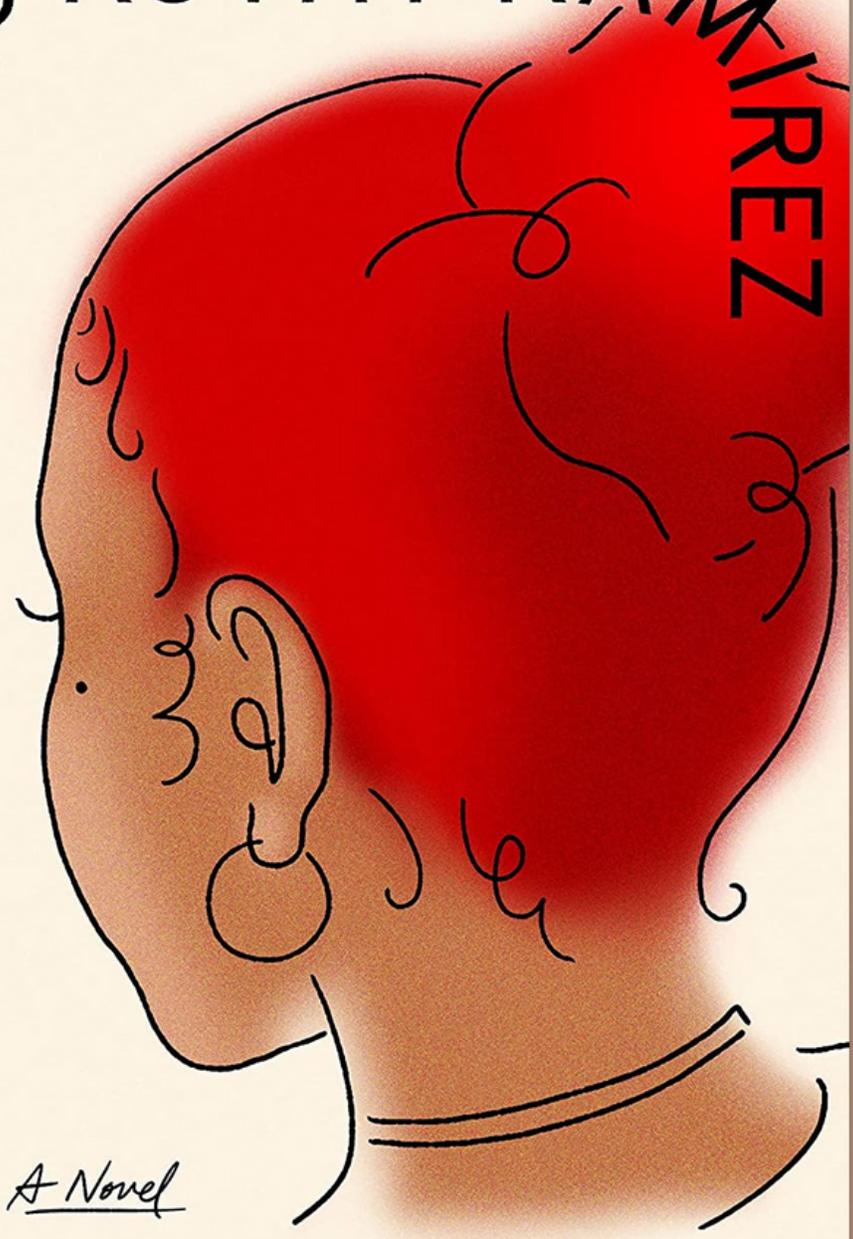


WHAT HAPPENED TO RUTHY RAMÍREZ



A Novel

CLAIRE JIMÉNEZ

BOOK CLUB KIT

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1.** Dolores is the mother who knows more about the harsh challenges of the world than her daughters; Jessica is the protective older sister; Ruthy is the middle child; and Nina is the baby. Describe the way that each woman's voice is distinct and how it reveals the role that each character plays in this family.
- 2.** In the aftermath of Ruthy's disappearance the Ramirez family's lives are irreversibly changed. Thirteen years later, though the Ramirez women have carried on, they hold grief and the wounds of this enormous loss at every turn. In what ways is it reflected in their actions?
- 3.** Discuss the ways each of the characters want more for themselves and their lives, what they are doing to achieve this, and the forces that work against them.
- 4.** Discuss how reading about the reality TV show *Catfight* made you feel, and how it speaks to the depiction of women, especially Black and brown women, in media.
- 5.** The myriad of ways that women experience violence is central to *What Happened to Ruthy Ramirez*, and each character has their own story to tell. Describe the ways that each woman attempts to heal, and protect themselves.
- 6.** The Spanish language is a large part of the novel and often works as a bridge for characters to connect on a deeper level. Describe the ways its inclusion felt essential to the narrative.
- 7.** Irene is both cherished friend to Dolores and meddlesome troublemaker for Jessica and Nina. How does our understanding of Irene evolve as the novel progresses?
- 8.** "It was very endearing and very aggressive, this performance of motherhood." The novel deals with complex mother-child bonds, and the experience of new motherhood. How does each woman's experience of being a mother and/or a daughter affect their perspective of what happened to Ruthy?
- 9.** Ultimately, what do you think the novel is saying about womanhood?
- 10.** The truth of what happened to Ruthy is unclear until the very end of the novel. Before the reveal, what did you think happened to Ruthy and why, based on the text?

