

## *Dreaming in Cuban* a novel by Cristina García

Cristina García's acclaimed book is the haunting, bittersweet story of a family experiencing a country's revolution and the revelations that follow. The lives of Celia del Pino and her husband, daughters, and grandchildren mirror the magical realism of Cuba itself, a landscape of beauty and poverty, idealism, and corruption. *Dreaming in Cuban* is "a work that possesses both the intimacy of a Chekov story and the hallucinatory magic of a novel by Gabriel García Márquez" (*The New York Times*).

### How to Use This Discussion Guide

All art—whether literary or visual—arises from the context of its time. Creating bridges between the literary and visual arts is what makes the MFAH Book Club unique.

This discussion guide features questions about broad themes—political, historical, religious, and familial—all addressed in Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*, as well as questions about works of art in the Museum's collections and exhibitions.

Read the book, discuss some or all of the questions with your group, and then reserve an MFAH Book Club tour online.

### How to Book an MFAH Book Club Tour

For book clubs and other groups of six or more confirmed participants, tours related to García's *Dreaming in Cuban* are available on select days and times January 1–April 30, 2017. Tours are led by Museum docents and feature excerpts from the book to drive discussion about works on view at the Museum. During this time, you will also be able to view exquisite works of art in the special exhibition, *Adiós Utopía: Dreams and Deceptions in Cuban Art Since 1950* (March 5–May 21, 2017).

For more information, visit [mfah.org/bookclub](http://mfah.org/bookclub). Please e-mail [bookclub@mfah.org](mailto:bookclub@mfah.org) with any questions.

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## The World Experienced: The Five Senses

As the title of this book suggests, dreams and the imagined world play a very significant role in the stories of the characters encountered in the text. This sets up an interesting opportunity for comparison between the world defined by sensorial experiences, and the world dreamt or imagined. While there are moments in the book that focus on all five of the senses, it is the olfactory sense that recurs as a powerful connector between past, present, and future. It functions as a humanizing agent in the face of trauma, as well as a mechanism of nostalgia, a trail for tracing histories. **Consider the passage below, wherein Lourdes describes the soldier who attacks her, through the imagery conjured by his smells.**

“She smelled the soldier’s coarse soap, the salt of his perspiring back. She smelled his milky clots and the decay of his teeth and the citrus brilliantine in his hair, as if a grove of lemons lay hidden there. She smelled his face on his wedding day, his tears when his son drowned at the park. She smelled his rotting leg in Africa, where it would be blown off his body on a moonless savanna night. She smelled him when he was old and unbathed and the flies blackened his eyes.” (p. 71–72)

In this instance, the soldier never ceases to be the villain, yet Lourdes permits us a moment punctuated by fresh citrus, the pleasant vision of a wedding, and a flash of sympathy over the death of his son and the impending loss of his leg. The smells seem to allow Lourdes to see and know things about this man’s history, as well as moments that have not yet come to pass. **Reflect on how smells and aromas can indicate a person’s past, present, and future. Is it possible for smells to function as both a reminder and a predictor?**

It is not just sense of smell that emerges as a powerful force in the book. Sense of sound is also highlighted in various capacities. Music in particular has long been a point of inspiration for artists. **Consider the two passages below. In what ways can music influence human emotion, behavior, and imagination?**

“[Felicia] knows only that suddenly she can hear things very vividly. The scratching of a beetle on the porch. The shifting of the floorboards in the night. She can hear everything in this world and others, every sneeze and creak and breath in the heavens or the harbor or the gardenia tree down the block. They call to her all at once, grasping here and there for parts of her, hatching blue flames in her brain. Only the Beny Moré records, played loud and warped as they are, lessen the din.” (p. 75)

“I [Pilar] play Lou and Iggy Pop and this new band the Ramones whenever I paint. I love their energy, their violence, their incredible grinding guitars. It’s like an artistic form of assault. I try to translate what I hear into colors and volumes and lines that confront people, that say, ‘Hey, we’re here too and what we think matters!’” (p. 135)

**See if you can identify passages in the book that illustrate sensorial experiences. Compare and contrast the two works of art below. Which of the five senses would you attribute to these works?**



Pieter Claesz, *Still Life with a Basket of Grapes*, c. 1625, oil on wood, The Edward and Sally Speelman Collection, TR: 1640-2005.



Wassily Kandinsky, *Sketch 160A*, 1912, oil on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Audrey Jones Beck, 74.140.

## The World Imagined: Dreams, Memory, and Nostalgia

In this book, the author really blurs the lines between dream, memory, and delusion. At one point Felicia tells her son Ivanito, that “Imagination, like memory, can transform lies to truths” (p. 88). **What do you think she means by this? Can you find examples in the book wherein this idea is evidenced?**

Throughout the text, Celia often overtly references her dreams, almost as omens or premonitions.

