

READING GROUP GUIDE

Damas, Dramas and Ana Ruiz

1. Did you have a quinceañera, a sweet sixteen, or a bat mitzvah? What did it mean to you? To your loved ones?
2. Traditional quinceañeras have deep ties to Catholicism. How is religion treated in this novel? In your opinion, is it a good thing that traditionally religious celebrations (like the quinceañera) are becoming increasingly secular? Why?
3. There are several stereotypes that this novel plays with and ultimately diffuses. For example, Mocte describes Cynthia as “the white girl from Kansas.” However, she is probably more familiar with Mexican folk music than any of the other characters in the novel, as she is in the mariachi band. Can you name some other stereotypes this novel entertains and then turns on their heads?
4. When Ana first meets Montalvo, she is obviously struck by his physical presence. Although she senses his interest in her, she does not allow herself to enter a relationship with him. What do you think of her reaction? Is it noble? Should Ana have been more responsive to his advances?

5. Do the young adults in the novel see the quinceañera as merely an opportunity to have a party, or do they attach greater significance to it?
6. What happened to Esteban and Ana's marriage? Was it just the indiscretion that drove them apart?
7. What do you think of Montalvo's self-absorption? Do you see it as a manifestation of the artist maintaining his autonomy, or a selfish and immature approach to life?
8. There are early clues that Montalvo may not be as wonderful as he seems. Can you name some of them? Were you surprised by his behavior when he revealed his ultimate plans to Ana?
9. Near the end of the novel, Beatriz asks Ana if the quinceañera is commemorating "the death of a girl or the birth of a woman." What is your opinion?
10. Ana protected her children by not telling them the truth about their father. Her children continued to look up to Esteban and blamed Ana for the separation, and yet she still didn't tell them about Esteban's affair. Why do you think she did this?

GUÍA PARA GRUPOS DE LECTURA

1. ¿Tuvo usted una quinceañera, una Sweet Sixteen, o una bat mitzvah? ¿Qué significó a usted? ¿A su familia?
2. Los quinceañeras tradicionales tienen lazos profundos al catolicismo. ¿Cómo se trata la religión en esta novela? En su opinión, ¿es una buena cosa que las celebraciones tradicionalmente religiosas (como la quinceañera) están llegando a ser cada vez más seculares? ¿Por qué?
3. Hay varios estereotipos con los cuales esta novela juega y difunde al final. Por ejemplo, Mocte describe a Cynthia como “la muchacha blanca de Kansas.” Sin embargo, ella es probablemente más al corriente de música tradicional mexicana que algunos de los otros caracteres en la novela, porque ella está en el mariachi. ¿Puede usted nombrar algunos otros estereotipos que esta novela entretiene y después que gira sus cabezas?
4. Al principio, cuando Ana conoce a Montalvo, ella nota su presencia física. Aunque ella detecta su interés en ella, ella no se permite que incorpore una relación con él. ¿Qué piensa Usted en su reacción?

¿Es noble? ¿Debe Ana haber sido más responsable a sus avances cuidadosos?

5. ¿Cómo ven la quinceañera los adultos jóvenes en la novela: como simplemente una oportunidad de tener una fiesta, o hay una significación más grande por ellos?
6. ¿Qué pasó al matrimonio de Esteban y de Ana? ¿Era justo la indiscreción que se separaron?
7. ¿Qué piensa usted en el ensimismamiento de Montalvo? ¿Cree usted que es una manifestación del artista que mantiene su autonomía, o un acercamiento egoísta, y no maduro a la vida?
8. Hay pistas tempranas que Montalvo no sea tan maravilloso como él se parece. ¿Puede usted nombrar algunos de ellos? ¿Fue sorprendido usted por su comportamiento cuando él reveló sus últimos planes a Ana?
9. Cerca del fin de la novela, Beatriz le pregunta a Ana si la quinceañera está conmemorando “la muerte de una muchacha o el nacimiento de una mujer.” ¿Cuál es su opinión?
10. Ana le protegió a su marido, quien la traicionó, por no decirle a los niños la verdad. Sus niños continuaron admirar a Esteban y echaron a Ana toda la culpa por la separación, pero Ana todavía no les dijo del asunto de Esteban. ¿Por qué piensa usted que Ana hizo esto?