A CONVERSATION WITH CLAIRE JIMÉNEZ

This is a novel about family, but the three sisters are its heart. What was important for you to represent in this portrait of sisterhood?

I was interested in how often siblings who have grown up with each other share an inside vocabulary and reference points, how sometimes they can communicate complicated emotions or ideas without even using words. (This goes back to my understanding of how silence shapes voice.) Some of that bond feels unnamable, even mysterious, but it is a definite force. The Ramirez sisters fight, but they also love each other fiercely.

***What Happened to Ruthy Ramirez* walks the tightrope of grief and hope in what is a powerful balancing act. How did you consider both of these elements while writing the novel?**

I thought carefully about each character's relationship to grief and how that sits in their body and transforms the way they see the world. Nina's response, her cynicism, her insistence that Ruthy ran away is a defense mechanism—even her humor is at times a way to deflect. Jessica's hope comes from a deep place of guilt, and the enormous sense of responsibility you feel for your younger sisters when you are the oldest. And the mother's grief was the most difficult for me to write. It took many revisions to nail down her voice. And I don't think I fully understood her until I became a mother myself. The difficult part for me was depicting these emotions without becoming overly sentimental, because sentimentality, too, can cheapen what these characters are going through. Grief is one of the hardest emotions to write.

At times, I thought seriously about rising critiques over the last decade of the trauma narrative, both from within and outside my own community of readers and writers. These critiques always lead with the argument that writers of color are increasingly selling their trauma to white readers and editors for individual profit. This is a somewhat valid critique of the ways in which the publishing industry became fixated over the last decade on selling the same story over and over again. In other ways, it is a dangerous argument, because it can discourage writers of color from dealing directly with the injustice that has birthed the trauma in their communities.

The urge to separate ourselves from the "trauma narrative" has often produced stories sanitized of any real conflict, where we are forced to turn our characters into role models and saints. This is a fantasy. And as Puerto Rican writer Melissa Coss Aquino has written before in the beautiful essay "Hablando Por un Tubo y Siete Llaves or My Life Is Not a Stereotype, and Neither Am I, Though We Both Fit the Bill," sanitizing our experiences to "uplift our people" in the eyes of white audiences is an act of "public relations" as opposed to art. She explains, "And art is not public relations."

What is the most enjoyable part and least enjoyable part of the writing process for you?

I love that beginning draft. It makes me think of the reasons why I began writing—the joy of play, of inventing different characters and making them speak to each other. The least enjoyable part of writing I think is the anxiety of knowing that your story will be read by other people.

Puerto Rican heritage and culture is a very significant aspect of the novel. What felt most important to you when portraying your Puerto Rican characters?

Though this novel employs a great deal of humor, it also takes seriously the ways in which US-Puerto Rico colonialism has consequences for even those Puerto Ricans living in the diaspora who have inherited the trauma and the violence of displacement and migration.

The women in this narrative, each in her own way, privately experience the impact of that history in their present-day lives. Writing this book, I also frequently thought about the absence of Puerto Rican stories in US literature. Puerto Rican voices of the diaspora and the archipelago are often marginalized, in a way that resembles how Ruthy's story is overlooked. (In this way, this book is very much about storytelling and voice.)

There are many great pop culture references sprinkled throughout the novel from music, TV, to fashion. Did you take inspiration from any of your favorite pieces of media when you began writing?

Oh, yes! I loved writing about the nineties, about **TLC** and **Mariah Carey**. I think that's mostly because I grew up then and most of us feel deeply connected to the decade in which we came of age. I also incorporated different references to salsa music I grew up listening to, songs played at baptisms, birthday parties, and long road trips: Music really helps me better remember certain moments in time and is a useful tool for all writers.

