

Reading Group Guide

Discussion Questions

The Taste of Sugar

Marisel Vera

1. According to Vera, many Puerto Ricans living at the turn of the twentieth century were “analfabetos,” people who “couldn’t read or write or do simple arithmetic, and were easily swindled by ladrones, the merchants and government officials who could” (p. 19). Were there moments in your journey with this book when you came across words you did not already know? How did you navigate those moments? What similarities and differences do you see between the way you engaged with words unfamiliar to you and the ways Vera’s characters made sense of words unfamiliar to them?
2. Eusemia, young and starving, imagines that inside her belly lives an always grumbling monster. “The monster,” Vera writes, “became a steady companion” throughout Eusemia’s life (p. 25). In addition to hunger, what other monsters accompany the lives of Vera’s characters? What feeds these monsters? What tames them?
3. In chapter two, “French Mademoiselles Circa 1889,” Vera writes, “Valentina was determined that she would be the romantic heroine of her own adventure” (p. 30). Does her dream come true? In what ways?
4. How do characters cope with being separated from people and places they adore? Are there moments when characters resist separation? What are those characters willing to risk to reach their desired destinations?

5. “Vicente never shared with others his conversations with the coffee trees,” writes Vera, “but it wasn’t because he thought his brother Luisito would laugh at him, or that his father might question his sanity; it was because it was between him and the trees” (p. 41). Drawing from this novel or from your own experience, what does intimacy look like? Feel like? Sound like? Taste like? Do intimate relationships grow organically, or do they require tending? With whom or what in your life can you share intimacies?
6. Vera writes that Vicente, sharing a bed with Valentina for the first time, “was discovering how much he cared about her, and it scared him a little” (p. 66). Over the course of their marriage, what do Valentina and Vicente discover about their affections toward one another? What do they find out about themselves by being together and by being apart?
7. When Valentina comments on the beauty of the tablecloth Inés is sewing, Inés replies, “It’s a pattern of my own invention” (p. 81). Where in the novel do you see characters practice creativity? What flowers in these moments?
8. “I don’t think the subject of multiple lovers is appropriate for the wife of my son,” Angelina tells Valentina in Chapter Seven, Luna de Miel (p84). In Valentina’s world, which expressions of sexuality are too taboo to discuss and which are socially accepted? Why is this so? How do Angelina and Valentina uphold or challenge these norms in their own relationships? What about other characters?
9. As Raulito boards the boat to Hawaii, an agent for the Hawaiian Sugar Planters’ Association stops Raulito and says, “They don’t want black men in Hawaii” (p. 235). How do characters who align with whiteness try to exclude Raulito from spaces they

run? What are these characters' means of enforcing their will? With whom does Raulito find community and how do those people include Raulito in their spaces?

10. On their voyage to Hawaii, Valentina tells Lourdes, "Ay Lulu, I wish you could have been a silly girl like me" (p. 256). Consider Lourdes or any other young person in this story. How are this character's curiosities in conversation with the lives of the adults in this story? What can you learn from this particular young imagination?
11. How do credit systems compel the Vegas, their ancestors, and other laborers the Vegas come to know to live by the rules of those Vicente considers "Inside Men"? How do these systems shape the ways Vera's characters relate to one another in their day-to-day lives? In what ways do they resist these systems? How do these systems live on today and in what ways do you see others, or you yourself, resisting them?
12. There are many pairs in *The Taste of Sugar* that seemingly contrast: Spain and the United States, Mikioki and Valentina, ron caña and okolehao, to name a few. Discuss one of these pairs, or another you notice from your reading. How are they in conversation with one another? Taken together, what story do they tell?
13. Why do you think this novel is titled *The Taste of Sugar*?
14. In her acknowledgments, Vera writes that *The Taste of Sugar* began with a question: Did the Puerto Ricans who emigrated to Hawaii have dreams to return home? What questions are you beginning to ask after your journey with this book? What will you seek to learn?