*Turn the page for a sneak peek at
the next Quinceañera Club novel*



BEATRIZ WAS FLOATING NEAR THE EDGE OF SLEEP, where memories, dreams, and secrets seeped into the seen world. She was still tired from the day before and wasn't ready to wake up yet, happily sunk in the lazy sensations of her dreams: the sun on her naked back, bare feet in cool water, the smell of a newborn, first kisses, and laughter. It was the laughter that stirred her—wild and uncinched, the way children laugh. At first, she thought she was dreaming of her boys when they were little, wrestling like puppies in the backyard. But the laughter wasn't from her boys, it was from one child—a girl, her laughter tinkling like a bell that Beatriz remembered but had spent so much of her waking life trying to forget, she almost didn't recognize it. Just as Beatriz was about to realize whose laughter she was hearing, she felt a slump, as if someone had sat down hard on the edge of the bed near her feet. The sensation snatched her from her dream and she snapped her head up to see who was there. But there was no one.

The sun was just pulling itself into the sky, so Beatriz didn't need to turn on the lamp to see the outline of her husband, Larry, sleeping like a stone on his side of the bed. Her

heart was racing, but she was relieved, taking in the familiar jut of her husband's jaw and the arc of his cheekbones. It wasn't light enough to see, but she knew a mass of reddish-brown hair flecked with gray, was sprouting around his mouth, over his jaw, and down his sinewy neck. Longer locks of that same-colored hair fell over his forehead and into the corner of one eye. Beatriz leaned over and swept the hair away with her fingertip and then laid her head on top of her hands to watch him sleep. One deep breath cleared the strangeness she felt earlier—it was just a weird dream, wasn't it? It didn't mean anything. It didn't even make sense. She steered her thoughts toward the long list of things to do before their anniversary party later in the day, even though she didn't want to get caught up in all that yet. What she wanted was to enjoy the stillness, when it was just her and Larry, alone in bed. She wanted to sway in the waves of his breath, sink into the luscious comfort of their bed, and enjoy the tantalizing closeness of his bare skin near hers.

When Beatriz saw Larry sleeping, she saw the boy she fell in love with twenty years ago. Twenty years already! It amazed her. She'd seen what her comadre Ana went through when her marriage crumbled—a painfully grinding breakup that almost turned her to dust. Since witnessing that, Beatriz began to wonder if long-term marriages were a thing of the past. But here she was, in bed with the man she loved and still loved more than she thought possible. Larry Milligan was the father of her children, three strong boys that had given them many days of joy and aggravation, sometimes at once.

And Beatriz couldn't think of a better companion to have gone through those days with. Larry was there for all of it, from the joyous moments to the let-me-crawl-under-the-bed blues. Beatriz felt a sudden twang of affection for

her husband and wanted to kiss him, but she didn't want to wake him. It was going to be a long day and they needed all the rest they could get. But when she rolled over and closed her eyes, it was too late. The long list of things to do had already started filling her head, one popping into her head after the next, crowding each other and flowing over until she was staring wide-eyed at the ceiling. Beatriz sighed. Ana and some of the last-minute deliveries would show up early. She decided to get up and make sure everything they set up the night before was still as they left it.

Beatriz wrapped herself in the silky, emerald robe Larry had given her as an early anniversary present. He loved how the green fabric gleamed against her caramel-colored skin, how her hair cascaded over her shoulders, her curls crazy in contrast to the quiet smoothness of the cloth. He could barely contain himself when she modeled it for him, opening it to reveal the matching slip of a gown and exposing the voluptuous hips he adored. When she had crawled into bed the night before, Larry pulled Beatriz toward him ravenously. Unfortunately, they had been working on the house all day and into the evening, getting ready for their big pachanga. Both of them were hungry for some intimacy, but the comfort of their bed was more seductive, and they began to doze off.

