

Back Bay Readers' Pick

Reading Group Guide

*Tomorrow
They Will Kiss*

A NOVEL



Eduardo Santiago



A conversation with Eduardo Santiago

When did you leave Cuba and what images of your childhood influenced your description of Palmagria?

I spent the first ten years of my life in Manzanillo, a town where everybody talked with the dead. And I mean *with!* They had ongoing conversations. Their lives were guided by the dead. Eighty percent of the population was clairvoyant. Manzanillo is described in a tourist guide as “a sleepy fishing port about 65km west of Bayamo that feels a long way from anywhere, but worth a visit.”

I based Palmagria on Manzanillo. I changed the name because I didn't want the fifty thousand Manzanilleros living in the U.S. to come after me, insisting that I got it all wrong. I know my people well enough to know that they would. Also, since the Revolution, Manzanillo has taken on a greater significance because Fidel Castro's so-called lover, the revolutionary heroine Celia Sánchez, was born there, and I didn't want Graciela to have to carry that burden. Besides, at the time that the novel takes place, Manzanillo hadn't become a historical landmark. Celia's statue hadn't been erected yet.



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The relationship between Cuban exiles and those they left behind is complicated by politics and trade policy, as the United States holds firm on the embargo of goods from the U.S. and its trading partners. Do you still have family in Cuba and, if so, on what basis can you relate to them?

I was born too late to see Cuba in its heyday, when the stores were stocked. All my memories are of deprivation, depleted shelves and counters, long lines of people with empty bags that they're hoping to fill with anything, whatever's there. Shortly after the Revolution, even if you had tons of cash, you couldn't walk into a store and say, "Today I want chicken," or, "The kids need new socks, I think I'll pick up some socks." No, you took what was available if you were one of the first in line. Many went home with nothing.

This image is so seared into my consciousness that to this day, even though I've been to Cuba and seen the abundant dollar stores, I can't walk into a supermarket without that image being superimposed. I've had many arguments in places like Ralph's, or Vons, or Safeway, because my partners tend to be Americans who sail through stores piling on as many items as a shopping cart will hold. "No," I say, "that's too much. There's a limit, and if there isn't, there should be." I look at the pyramids of apples and oranges, the endless rows of canned goods, and there is another picture overlaid, of cobwebs and dust — and of the storekeeper, sitting there in the store, under flickering fluorescent light tubes, waiting for something to arrive.

Who's to blame, the communists or the embargo? If the point of the embargo was to starve the Cubans into an uprising, why do Cuban exiles send them millions of dollars a year in personal

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remittances? “Where is the humanity in that statement?” my mother, a frantic remittance-sender, asks me. It’s a haunting dilemma, the idea of starving a country into surrender, but such is war. What are the options? Invasion? Devastation? Bloodshed? Of course, not all Cubans who live and work in the U.S. are like me. Most of them want, get, and enjoy everything America has to offer. They live well, eat well, wear thick gold chains around their necks and wrists, and soothe their conscience with monthly remittances. I envy them. They seem so free.

What made you choose Graciela, Imperio, and Caridad as the novel’s narrators? By giving them alternating chapters were you bestowing validity or deconstructing their points of view?

At some point in my teens I became aware of the backstabbing relationships among the Cuban women in my mother’s life. They kept shifting allegiances. Later I realized that had they remained in Cuba, a lot of those friendships would not have lasted; they would have moved on to other Cuban women with whom they had more in common. But here they were trapped. The circle was small, the pickings slim, and they had only each other in spite of their differences. This dilemma, which I found both comic and dramatic, was the very first grain of inspiration.

How to tell the story was a bit more challenging. Initially I wanted to write something based exclusively on gossip, hearsay, and slander. So I wrote a short story about Graciela from Imperio and Caridad’s point of view. I wanted it to read like a conversation over a clothesline, brief and biting. When I decided to go to novel length, I gave Graciela a voice, but with the

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condition that she had to tell the truth. I was fascinated by the idea of — what if the gossip is true? And if it is, if Graciela is all the things people say, what were her circumstances at the time? How did she come to make those mistakes and how did those mistakes affect the others? It got more and more complicated from then on.

Are Graciela, Imperio, and Caridad based on women from your childhood?

Initially, yes. My mother had two types of friends: the ones my father approved of and the “secret” friends. The ones my father approved of, the close friends, we were related to in some way — sisters-in-law, aunts, cousins distant and not. They were all married, none of them was divorced or ever would be divorced. These women chose a man, stuck by him no matter what. Then there were the others, the not-so-close friends, who visited when my father was at work. They were divorced, independent, outspoken, and smart. They filled the room when they walked into it; they had ideas and plans. They dressed in the latest fashions and kept themselves thinner than my mother’s other friends, who seemed to gain fifteen pounds with each child. They exchanged their vanity for motherhood.

