



Mambo Peligroso

By Patricia Chao
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Introduction

Cuban exile Catalina Ortiz Midori loses her father, her homeland, and her language all within one year. Feisty and madly talented Wendy Cardoza loses her dream of becoming a gymnast as a teenager, and then nearly loses her life to drugs. Oswaldo "El Tuerto" loses his eye to one of his many jealous lovers. What saves them all is The Mambo. Intertwined in a passionate love triangle, it's the dance that pulls these friends and lovers apart and draws them together again. Catalina's apprenticeship with El Tuerto and Wendy, and her growing obsession with the world of mambo, brings her back to her roots, her family, and her homeland, with a passion she never knew she possessed. From New York to Miami to Cuba, Catalina rediscovers who she is and what really matters in this world.

Questions for Discussion

1. First cousins Catalina and Guillermo were raised like brother and sister. As teenagers, they take their familial relationship in a forbidden direction. Why do you think Catalina and Guillermo never feel remorse about their incestuous affair? Did you find their relationship disturbing?
2. After the childhood trauma she suffered -- discovering her dead father and then sneaking out of Cuba -- Catalina forgets how to speak Spanish. How does the mambo reconnect this self-proclaimed WASP to her heritage?
3. Why did Wendy tell Catalina that Tuerto was interested in her if she didn't want them to get together? Was it part of "the dance?"
4. This is often a story about addiction. Describe the addictions that both plague and motivate the characters in the story.
5. How do the characters in *Mambo Peligroso* both lose themselves and find themselves in dancing?
6. When Tuerto and Catalina begin their affair, Wendy stops being friends with Catalina, and just bides her time until Tuerto dumps her friend, like he does with all his other conquests. How do Wendy, Tuerto, and Catalina reconcile their feelings for each other and continue being friends?
7. At the end of the story, Catalina finally talks to the Japanese girls in her class, and makes plans to travel to Japan with Wendy's son. Why do you think Catalina suddenly takes an interest in the other half of her heritage?
8. The mambo saved Wendy from a life of drugs. After all those years of being drug-free, Wendy decides to give in to the craving in Cuba. Do you think Wendy was trying to commit suicide? Or was mambo just another habit -- and without dance in her life, she needed to feed her addiction?
9. Patricia Chao explores the power of language in this story: Catalina loses her language, and then develops a sign language to communicate with her cousin. As an adult, she is drawn to teaching English to ESL students and helps them assimilate into American culture. Catalina says the mambo feels so natural. Does dancing in some way represent her lost language? And does dancing help Catalina tap into her repressed language?
10. Culture plays a prominent role throughout the story. First Catalina must leave her Cuban culture and immerse herself in American culture. She then sheds her culture once again when she moves to a white Boston suburb, attends a Seven Sisters college, and dates Richard, the uber-WASP, for seven years. Even within the Latin community, people differentiate themselves as being Cuban, White Cuban, Miami Cuban, Dominican, or Puerto Rican. How does culture divide and unite within this story?

About the Author

Born in California and raised in New England, Patricia Chao has traveled widely and feels most at home in Latin countries. She reviews Latin dance music for *Global Rhythm* magazine, and her poetry has appeared in various journals. She has taught creative writing at Sarah Lawrence College and New York University. Her first novel, *Monkey King*, was critically acclaimed and was a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers finalist. She is at work on a new novel set in Brazil, Japan, and Argentina. Patricia Chao lives in New York City.