"I'm sorry, mi amor," Larry slurred before he finally drifted off to sleep. A moment later, Beatriz was also sleeping, her arms wrapped around her husband's neck, her head nestled under his chin, Larry's hand cupping the fullest part of her rump, another one of his favorite parts of his wife's curvy body.

Beatriz cinched the robe around her waist and padded out of their room. As she made a cup of tea, she looked into the

backyard. The extra tables and chairs they'd rented for the party were there, gleaming bright white against the adobe fence she and the boys had painted a warm pumpkin. The small tent set up next to the house for the bar area was still standing, as was the tent near the grill, opposite and away in the far corner of the yard. The long tables that would be covered with yards of slick Mexican oilcloth in bright reds and yellows that Beatriz bought at Fiesta on Main were standing end to end, ready for the food she had prepared the day before, and more to come from friends and loved ones. They could have catered their anniversary party, or reserved a nice restaurant, but Beatriz was tired of formal events. She had enough of that at work. She wanted a party where parents would feel comfortable bringing their kids, where guests could kick off their shoes and los viejos could sit in peace but not be ignored.

Beatriz stirred a drop of milk into her tea then walked out into the yard. The sweet magnolias from her neighbor's tree greeted her, and she inhaled deeply. She could see everything was in place from the night before. So why did she feel like something was not quite right? She walked around the entire yard, admiring the greenery Ana and her daughter, Carmen, had helped Beatriz plant along the fence last weekend. She took one of the wooden chairs stacked against the fence, opened it with a snap, and sat, resting her cup on one knee, which she crossed over the other. The basics were covered, Beatriz thought. So what was the problem? She closed her eyes. Maybe she dozed a little (or maybe she didn't), but when she felt a hand on her shoulder she lurched as if one of the legs of her chair had given way, making her tip her cup. The tea sloshed over her knee and down her leg.

“Ay! Dios!”

She turned, to see who had snuck up on her, but there was no one. The sun was blinking through the branches of the jacaranda and the birds were chirping like crazy. Maybe they saw who touched her.

“Quién es?” Beatriz called out. “Who’s there?” She stood up, wiping the tea from her knee and shaking the liquid from her hand, as she turned around. She could see she was alone, but she couldn’t stop herself from asking, “Hello?”

This was not the first time this had happened to her. In bed, she could say it was just a dream, but when the weirdness began to happen when she was awake, she started to wonder.

One time she felt the hand on her shoulder when she was alone in her office. Another time, she was reading e-mail on her laptop at a coffee shop and was convinced the woman next to her was playing tricks on her. When the woman moved to another table to avoid Beatriz’s darting glances, Beatriz decided the woman was probably innocent. Probably. No, this was not the only time Beatriz felt the strange sensation. The first time it happened, she was a little girl. Her baby sister, Perla, loved to sneak up on Beatriz and make her jump out of her skin. Beatriz didn’t know how she did it, but every time, no matter how on guard Beatriz thought she was, somehow her sister found her and scared the living molé out of Beatriz so bad she would get angry and chase the little girl, who would run off, laughing devilishly.

“Chiflada! You gave me un susto!” Beatriz would exclaim. “Why can’t you leave me alone?”

Perla was the baby of the family—that last surprise and

the only other girl after Beatriz and four brothers. The little girl adored Beatriz, who was twelve years older than her, and was the new light of their very tired daddy's dimming eyes.

"Leave me alone!" Beatriz would yell angrily, still horrified that her elderly parents had managed to, well, you know, produce this spit of a little girl whose only value seemed to be to make Beatriz's teenage years miserable.

Perla only laughed before running off to play with the other kids. One of Beatriz's last memories of Perla was not as a young woman but as that mischievous little girl with the gummy grin, the long, knobby-kneed legs, and skin as dark as molasses from playing in the sun.

Ay Perla, Beatriz thought. *Ay, Perla*.

Larry was coming out of the shower when Beatriz walked back into their bedroom. She shut the door behind her and walked over to the window that looked out into the backyard. Larry was humming to himself and drying his hair with a towel as he walked into the main part of their bedroom and saw Beatriz.