While writing this book, I was particularly drawn to the phenomenon of the reality television show at the beginning of the millennium. I saw the fictionalized show *Catfight* as a microcosm of the ways in which Black and brown women are depicted in popular culture. More broadly, reality television seems to reveal a peculiar American desire to witness people being humiliated, sometimes in the most violent of ways. We see this obsession play out in TV shows like ***The Bad Girls Club***, ***Love and Hip Hop***, and ***The Housewives*** franchise—the hair pulling, the whole tables flipped over, the dishes thrown across the room, etc. I was curious about what this ugliness reveals about our culture, especially when Black and brown women's bodies become the sites of that spectacle and violence. I also intentionally use my fictionalized TV show to generate tension and magnify the question of what is real and what is performed, connecting that to the family's quest to discover who Ruthy really is/was.

What do you hope readers will take away from the novel?

I want readers to feel the way I do when I finish a good book. When I'm reading an amazing poem or novel, I often talk to myself. You'll hear me muttering and shaking my head, saying, "Goddamn, this is good." It's like finishing an excellent meal. I guess what I'm saying is that I want my readers to be moved and for it not only to bring them back to their own stories and experiences, but also to open up something in their world.



Photo: © Damion Meyer

THROWBACK MIX

FOR BUMPING ON THE WAY TO TRACK PRACTICE, BLASTING ON A DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY ROAD TRIP, OR BRAWLING IN A CLUB

LISTEN TO THE PLAYLIST NOW ON 



REWIND 

TLC - "Waterfalls"

Mariah Carey - "All I Want for Christmas is You"

La India - "Mi Mayor Venganza"

Whitney Houston - "I Will Always Love You"

La Lupe - "Fever"

Marc Anthony - "Hasta Ayer"

Gilberto Santa Rosa -
"La Agarro Bajando"

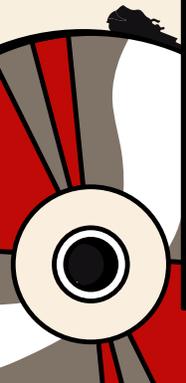
Rocío Jurado - "Como Yo Te Amo"

Patrick Swayze - "She's Like the Wind"

Frankie Ruiz - "Mi Libertad"

Flo-Rida - "Low"

MiMS - "This is Why I'm Hot"



AN OLD FASHIONED

FOR

IRENE & DOLORES

Irene & Dolores' secret recipe for the perfect book club
(or Bible study) night.

Adapted from a recipe posted on GimmeSomeOven.com

INGREDIENTS

1 teaspoon granulated sugar
1 teaspoon water
3-4 shakes Angostura bitters
2 ounces bourbon
Orange peel

DIRECTIONS

1. Begin with Marc Anthony playing loudly in the background. Only one of his Spanish albums. Never the English ones. Preferably *Todo A Su Tiempo*.
2. Take off all your rings and make sure to wipe the kitchen counter twice with bleach.
3. Start a large pot of coffee. Enough for eight people, even though there are only two of you.
4. Muddle together the sugar, water, and bitters until the sugar dissolves. (Or skip bitters because you don't know what that is and couldn't find it at the Key Food.)
5. Add a large ice cube to the glass and mix in discounted bourbon.
6. Look for your lighter. (Where is your lighter? Did Nena take the lighter out of your purse without returning it again?)
7. Rub an orange slice along the edge of the glass. Will probably have the same effect... Anyway, the peel was just for decoration.
8. Pour a cup of coffee for Irene because she doesn't drink. (No sugar. She's on a diet.)
9. Enjoy. Drink up. Make sure the neighbors hear you laugh.