“One dream recurs. A young girl in her Sunday dress and patent shoes selects shells along the shore, filling her limitless pockets. The sea retreats to the horizon, underlining the sky in a dark band of blue. Voices call out to the girl but she does not listen. Then the seas rush over her and she floats underwater with wide-open eyes. The ocean is clear as noon in winter. Bee humming-birds swim alongside pheasants and cows. A mango sapling grows at her side. The fruits swell and burst crimson and the tree shrivels and dies.” (p. 45)

**What can we intuit from this passage? Is this vision a memory, premonition, just a dream, or perhaps a combination therein?** There are those who believe that our dreams are not simply random visions, but reveal something greater about our identities, and can even perhaps be used as interpretive tools to unearth buried truths.

**What do you think it is that constitutes dreams? Can they be used to tap into the unknown?**

Charles Schorre, *Ancient Memories from the Portfolio Spirals from Another Kingdom*, 1987, lithograph, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Shell Oil Company, 87.265.3.





Felicia and Ivanito would play a game on their walks, wherein they would attribute colors to feelings, thoughts, and ideas. **Are there any particular memories, emotions, or ideas that you have to which you might assign a color?** Consider the passage below and discuss Ivanito's question to his mother.



"They play a game with colors as they walk. 'Let's speak in green,' his mother says, and they talk about everything that makes them feel green. They do the same with blues and reds and yellows. Ivanito asks her, 'If the grass were black, would the world be different?' But Felicia doesn't answer." (p. 84)

Émile Bernard, *Woman Walking on the Banks of the Aven*, 1890, oil on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by Mr. and Mrs. Raymond H. Goodrich, by exchange, 92.9. © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

## Rewriting History: Politics of Place, Family, and Identity

Another theme that recurs in this book is the writing and rewriting of history, and who has the power to do so. This question seems to surface most often amidst Pilar's reflections. On page 28 she questions the historical record process:

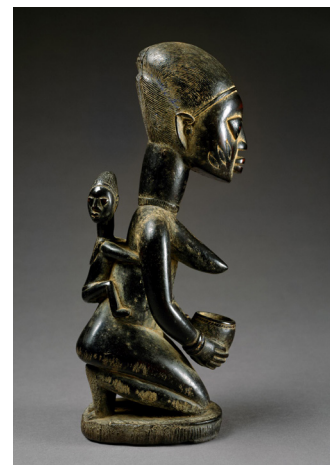
"If it were up to me, I'd record other things. Like the time there was a freak hailstorm in the Congo and the women took it as a sign that they should rule. Or the life stories of prostitutes in Bombay. Why don't I know anything about them? Who chooses what we should know or what's important? I know I have to decide these things for myself. Most of what I've learned that's important I've learned on my own, or from my grandmother." (p. 28)

Reflect on Pilar's questions above. Think about how we acquire information and discern collective or universal "truths." Is Pilar right in suggesting that we learn most things on our own, or from trusted relatives?

This question brings to light the familial and multigenerational ties between Celia, Lourdes, and Pilar. Pilar recollects a sentiment expressed by her grandmother, noting, "Women who outlive their daughters are orphans, Abuela tells me. Only their grand-daughters can save them, guard their knowledge like the first fire." (p. 222)

Is there a difference between knowledge and truth? How important is truth to knowledge and who decides? Reflect on the ideas, thoughts, and memories you consider to be most important. How did you come to know or learn those things?

Conflict also emerges on many fronts. Pilar's internal struggle to reconcile her identity as not-quite-Cuban and not-quite-American, is a prime example of this.



Yoruba peoples, Ekiti group, *Mother and Child Figure*, 1865–1900, wood and traces of indigo, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by the Alice Pratt Brown Museum Fund, 91.238.



"I felt sorry for the Jews getting thrown out of Egypt and having to drag themselves across the desert to find a home. Even though I've been living in Brooklyn all my life, it doesn't feel like home to me. I'm not sure Cuba is, but I want to find out. If I could see Abuela Celia again, I'd know where I belonged." (p. 58)

*Circle of Hieronymus Bosch, Saint Christopher Carrying the Christ Child Through a Sinful World, early 16th century, oil on panel, Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston, BF.1979.1.*

It is clear that Pilar is struggling to find a sense of belonging. In her mind, that belonging seems to be strongly tied to having a clear concept of "home." **Do you agree with this idea? How much of our identities are tied to where we come from? And, subsequently, how do we discern the identity of a person who has no "home"?**

## Passages: Light, Water, and Reflection

Throughout the book, every character finds themselves at some point in a state of transition; and each character seems to travel, either physically or psychologically, aided by certain types of portals or passageways. Water becomes a physical symbol of both a passage and a barrier, as it divides the island of Cuba from the Miami harbor. Alternatively, water is also used as a metaphor for deep psychological reflection, particularly for Celia as in the book she begins and ends submerged in ocean waters. Light and reflection (in mirrors as well as water) are also described as channels to other worlds, delineating infinite space, or acting as markers evidencing the passage of time.