"Why, hello, señorita," he said in a pronounced Texas drawl. "May I say, you shore are the purtiest woman to walk into this room." He walked over to his wife and kissed her.

"Here's your coffee," Beatriz said.

Larry gently took the cup and placed it on the nightstand near them and took Beatriz in his arms.

"Happy anniversary, mi corazón." He pulled Beatriz up toward him and kissed her again, a long, lingering kiss that was fueled with all the pent-up passion he wasn't able to spend the night before. "And thank you for being the prettiest woman to walk into my life."

“Oh, my!” Beatriz said, suddenly feeling the hardness of her husband kneading her belly.

“I think we have some unfinished business,” he murmured into her ear.

Beatriz smiled. “I think we do, too.”

Larry hoisted his wife up off the floor and she wrapped her legs around his hips. They fell onto their unmade bed, and he continued to kiss Beatriz on her face and neck, pushing her up so he could cover her breasts with kisses. Beatriz was liking this. She was liking this a whole lot. The dream, the weirdness in the backyard, it all burst like a bubble. So, when the doorbell rang just as Larry had circled his tongue around Beatriz’s nipple, she gasped.

Ana. Beatriz had forgotten she’d asked Ana to come early.

Reluctantly, knowing the moment was lost, Larry reached for his pants. “I’ll get the door, mi amor. You get dressed to meet your comadre.” Pulling his shirt over his head, he added with a wink, “And then I’ll see you back here later.”

By the time Ana came upstairs, Beatriz was already showered, towel-drying her hair while standing in front of the closet, deciding what to wear—the eggplant-colored dress that was comfortable, or the white, form-fitting dress that she knew would drive her husband wild?

“Hola!” Ana said, as she tapped on the door and poked her head inside the room. “Can I come in?”

“Sure. How are you?” Beatriz exchanged kisses on the cheek with Ana.

“How am I? How are you? What a big day! Do you need help with anything?”

Beatriz held up both dresses for Ana to see. “What do you think?”

“I like the white one,” Ana said.

Beatriz frowned.

“Okay, I like the purple one. Wear whatever you’ll be most comfortable in,” Ana said.

Beatriz laid both dresses on the bed and began to shape her hair with her fingers.

“And don’t worry about anything. I’ll take care of those annoying details that come up at the last minute. Oh! That reminds me—I got the new guayabera for Larry. The one you asked me to pick up?”

“Uh-huh,” Beatriz said, looking at her face in the mirror, trying to decide how much makeup to put on.

“Okay, then. Well—maybe I should leave you alone,” Ana said, unsure of what was going through Beatriz’s mind. “Are you okay?” she asked, as she reached the door.

“What? Sure!” Beatriz said. “I’m just—I don’t know. I’m kind of out of it, I guess.”

“Did you and Larry have a fight or something?”

“Oh, no,” Beatriz smiled, imagining what their morning could have been like had they not had the party to deal with. “It’s just—I wish everybody could be here, you know?”

“Ah, sí,” Ana said, closing the door and leaning against it. “You mean your parents?”

“Yeah. I really miss them at times like this, you know?”

“Sure, sure.” Ana said. “They would have loved this. When I walked in the house, something smelled so good, I thought your mother was cooking. But at least your boys and your brothers and their families are coming, right?”

“Yeah,” Beatriz said faintly. “It’ll be nice to have us all together again.”

But that wasn't true. Sure, all the Sánchez brothers were coming in with their wives and children, but there was one sibling who would not be there: Perla. Beatriz wondered if any of them would dare bring up her name.

The guests began to arrive around eleven o'clock. The first wave was colleagues from work who dropped by to offer well wishes and intended to stay for only a couple of hours. But some of those guests were still lingering by the time the relatives began to show up around noon, their voices and laughter bubbling from the house and into the yard. Beatriz had forgotten all the weirdness from the morning, too busy greeting people, accepting dishes of food, giving directions, and, finally, enjoying all the activity. It wasn't until her oldest brother, Erasmo, showed up, that Beatriz was reminded of the earlier strangeness. Erasmo was the brother who looked most like their father, and as he got older the resemblance only became stronger. She hugged her big brother at the door, welcoming his family into her house. Her eyes were tightly closed as she hugged him close.

