but this historical gem of a mystery becomes the basis for **The Messenger**, a haunting, multi-faceted story that moves between the worlds of poverty and wealth, past and present, and love and death, to offer a stirring contemplation of humankind's attempts to control destiny. In Montero's story, Caruso is rescued from his would-be assassins by Aida Petrirena Cheng, the exotically beautiful daughter of a mulatto mother and a Chinese father, whom he encounters in a hotel kitchen where he has taken shelter. Still dressed in the robes that were his costume, Caruso is shocked and terrified by the explosion, but Aida has been forewarned of this meeting by her godfather, a Santería priest. Dutifully she helps fulfill her destiny by taking Caruso under her wing. What Aida hasn't anticipated is the intensity of her feelings for this powerful, ailing man, and her attempts to save him and herself force her to choose between the stirrings of her own heart and the advice of others. Wrapped around this story are the accounts of witnesses, bystanders, and others who were affected directly or indirectly by the explosion, and the personal accounts of Enriqueta -- Aida and Caruso's love child.

Discussion Guide

1. Montero based her novel on an actual event: the bombing of a Cuban opera house and Caruso's subsequent disappearance for several days. How does she incorporate the facts into her fiction? Does her use of testimony and journalism affect the way you perceive Aida's and Caruso's stories?

2. One of the characters in the novel, the doctor who treated Caruso before he returned to New York, compares destiny to the libretto of an opera. "For those who believe in destiny," he says, "things happened as they had to happen. Caruso

couldn't escape the libretto; he couldn't skip a line. Fatality is the only opera we never have to study: we're born knowing it by heart." What does this novel say about fate? Is a belief in destiny paralyzing or liberating?

3. Montero introduces a variety of cultures in her novel -- Indian, African, Chinese, European; Enriqueta Cheng's heritage includes each of these ethnic groups. How does her character embody their influences, similarities and differences?

4. Although the novel's events occur primarily around 1920, Montero starts and ends the novel in present day Havana. How has life in the city changed over the past seventy years? How does the older Enriqueta's way of life reflect these changes?

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

"[A] smooth and graceful translation....Spellbinding....well worth the trip."

The Messenger: A Novel
by Mayra Montero

Publication Date: July 1, 2000
Paperback: 228 pages
Publisher: Harper Perennial
ISBN-10: 0060929618
ISBN-13: 9780060929619