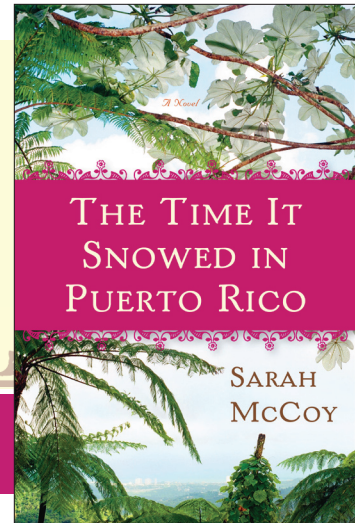


THE TIME IT SNOWED IN PUERTO RICO

by Sarah McCoy

DISCUSSION GROUP GUIDE



ABOUT THIS BOOK

Verdita Ortiz-Santiago has spent eleven long years in her sleepy Puerto Rican mountain town, and she is desperate for change. After all, everything else is changing around her. Mamá has announced that she is pregnant, Papi is spending more time at the jíbaros bar discussing politics and watching the cockfights, and the whole island seems trapped in the struggle to stay linked to the United States or to fight for independence.

For Verdita, the choice is easy. In the States, her life would be perfect, just like Dick and Jane's in her textbooks. She would be free to sing Elvis songs, eat *hamburguesas* at every meal, and maybe sort out her feelings for her American friend Blake, whose accidental touch made her feel as if she would burst into flame.

Like the classics *Annie John* and *The House on Mango Street*, *The Time It Snowed in Puerto Rico* delves into the conflicting feelings we have for the people we love and the difficulties of leaving one's homeland for places unknown. Sarah McCoy handles Verdita's struggles with striking insight and lyrical prose.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah McCoy has taught writing at Old Dominion University and the University of Texas at El Paso. She lives in El Paso, where she's working on her next novel.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What role does food play in Puerto Rican culture? How does McCoy use specific foods to bring the characters together?
2. What kind of narrative voice has McCoy chosen for this novel? How do we connect with Verdita's character through that narrative style? How does the child's point of view enhance or detract from the book's impact?
3. Freud's theory of the primal scene asserts that when a child is faced with the sudden awareness of his or her parents' sexuality and intimacy, it shocks the psyche and sets the child's libido into motion. How do you see this affecting Verdita in chapter 1 and throughout the novel?
4. The discovery of identity is a common theme in coming-of-age (bildungsroman) stories. At the beginning of the book, Verdita's persona is directly tied to her parents. Finding her identity requires her to recognize the separation between who they are as a unit (Venusa and Faro) and who she is as an individual. Simultaneously, she battles with who her parents are in the intimate setting (Mamá and Papi) and who they are in public (Monaique and Juan); who she is in private (Verdita) and in public (Maria-Flores). Discuss this and other social dualities Verdita faces in her coming-of-age struggle.



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- How is Verdicta's coming of age in 1960 Puerto Rico different from a girl coming of age in America during that same period? How are they similar?
- How have the Taino Indians and the indigenous island culture adapted to each of its colonizers (the Spanish and the Americans) and the African slaves brought by them? How do you see each of these influences in the novel? How does this compare to America's "melting pot" identity?
- Much of Puerto Rican and other Latino fiction focuses on themes of migration to New York, Chicago, Miami, or other Latin-populated cities. How is this story different? How is it similar? Discuss what you've learned about the island culture that you didn't know before reading the book. How is this culture different from the Puerto Rican immigrants in the United States?
- At the beginning of chapter 3, Papi discusses Puerto Rico's possible statehood. Do you believe Puerto Rico should be a part of the United States? If so, why and what benefits does statehood offer? If not, why and what detriments come with it? Would it affect Puerto Rico's identity in a good or bad way?
- A magical worldview is a common characteristic of the Latino culture. While McCoy's storytelling is more realistic, how and where do you see elements of magic in the characters' lives?
- What is the role of myth and story in Puerto Rican culture? How does it influence both individuals and the community?
- Verdicta believes in God, but her understanding of Him and how the supernatural interact with the mortal is perplexing. The magical tales of the church mingle with the ones told within her family, the ones of Puerto Rico's heritage and history, and those of America. Many of the overlapping concepts contradict one another. For example, in the novel: Is there a king of the ocean or a God in heaven; would one make seashell wishes, or prayers at the altar; is there a Santa Claus, or Three Kings? In what other areas does Verdicta struggle to find truth? Can you reconcile these conflicting truths?
- The Greeks described love as a three-pronged fork. One prong is the fundamental emotion of compassion: *philia*, *storge*, and *agape* (cherishing, belonging, and self-sacrificing). The Greeks contended that upon coming of age and the budding of sexuality love branches into two additional prongs: *eros* and *epithumia* (romance and desire). How does McCoy portray *philia*, *storge*, and *agape* in the novel? How does she portray *eros* and *epithumia*?
- Gender roles are addressed in the novel's text and subtext. What are the Puerto Rican gender roles in the home? What are they in public? How do these compare with the projected American gender roles?
- Patriarchy is a traditional characteristic of many Latino families. How do you see the Santiago family following in that tradition? How do you see them diverging from it? How does Verdicta view femininity (represented by Mamá, Delia, Mamá Juanita, Titi Lola, the puta in San Juan) and masculinity (represented by Papi, Omar, Blake, Naranja)?
- How is sexuality portrayed throughout the novel? Are women encouraged to embrace their sexuality or shun it? Discuss the conversation between Verdicta and Mamá on page 121. How does Verdicta deal with her sexuality and the sexuality of those around her? How does religion influence this?
- Duality of culture is a major theme in McCoy's novel. How does American culture impact the traditional Puerto Rican society? How does it affect the language, the foods, the religion, the traditional gender roles of men and women, and so on?
- In the end, after Verdicta evaluates both the good and bad of life in America, why do you think she still chooses to leave her homeland? What brings her to this decision? What do you think Verdicta will find when she lands in the United States—will her expectations be met? Will she be disappointed?