"Qué pasó?" Erasmo asked, when he could feel she was holding on to him a little longer than normal.

"Nothing, it's just that you look so much like 'Apá."

"Yeah," he said. "I get that a lot. But we're here, so they're here, too." He patted his sister's shoulder as he edged his way past her to get a look at their baby brother and his new wife, pregnant with their first child. Beatriz smiled a sad smile, thinking of what her brother said. He was right, she thought, as she closed the door to join the crowd. But as she looked out the door, she saw something that made her pause. A little girl was standing on the curb near her brother's truck, standing and waiting. Beatriz recognized the dress the little girl wore, and she blinked her

eyes against the sun to try and see the girl's face. When the little girl smiled a gummy smile that Beatriz instantly recognized, a jolt of adrenaline shot through her.

"Erasmus! Erasmus!"

But Erasmo was lost in the loud bellows of hellos and laughter that come from too much time passing between seeing relatives and friends.

"Erasmus!"

"Mande!"

"Come here!" Her heart was racing now. If she was seeing what she thought she was seeing, she wanted Erasmo as a witness. He was the one they would believe.

"Erasmus!" she said, yelling into the house so she would be heard.

"Sí, sí, sí. Qué pasó?" he said, marching to the door as soon as he saw his sister's shocked expression.

"Did you bring that little girl?"

"Who?"

"Over there, the little girl standing by your truck."

When Erasmo looked out the door he reared back a little. He looked at her and shook his head.

"Little girl? That's *my* girl Angie, and her friend Lidia," he said. "No problema, eh? The more the better, verdad?" he asked, looking into his sister's anxious face. But the girl he was referring to wasn't the girl Beatriz saw but another young woman walking up with Angie. Both were a year younger than her Carlos, who had just turned twenty.

"Hola, Tía," Angie said obediently, giving her aunt a kiss on the cheek. "This is my friend Lidia. 'Apá said you wouldn't mind if she came."

Beatriz looked over the young women's heads back where she thought she saw the little girl, but there was no one. It was a long moment before she realized that the two

young women were still standing before her expectantly. Lidia glanced at Angie nervously.

“I hope it’s okay I came,” Lidia said.

The embarrassment in the girl’s voice brought Beatriz back to the present.

“Discúlpe me! Of course! Of course, you’re welcome! Please forgive me, I have a million things on my mind. Any friend of Angie’s is a friend of mine. Pásale, mi’ja. Pásale.” The girls slipped past Beatriz into the house and sought out the other young people in the crowd. Beatriz scanned the street for the little girl.

I saw her! Beatriz thought. *I saw her.*

But of course, that wouldn’t be possible. Perla wouldn’t be a little girl anymore; she would be a full-grown woman by now. *But it was her*, Beatriz thought. She knew it.

When Larry came behind his wife and slipped his arm around her waist, Beatriz shrieked.

“Jesus! Larry!”

“I’m sorry, love. My uncle James is asking for you. He’s over by the bar,” Larry said. Then, he noticed the stricken look on his wife’s face. “Baby, what’s wrong? You look like you saw a ghost!”

“I did—I mean, I thought—it’s nothing. It’s okay. I think I need to eat something.”

“Well, then—you came to the right place,” Larry said, swooping his wife back into the house.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BELINDA ACOSTA has written and published plays, short stories, and essays. As a journalist, her work has appeared in the *Austin-American Statesman*, the *Austin Chronicle*, the *San Antonio Express-News*, the *San Antonio Current*, and *AlterNet*. Her short story “Tortilla Dough” appeared in *Saguaro*, a publication of the University of Arizona, in 1992. In 1993, she produced, directed, and performed in a multimedia dance-theater performance of *La Llorona*. National exposure came in 1995 when she read her personal essay *Gran Baile*, on *Latino USA—the Radio Journal of News and Culture*, carried on National Public Radio.

Belinda received a master’s of fine arts in writing from the University of Texas in 1997.

She lives in Austin, Texas, and is the TV and media columnist for the *Austin Chronicle*.