A STATEN ISLAND FOOD TOUR WITH CLAIRE JIMÉNEZ

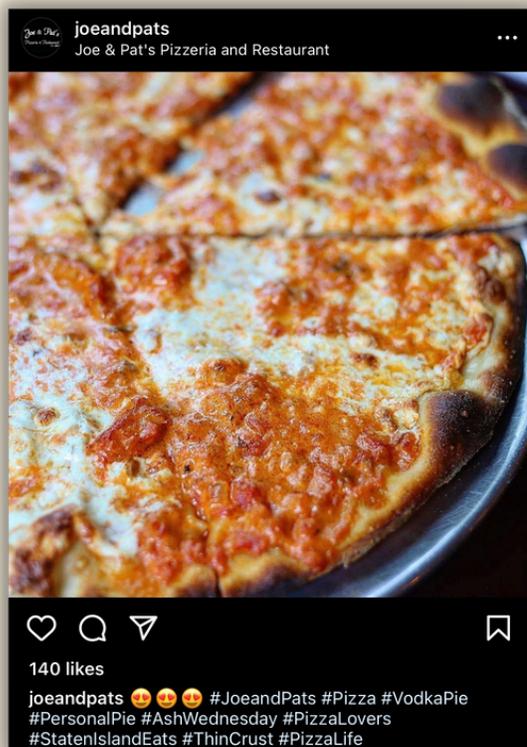


NEW DOSA GARDEN

My go-to is the Kothu Roti, which is a combination of chopped up egg, roti, and chili served with a side of sweet onion sauce. I cannot tell you how many times I got off the bus on my way home from work in the city, in the freezing cold, to pick this dish up, only to stand another ten minutes looking for the next S62. But I guarantee you the taste was well worth the cold wait.

JOE AND PAT'S

After I graduated from my MFA program in Nashville, Tennessee, I eagerly returned home to Staten Island, only to work multiple part-time jobs to afford rent. I'd work long hours into the night, and the thought of coming back to my apartment to make dinner after an eleven-hour day would overwhelm me. So sometimes I'd give in and pick up the weekly Tuesday special—a large cheese pie for just twelve bucks! (Don't judge, the pizza is super thin!)



A STATEN ISLAND FOOD TOUR

WITH CLAIRE JIMÉNEZ



PIER 76

This one is right by the Staten Island Ferry, and along with Joe and Pat's, this restaurant is an Island favorite. Any of their slices are delicious, but if I'm in the mood to trick myself into being healthy, I'll buy their arugula slice, which also has tomato and thinly cut parmesan cheese and red onion, all of this drizzled with sweet balsamic vinegar. If I don't care that day, it's the vodka slice for me, so creamy and satisfying.

CAMPO BELLO



Located on Tompkins Avenue right in front of the s78 stop, this Dominican restaurant has saved my day (and stomach) many a time. At the community center I worked at in Stapleton, I'd often camp out at my desk until 9 pm. Those nights, I'd pick up a delicious, reasonably priced plate of rice, beans, platanos, and pollo guisado to get me through whatever report was due that day.



BESO

And if I was feeling fancy, and I'd just gotten paid, and my good friend Nichelle was up to it, we'd hit up this Spanish tapas restaurant, also located right by the Staten Island Ferry. There's so much to love here, but some of my favorite appetizers are the fried goat cheese and the relleno de gambas. They also serve this pickled garlic in olive oil that is so, so, so good. Nichelle and I finished many a pitcher of white sangria here throughout our late 20's, plotting and dreaming over delicious food.



FURTHER READING RECS

FOR EXPLORING MORE PUERTO RICAN LITERATURE

NOVELS & DRAMA

- Elisabet Velasquez, *When We Make It*
- Xavier Navarro Aquino, *Velorio*
- Melissa Coss Aquino, *Carmen and Grace*
- Mayra Santos Febres, *Sirena Silena*
- Quiara Alegría Hudes, *Water by the Spoonful*

SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS

- Ivelisse Rodriguez, *Love War Stories*
- Amina Gautier, *Now We Will Be Happy*
- Jennifer Maritza McCauley, *When Trying to Return Home*
- Editor Mara Pastor, the anthology *A toda costa: Narrativa puertorriqueña reciente*

MEMOIR

- Jaquira Diaz, *Ordinary Girls*
- Judith Ortiz Cofer, *Silent Dancing*
- Jesús Colón, *A Puerto Rican in New York*
- Esmeralda Santiago, *When I Was Puerto Rican*
- Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets*

POETRY

- Pedro Pietri, *Puerto Rican Obituary*
- Willie Perdomo, *The Crazy Bunch*
- Andrés Cerpa, *Bicycle in a Ransacked City: An Elegy*
- Julia de Burgos, *Poema para mi muerte*
- Malcolm Friend, *Our Bruises Kept Singing Purple*
- Raina León, *Black God Mother This Body*
- Ana Castillo Muñoz, *Corona de flores*
- Tato Laviera, *La Carreta Made a U-Turn*
- Manuel Ramos Otero, *Página en blanco y staccato*

WRITING PROMPTS ON CHARACTER, VOICE, AND MEMORY

1) Pick a family memory or legend and tell the story through the perspective of two different family members. What changes in each rendition of the memory? What stays the same?

2) Choose a character from a story you are currently working on. (If you are brand new to writing, you can pick somebody you know, a family member, or friend.) Make a list of phrases or words that this character/person always says. Make a list of the things that they would never say. Faced with this silence, what do they say instead?

3) Take a family photo and describe everybody in the picture. What can we tell from this photo? What is invisible?