

Women's Prize for Fiction 2020

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Fremantle



2020 SHORTLIST

DOMINICANA BY ANGIE CRUZ

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Angie Cruz is the author of the novels *Soledad* and *Let It Rain Coffee*, a finalist in 2007 for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. She has published work in *The New York Times*, *VQR*, *Gulf Coast Literary Journal*, and other publications, and has received fellowships from the New York Foundation of the Arts, Yaddo, and the MacDowell Colony. She is founder and editor in chief of *Aster(ix)*, a literary and arts journal, and is an associate professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh.

PLOT SUMMARY

Ana comes to New York in 1965 from the Dominican Republic, a teenager married without love or ceremony to a man more than twice her age, yet full of hope about the luxurious life she will live in America. Yet, Ana's life with Juan is unhappy: Juan is abusive, secretly seeing another woman, and Ana fantasises about him going away and never coming back. In their cheap apartment, Ana is expected to cook, clean, hem the trousers of the men that visit to buy cheap suits, and to keep the door locked at all times.

Ana misses her home and family in Santo Domingo, but knows if she goes back, her mother will punish her for walking out on their best opportunity to become American citizens. Worse, if Ana leaves Juan, she'll lose the only way that her family can escape the political turmoil of the Dominican Republic where everyone is poor, and young men are dying in their thousands.

Yet as Ana settles into life in New York, learning English at Church and cooking for her neighbours, she also starts to grow closer to Juan's brother Cesar, who is completely unlike his brother. Pregnant with the daughter who will be an American by birth, Ana nervously awaits Juan's return from their home country.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

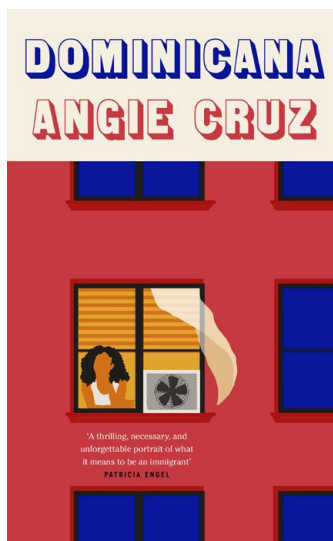
Ana's story is a coming-of-age narrative set against political changes in two nations, America and the Dominican Republic. When the story begins, Ana is only twelve: when she is fifteen, she is married off to Juan and sent to New York. Ana's coming-of-age happens very quickly: in the process of emigrating, she gains four years in age because of her false passport, and loses her virginity. Suddenly, the carefree girl who sat by a pool with her friend Gabriel in Santo Domingo and considered kissing him is a housewife with responsibilities and fears.

Like Ana, New York is filled with recent immigrants: people from nations all over the world have clustered there, chasing the American Dream. Yet New York is cold, smelly, loud and inhospitable. America is suffering from its own coming-of-age in terms of race relations, as Ana comes to understand when a black man, Malcolm X, is assassinated in the building downstairs from her apartment. And in the Dominican Republic, tensions are brewing towards what will become a civil war, ended by a temporary occupation by the United States.

Cruz makes a microcosm of tension in Juan and Ana's apartment that reflects the larger tensions that have both brought them there, yet which also hold them trapped. Immigration hasn't really solved Ana and Juan's poverty,

and in chasing a better life, Ana is isolated from the love and support of her family.

As Ana grows up fast, it's her Dominican identity that provides her with sustenance, whether it's the Dominican food she and Cesar sell at building sites, the advice her mother gives her about how to handle a husband or the community she shares with Marisela. Yet, Marisela betrays her friendship, Juan hurts her and her love affair with Cesar is ultimately doomed. Instead, Ana's way forward is to tread a path between the tensions of New York and Santo Domingo, and in so doing, lead the way to a new identity for her daughter.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Cruz's depiction of Ana's relationship with Juan seems honest and realistic, though it's not a relationship of love. Ana never loves Juan, yet patiently endures his abuse, his adultery, his anger and cruelty as a faithful wife right to the end of the book, where she says that she can see a future for herself without him, even though he is still there for the moment. Much of Ana's behaviour in her role as dutiful wife seems in accordance with her mother's teaching and the expectations of women within 1960s Dominican culture. Also, Ana has little option other than to stay with Juan – she has no financial independence, and her only other choice is to return home, where she would likely have to remain dependent on her family.

Given this situation, are any of Ana's choices surprising? Does she ever really have any choices, or is she making the best of the circumstances she's given?

In the endnote for the book, Cruz tells us that *Dominicana* was inspired by her own mother's story and the lives of many other women like her, and that her mother's response to being written about was, "Who would be interested in a story about a woman like me? It's so typical." Do you think that Ana's story has a 'typical' universality about it in terms of the experiences of immigrant women, and if so, why has such a 'typical' story been so little heard?

QUESTIONS

Cesar says, "We're angry too. We can't rent houses either. Our schools aren't better. We're paid less. The police harass and shoot us at will. We want to work and be left alone. But the blacks look at us like, Who invited you to our party?". Discuss the racism in the book portrayed by the Ruiz brothers.

Talk about the way men are represented in the novel. How does Juan differ from Cesar? Can you understand some of Juan's violence considering the expectations for men, or the norms for how marriages could be, at the time the book was set?

There is a sense of realness in Ana's coming-of-age, including her experiences of sex. Did the scene where she orgasms with Juan surprise you? Or the scenes where she feels sexually attracted to Cesar while pregnant?

Do you believe that Caridad loves Juan?

NEXT STEPS

Martin Luther King and Malcolm X are well known historical figures from the civil rights movement in America, but the women of the movement don't tend to be as well known.

Research one female contemporary of Malcolm X who worked alongside him, or who was involved in civil rights at the same time as him. You might like to write up an article about her, or an interview, as if for a magazine feature. Look at a women's magazine for inspiration.

Dominicana paints a vivid picture of a small section of 1960s New York, from Ana's Jewish neighbours to the clothes shop she delights in visiting and the food available in the shops. Can you write a poem that evokes a vivid sense of place from the point of view of someone contained in a small space? Perhaps like Ana leaning out

of the window, her movement mostly restricted to the apartment, or in another way that expresses someone taking in a vivid but restricted environment? How will you achieve the vividness of description? Remember to use all the senses in your writing as well as inventive but relevant simile and metaphor. Try to make the poem come alive with sensual detail, and perhaps somehow infuse it with a sense of yearning.



THE 2020 WOMEN'S PRIZE FOR FICTION SHORTLIST

“ A HUGE IMPORTANT STORY FOR NOW TOLD WITH VIM, ENERGY AND INCREDIBLE FRESHNESS ”

MARTHA LANE FOX
CHAIR OF JUDGES 2020

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

SOLEDAD BY ANGIE CRUZ

IN THE TIME OF THE BUTTERFLIES BY JULIA ALVAREZ