



Conquistadora

By *Esmeralda Santiago*

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As a young girl growing up in Spain, Ana Larragoity Cubillas is powerfully drawn to Puerto Rico by the diaries of an ancestor who traveled there with Ponce de Leon. And in handsome twin brothers Ramon and Inocente—both in love with Ana—she finds a way to get there. Marrying Ramon at the age of eighteen, she travels across the ocean to Hacienda los Gemelos, a remote sugar plantation the brothers have inherited. But soon the Civil War erupts in the United States, and Ana finds her livelihood, and perhaps even her life, threatened by the very people on whose backs her wealth has been built: the hacienda's slaves, whose richly drawn stories unfold alongside her own in this epic novel of love, discovery and adventure.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Francisco Goldman Reviews *Conquistadora*

Francisco Goldman is the author of *Say Her Name*, *The Art of Political Murder*, and *The Ordinary Seaman*. He lives in New York City and Mexico City.



Conquistadora is many vivid things all at once, and for the reader, they happen in your body, imagination and soul. It's a swashbuckling adventure, visceral and ardent; it's a historical novel so seamlessly told that you don't realize your heart's pounding even as your brain's amassing a wealth of fascinating new knowledge. This is a book that is like that one small island you've been longing for since the great adventure and pirate stories of childhood. But the island is real, and this novel tells a real story--an important piece of history--that has never been told before. It's a story about Puerto Rico, Esmeralda Santiago's birthplace, and it shows us the island in a way that we've never seen before.

Here also is a portrait of characters I came to know and to care about, far from the usual New World stock cast of rapacious and greedy Spanish plantation owners chasing after slave and Creole girls. I was especially intrigued from the start by Ana, whom we first meet as a teenager in a convent in Seville in 1826, bent over the yellowing pages of some journals. (I have an established proclivity for historical novels that begin in convents!) Ana's story, as every feisty convent girl's life story should, begins and ends with rebellion: those journals belong to an ancestor of hers who journeyed to Puerto Rico with Ponce de Leon, and when Ana travels there just after her eighteenth birthday, she is a señorita de buena familia rebelling against expectations--of her class, her gender, and the time period. By 1865, she's rich: a wealthy plantation owner on the island. She's lost none of her fire. But when the slaves on whom her sugarcane business was built catch the winds of change when Lincoln is elected in the US, she may lose it all. In the decades in between, Ana loves and loses, and finds her true home and her destiny. Puerto Rico, like many tropical "paradieses," turns out to be not the fantasy she'd dreamed on, but a harsh land with harsh realities--a place that rewards only the toughest. The surprising Ana is an irresistible heroine despite the history she carries. She is a woman of her time, for good or ill. A woman who by the end of this sweeping story, comes to define her life not just by all that she has conquered but also all that she has lost. Most importantly, she lives in the reader's imagination.

Conquistadora is a novel that surpassed my every expectation. It brings a hitherto unknown swath of history alive through great storytelling and narrative verve.

Esmeralda Santiago has written a brilliant and blazingly alive novel, as engrossing and just plain fun as any I have read in a long while.

Review

“Santiago brings passion, color, and historical detail to this Puerto Rican *Gone with the Wind*, featuring a hard-as-nails heroine more devoted to her plantation than to any of the men in her life . . . Ana grows up the willful daughter of aristocratic parents during the waning years of Spain’s colonial era. [She is] a not-so-innocent convent girl who marries her best friend’s fiancé’s twin brother, then heads to Puerto Rico without her friend, but with both twins in tow. The young men intend to make their fortunes, but it is Ana who has the savvy and determination to persevere through hurricanes, slave revolts, cholera and any other challenge the island has to offer. . . Santiago makes Caribbean history come alive through characters as human as they are iconic. The richness of her imagination and the lushness of her language will serve saga enthusiasts well, and she provides readers a massive panorama of plantation life—plus all you could ever want to know and more about growing sugar cane.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Extraordinary . . . a historical novel set in 19th Puerto Rico, featuring a high-handed, strong-willed woman determined to escape her boring upper-class future in Spain. When twin brothers inherit a sugar plantation in Puerto Rico, Ana marries them (who can tell them apart?), and they embark on what for the brothers is a lark, but for Ana is serious business. From the start, she takes to the land and the work of processing cane in the Caribbean, keeping the slaves inherited with the property and adding to their number over the years. She becomes the very image of a conquering hero: implacable, outspoken, demanding. Her husbands languish and fade while Ana runs Hacienda los Gemelos without their help. The issues of social caste, slavery, and sex roles make this a fascinating read. It’s an outstanding story, full of pathos, tropical sensuality, and violence&...

About the Author

Esmeralda Santiago is the author of the memoirs *When I Was Puerto Rican, Almost a Woman*, which she adapted into a Peabody Award–winning film for PBS’s Masterpiece Theatre, and *The Turkish Lover*; the novel *América’s Dream*; and a children’s book, *A Doll for Navidades*. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, and *House & Garden*, among other publications, and on NPR’s *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition*. Born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, she lives in New York.

www.esmeraldasantiago.com

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Lorenzo Davis:

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Robert Young:

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