Light, water, and reflection seem to mean different things to each of the three generations, and manifest in different ways. **Consider the three passages below, representing the voices of Celia, Lourdes, and Pilar, respectively. How does each selection reflect a journey, or a transitional moment, in the lives of each character?**

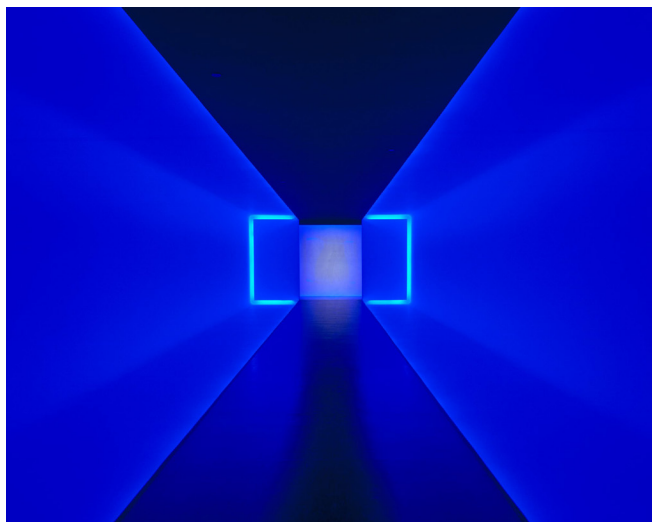
"Celia steps into the ocean and imagines she's a soldier on a mission—for the moon, or the palms, or El Líder. The water rises quickly around her. It submerges her throat and her nose, her open eyes that do not perceive salt. Her hair floats loosely from her skull and waves above her in the tide. She breathes through her skin, she breathes through her wounds." (p. 243)

"The night is so clear that the water reflects every stray angle of light. Without the disruptions of ships and noise, the river is a mirror. It reminds Lourdes of a photograph she saw once of the famous Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles with its endless ricocheting light." (p. 133)

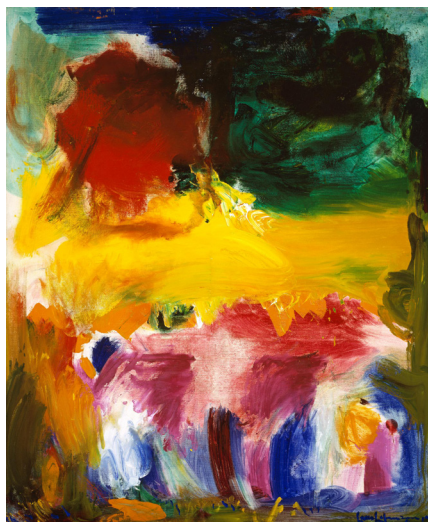
"Outside, the afternoon light is a dark, moist violet. It's a matrix light, a recombinant light that disintegrates hard lines and planes, rearranging objects to their essences. Usually I [Pilar] hate it when artists get too infatuated with light, but this is special. It's the light I love to paint in." (p. 178)

As Pilar suggests in her quotation, artists have long been fascinated with the effects and behavior of light. Just as each of the above selections is illustrative of each character's perspective on the world, so too are works of art extensions of the perspectives of their makers.

Following the above examples, compare and contrast the approaches to light adopted by the artists represented below, James Turrell and Hans Hofmann. How do they remind of or differ from the perspectives of the book's characters?



James Turrell, *The Light Inside*, 1999, neon and ambient light, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum commission, funded by Isabel B. and Wallace S. Wilson, 2000.1. © James Turrell



Hans Hofmann, *Fiat Lux*, 1966, oil on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by Mrs. William Stamps Farish, Sr., by exchange, 81.30. © Renate, Hans and Maria Hofmann Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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## Author Biography



Cristina García is the author of seven novels, including: *Dreaming in Cuban* (watch for the 25th Anniversary edition in March 2017), *The Agüero Sisters*, *Monkey Hunting*, *A Handbook to Luck*, *The Lady Matador's Hotel*, *King of Cuba*, and the forthcoming *Berliners Who* (October 2017).

García's work has been nominated for a National Book Award and translated into fourteen languages. She is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Whiting Writers' Award, a Hodder Fellowship at Princeton University, and an NEA grant, among others. García has taught at universities nationwide. Recently, she completed her tenure as University Chair in Creative Writing at Texas State University–San Marcos and as Visiting Professor at the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas–Austin. She lives in the San Francisco Bay area.

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