



Let Their Spirits Dance

By Stella Pope Duarte
ISBN: 9780060089481

Plot Summary The Ramirez family, living in El Cielito, a Chicano barrio in South Phoenix, suffers the loss of their son and brother in Vietnam during the Tet offensive of 1968. Thirty years after her son Jesse's death, Alicia Ramirez, now approaching her own death, "hears" his voice one night, and his "friends." She recalls that before boarding the plane to Vietnam, Jesse had assured her that one day she would hear his voice again. Unknown to her, Jesse had secretly told his sister, Teresa, that he would not return, but that someday she would read about him in a book. Adding to the mystery surrounding Jesse's death is a prophecy proclaimed by Don Florencio, El Cielito's Aztec seer, that Jesse would return "in a new form." Alicia later connects the voices she heard to a photo of the Vietnam Memorial Wall shown to her by her daughter, Teresa. She realizes that she is being called to the Wall, and makes a promise, *una manda*, to reach the Wall before her death to touch her son's name and honor his memory. Teresa, a newly divorced school teacher now living with her mother, tries to dissuade her mother from making the journey insisting that there is no money for the trip which will be made by car, as her mother refuses to board a plane. Alicia's faith in God's providence proves correct, as the family receives an unprecedented amount of money owed to them by the military due to an

error in the handling of Jesse's death. Eventually, the entire family including Jesse's younger brother Paul, an ex-con, his flamboyant sister Priscilla, his wiz kid nephew Michael, Irene one of Alicia's friends from the sisterhood of the Guadalupanas, Jesse's vet friends, and people they invite along the way, join them in their journey across America. Michael sets up a web site for his grandmother and engages the family in speculations of universal parallels that "jump into our orbits and start traveling with us." The entire nation is caught up in the journey of the Ramirez family, connecting with their suffering, loss, faith and love that reaches beyond the grave. The family comes to realize that unanswered questions about Jesse's death will be revealed at the Wall. Stella Pope Duarte's stunning debut novel portrays the universal suffering caused by war while honoring the men and women who served in Vietnam, and those left behind who watched and waited, but never forgot. **Questions for Discussion**

1. How does Alicia Ramirez's "call" to journey to the Vietnam Memorial Wall open up family wounds and unresolved conflict? What are some of the struggles the family faces? How has Jesse's death changed each family member?
2. What circumstances, both social and political, lead to the turmoil of the story's setting in the '60s? In what ways is the structure of the Chicano family threatened by war and discrimination?
3. To what extent does Pope Duarte use the theme of Teresa's near drowning to uncover the Chicano's sense of helplessness during the Vietnam War? How does this theme connect to what happens at the Chicano Moratorium demonstration in 1970 and the killing of Rubén Salazar in east L.A.?
4. In what ways does faith shape the journey to the Wall? How do belief in El Santo Niño and La Virgen de Guadalupe contribute to Alicia's confidence, and Teresa's changing attitude towards the unknown?
5. How does Alicia's promise, *la manda*, fulfill itself, and in what manner does it affect family and friends? What characteristics do the *doñas*, Alicia and Irene share in common? What characteristics do the Vietnam vets, Chris, Willy, Gates, and Yellowhair share in common?
6. How does Pope Duarte handle the theme of betrayal by men as it relates to Teresa's life and that of her mother? On a larger scale, how does betrayal happen during wartime? What types of betrayal did the soldiers fighting in Vietnam experience?
7. What is the importance of Jesse and Don Florencio's prophetic messages in revealing a timelessness in the story that transcends earth time? What other dreams, prophecies and premonitions occur? What is their purpose? How do Michael's speculations about universal parallels and the movement of light draw on this theme?
8. In the first page of the novel, the passionflower is described as depicting the suffering of Christ. How does the theme of suffering continue to surface in the novel? What does Teresa learn about the suffering of indigenous peoples, and the possibility that if "We're pursuing (pain), does that make us more powerful than pain?" How is the flower, *yoloxochitl*, identified with suffering?
9. In what manner does Pope Duarte link the ancient custom of human sacrifice and the Aztec god of war, Huitzilopochtli, to the modern-day custom of drafting young men to war? In what ways was the Vietnam experience different for men of Chicano/Latino descent?
10. Don Florencio believed in Aztlán as the birthplace of the Mexicas, or modern-day Chicanos. What reflections does Teresa make throughout the novel that are related to the search for Aztlán? What is the meaning of her statement, "Are we moving closer to Aztlán, or did we already pass it by?"
11. What are the similarities between Palmira, the curandera, and Don Florencio, the *tlachisqui*? How do their powers help Teresa and her mother?
12. In what manner does guilt play havoc in the lives of the characters? How is guilt linked to practices of the religious cult of penitentes in Albuquerque? What does Chris reveal about his own guilt as related to Jesse's death?
13. What does the Ramirez family learn about America on their cross-country trip? What does the nation learn about them?
14. What information is revealed in Jesse's letters about the Vietnam War? What attitude has Jesse formed about the Vietnamese, and most specifically about the woman he loved? When does he show a premonition of his own death?
15. How is Jesse's character revealed in Chris's explanation of how Jesse died? What do we know about how battles were fought through Jesse's experience?
16. Altars play a prominent role in the novel. What meaning do they have for Alicia and Irene? How might the Vietnam Memorial Wall be described as an altar? What is the significance of the term "America's wailing wall"?
17. How is transfer of *la manda* done from Alicia to Teresa? What occurs between Teresa, Priscilla and Paul after their mother's death? How is each changed by the journey?
18. The uniting of Chicano and Vietnamese families at the end of the story creates a new understanding of how pain is suffered by both sides. What are some of the factors that kept Thom alienated from Jesse for so many years?
19. At the end of the story, Teresa reflects, "I've learned not to doubt the impossible." To what, specifically, is she referring?

About the Author: Stella Pope Duarte was born and raised in la Sonorita barrio in South Phoenix. She began her writing career in 1995 after a dream in which her deceased father related to her that she was destined to write. She holds a B.A. in education from Arizona State University, and an M.Ed in Educational Counseling. She has been awarded two creative writing fellowships from the Arizona Commission on the Arts for *Fragile Night* (1997), her first collection of stories, and for *Let Their Spirits Dance* (2001). In 2000, she was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in Literature.