It seemed to me that my mother and her close friends spent their entire lives finding fault with the not-so-close friends. Now what’s really peculiar is that the secret friends didn’t band together. They were strong, independent, and adrift. I loved those women. When they came to visit they seemed like movie stars or royalty. Their lives were frightening, melodramatic, intoxicating. And they were always very nice to me, as if they recognized a kindred spirit. So, initially, I based Graciela on some of those

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women, but eventually the real women receded and a new one emerged.

Graciela, Caridad, and Imperio aren't political people. What was your aim in writing from an apolitical perspective?

I knew from the start that I didn't want to write a book that took place in Havana, and I didn't want to write a book that either glorified or vilified the heroes of the Revolution or the heroes of the counterrevolution.

There is only one Havana and everyone knows it well. But there are a thousand small towns, small as you can imagine, and I wanted to take readers there for a change. I also didn't want to write about a place known for its scenic beauty — I didn't want to write a travelogue.

So the book was more about what I didn't want to write than what I did. Politically, it was drummed into my head by my parents that we were accidental exiles, victims of circumstance. I have come to understand that our flight was more economic than political. It's no secret that the middle class likes *things*, they like *stuff*. So we came here to where things and stuff are plentiful. Of course, once we were here, none of the stuff was good enough — shoes were better in Cuba, clothes fit better in Cuba, food tasted better in Cuba. It is my opinion that if it hadn't been for the embargo on this end, and the nationalization of property on that end, my family would have stayed and grumbled about the system the way Republicans in this country grumble about a Democrat in the White House and vice versa. They're unhappy until the next election, but they go about their business. A major difference is

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that in this country elections come every four years. In Cuba they seem to come every fifty to sixty years! That's a long time to grumble.

The men in Tomorrow They Will Kiss are portrayed as strong and powerful when they are in Cuba, but when they reach the shores of America they become remarkably absent, participants in events rather than instigators. Why this role reversal after exile?

Shortly after our family arrived in the United States, my grandfather was diagnosed with throat cancer. He had a tracheotomy that removed much of his throat, most significantly his vocal cords. So here was a man who had lost his country, his money, his ability to work, and his voice. He was a once-powerful patriarch rendered powerless. The men in my family lived lives of shame; most of them had helped bring Fidel Castro to power only to be betrayed and humiliated by him. You may disagree, but that's the way they saw it, and it caused them to be distant, or depressed, or drunk. The men also found it more difficult to form an intimate group. When I listened to them, I heard nothing.

The women, apolitical housewives and factory workers, just wanted to be seen. They were the storytellers, the memory keepers, and I listened from behind closed doors, from around corners. I found them fascinating. I found it very comforting to write with their voices. In spite of all the backbiting, the women banded together. They had the children in common; they had things to talk about. The men had more trouble expressing their feelings, so they suffered a strange rigidity that permeated the rest of their lives. They disappeared into television and silence.

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Why did you choose to write about the 1960s?

It has always been interesting to me that my family escaped one revolution and landed smack in the middle of another one, to which they were mostly oblivious. Maybe it was because this country is so big that events don't knock on your door the way they did back in Cuba. Maybe it was the language barrier, or because they were starting brand-new lives and needed to stay focused on the day-to-day, or because they were done with politics, they'd had it, they were in no mood. But we landed here at the time of the civil rights movement, political assassinations, campus revolts, the sexual revolution, the women's movement, and on and on.

I tried to bring this into the novel through Barry O'Reilly, but I also didn't want to dwell too much on it because *they* didn't. To the early Cuban immigrants, whatever was going on with the Americans was *their* business. It all happened at a distance. But I was aware of it, as much as a kid can be. We lived just outside of Los Angeles during the Manson murders, and a kid from my high school, Steve Parent, was the first one killed at Sharon Tate's house. I was friends with his younger brother, Dale. To this day, I don't think my parents know this, or if they do, I don't think it has any particular significance to them.

I also wrote about the '60s because we knew so little. We didn't know how long Castro's reign would last. There was still hope of returning and claiming what we'd left behind.

The theme of exile surfaces throughout the novel, not just in the moments when each of the three women leaves Cuba. For example, Graciela goes

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through a series of exiles — from her school friends, her family, her husband (and, thus, the women of her community), the island of Cuba, et cetera. How do these experiences define Graciela’s story line and influence her motivations? Does it make a difference whether she is exiled or she exiles herself?

