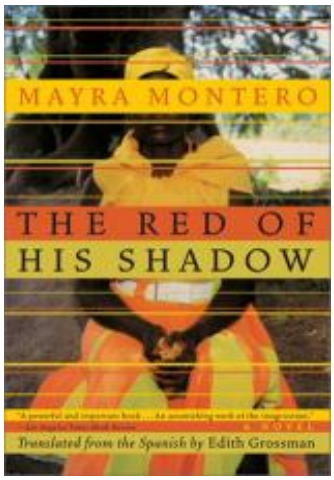
The Red of His Shadow: A Novel

by Mayra Montero



About the Book

In the author's note to her novel, **The Red of His Shadow**, Mayra Montero describes the life of Haitian sugar cane cutters in the Dominican Republic as one of "untold privation and misery in working conditions patterned after the cruelest slave regimes." It is a life few of us will ever witness firsthand, but one that we gain searing access to in this unforgettable story.

Hunger, death, and terror are daily realities for the "Congos," who constantly are reminded of their powerlessness against nature's brutality and the unpredictable whims of the field owners. Voudon, the religion they brought over from their native Haiti, offers them a way of coping with their plight. The haunting music and chants, the numerous and varied gods, or "loas," their elaborate ceremonies, and the fits and trances that signal possession by these loas are fascinating aspects of Voudon that are often characterized as sinister in literature and film. But this hypnotic novel, which takes place over the festivals of Voudon's Holy Week, personalizes the religion, reveals its mysteries and beauty, and brings into sharp focus the extraordinary courage and faith its practitioners depend on every day just to survive.

Zulé, the novel's young and strong-willed heroine, is an Afro-Caribbean queen disguised as the rag-clad daughter of a cane cutter. Zulé's endurance, her stubbornness, her clairvoyance and self-confidence make her a strong spiritual leader. But she is still a girl, and suffers a girl's passions and uncertainties. When she is forced to choose between confronting Similá, a murderous, rival Voudon priest who is also her ex-lover, or giving in to his cruel dominance, she wavers in her heart, but never in her resolve to do the right thing. Similá's ferocity, corruption and hatred reflect the many repressive forces at work in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, but they are no match for Zulé's dignity and conviction. What finally conquers her is not the power of her enemy, but the jealous love of one of her own people.

Montero's tale is as epic and moving as a Greek tragedy, but it is a story that could only be told amid the poverty and ruin of the Haitian people. By compelling us to look closely at this mysterious religion, by immersing us completely within its culture -- its potent smells, sounds, and surroundings -- Montero leads us toward an understanding of how truly

remarkable it is that these people have retained such spiritual strength. Of how an impoverished society manages to treat its leaders as kings and queens, transform its shacks into temples, and find dignity, beauty, and love within the most desperate of conditions.

Discussion Guide

1. Zulé's father, Papa Luc, has an uncanny nose for news: he seems to get information before anyone else, and senses the truths that no one will tell him. "Each day in the batey Papa Luc learned something different. And that night he had learned that great secrets did not exist in the lives of men, only small snares waiting at each step, the bait lying right there on the ground." What is the difference between a secret and a snare? How does this comment on destiny prophesize what would become Zulé's fate? Why do you think Zulé repeatedly utters the line, "What have you heard about Similá Bolosse?"

2. "Coridón had taught her that Gagá wars can be very good. Good when you make an alliance and the Societé fattens like a maja snake in the shade and the men are barely bruised by an unlucky stone. But who ever heard of firearms in Gagá battles? It needed Similá Bolosse with his evil tonton macoute ways for things in the Dominican Republic to stop being what they had been." What does this passage tell you about how modern-day realities of drugs and weapons have affected the Voudon religion? Without the impact of these factors, how might Zulé's life -- and the lives of her Societé -- been different?

3. In her author's note, Montero points out that the novel is based on true events that the Dominican police dismissed as "a simple 'crime of passion.'" What does this fact lend to the story?

4. On one level, **The Red of His Shadow** is a classic battle of wills between two powerful leaders intent on dominating each other. How does Montero "tweak" this archetypal plot to make it her own? Is Zulé a heroine? A martyr? A scorned lover? Do you think she should have heeded the advice of her elders and taken a different route from Similá's Gagá? What impact does the fact that Similá and Zulé used to be lovers have on the story?

5. Without the religious details -- the ceremonies, songs and spells -- Zulé's story is about a young woman protecting her family from outside forces. How does Voudon transform this story into something more epochal and mysterious? How did this novel educate you about the Voudon religion?

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

Transfixing ... Montero's unromantic vision and crisp pace strike a harmonious balance with the lushness of the background detail."

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