Graciela would like to fit in, but it’s not in her nature, not in Palmagria, not in Union City. She makes unconventional choices and this sets her apart. Even when all the women are coming to her house to get their nails done, Graciela is the outsider. I also think that Graciela is not as smart as she thinks. She’s driven and passionate, but not a good strategist. Imperio is right when she says that Graciela “lets her heart and not her brain” make her choices. That, to me, is the key to Graciela’s story. But it’s only true to a point. Graciela does change, she does mature, and just because Imperio and Caridad can’t see it, or don’t want it to happen, doesn’t mean that it doesn’t.

Still, Graciela’s most significant exile happens in her parents’ house, the three years she spends there before she leaves the country. It’s specifically during that time that Graciela realizes she has nowhere to go but up, which is why her progress in Union City is so swift. Until that point Graciela has believed that she will be rescued, but after that point she concludes that it’s up to her to save herself. Life in the United States is like a prison sentence for Imperio and Caridad, but for Graciela it’s the ultimate freedom. She recognizes the land of opportunity. She works to shed Palmagria and immerse herself in life. Hard as it is with Imperio and Caridad constantly bringing up the past, Graciela starts to reinvent herself.

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Imperio and Caridad seem to depend on Graciela in a way. They can't wait to criticize her or to center the gossip on her, but they also can't seem to let go when Graciela starts to move away from their circle.

I see Graciela, Imperio, and Caridad standing knee-deep at the shore. In front of them is the United States, Cuba is behind them. They are thirsty and tired, and eager for dry land. But with every heavy step they take forward, there is the pull of the undertow, the erosion of the sand beneath their feet. I think all three of them wish they could put the past behind them, yet without the past they have no sense of identity. For Imperio and Caridad it's easier to focus on Graciela's past. To review their own lives is much too painful.

As Graciela starts to make her way in Union City, to break out on her own, Imperio and Caridad frantically try to pull her back. They are *her* undertow. She is a part of their memories, and if she drifts away, how long before it's all gone, how long before they all become other people, how long before they become foreigners as well? Painful as it is, they anchor themselves to Graciela.

Graciela was always the outsider, less dependent on Imperio and Caridad and somewhat impervious to their judgment. Her mistakes were youthful miscalculations of her own making. She sets out to undo her wrongs with willful determination, which is the only way she knows how to do anything. I don't want to go metaphor crazy, but while writing I saw Graciela growing wings, and Imperio and Caridad constantly trimming them. Emotionally, they can't afford to let the bird take flight.

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Telenovelas were originally one of the main sources of Spanish-language television in the United States. How does the telenovela influence the women's friendship and what message does it convey?

Our apartments in the U.S. were small, and when we finally moved to houses, they were small too. There was no way to escape the telenovelas, whether you sat down to watch them or heard them through the wall as you tried to do your homework. In an inconsistent world, the telenovelas were the only element of consistency. There they were — on at seven p.m., eight p.m., nine p.m., and ten p.m. All night long every weeknight. Originally I tried to stay away from them in the novel, even considered removing any mention of them in one draft, but it was impossible. I could not see these characters without the telenovelas. They were such a powerful influence, and I had to surrender to them. I tried to use the telenovelas in a way that I had never seen before — to take the reader to the days of the early telenovelas, to show their evolution and how they could be used to create a smokescreen over the harsh realities of immigrant life. You'll notice that whenever things get tense in the van, the talk turns to the telenovelas.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. What do you think is the significance of the novel's title? What information does the title convey? What function do the telenovelas serve in the novel? What function do they serve for its characters?
2. Graciela's frame of mind changes over time. Identify at least three significant moments of such change. How do you feel about Graciela at these points in the story? Did you sometimes sense your loyalties shifting as you read?
3. Caridad and Imperio rarely describe their own problems, while they focus intently on Graciela's shortcomings and scandals. Did it change your understanding of Caridad and Imperio when, at the end of the novel, Graciela provides a window into the dramatic hardships that they both suffer? What does the author make us understand about Caridad and Imperio by allowing their secrets to come to light in this manner?
4. How does *Tomorrow They Will Kiss* change or contextualize your understanding of Cuban American identity? Do you see this story as representative of the experience of many Cubans who came to the United States in the early 1960s?





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5. What did you know about the Cuban Revolution before reading this book? What do you think you gain from reading a novel built around such an event, as opposed to reading a more strictly historical account?
6. Why do you think the men in this story are so absent from the plot? What do you take from that?
7. In the penultimate chapter of *Tomorrow They Will Kiss*, Caridad says, “I had never seen Graciela laugh so much, she could hardly stand from laughing. Is that what happiness looks like? I wondered. Like insanity?” What did those few lines make you feel?
8. What lessons do we draw from Graciela — at an individual level, and also in terms of the larger ideas of assimilation and acceptance?