Questions for Discussion

1. "Rosas Puras," the simple melody of the novel's title, becomes "a blessing and a curse" to its creator, Israel Levis. How does the song reappear throughout the novel? How does its significance change over the course of Israel's life?

2. Why do you think Hijuelos gave his main character, a Catholic, a name that seems to be Semitic? Is he merely illuminating the history of Jews in Spain? Is he making a larger point about identity and religion?

3. Like any person who survived the Holocaust, Israel emerges from his experience at Buchenwald a changed man, both in appearance and in spirit. One of the most fundamental transformations has occurred in his religious thinking: he was once a devout Catholic, but now he no longer believes in the existence of God. How could God allow such evil to exist? Does Israel's abandonment of his belief indicate that his faith was never as strong as it appeared? Is faith only valid once it's been tested?

4. Israel Levis would have considered himself a blessed man, convinced that God was watching over him and protecting him. His relationship to God was not unlike a child worshiping a parent, wondering what that parent is truly like, but happy enough to accept his or her sovereignty without question. Once he is released, Israel has lost his voracious appetites. He feels betrayed by God, and remembers with humiliation the life he had before, consumed as it was with trivial and vain pursuits.

5. How do you reconcile Israel's homosexual yearnings with his frequenting of bordellos and his love for Rosa? Is he bisexual?

6. How do you explain Israel's affection for his friend, Manny Cortez, a person who seems so at odds with Israel's own personality?
7. Why do you think Israel waits so long to notice, or protect himself from, the dangers brought about by the political situations in Habana and Paris? Is he truly unaware? Or is he relying on the good fortunes that seemed to have befallen him since his infancy?

8. As a man of voracious appetites, Israel can never seem to get enough to eat or drink and he is equally dissatisfied in his romantic life. Why do you think this is? What would truly satisfy Israel's "appetites?"

9. How does Hijuelos portray the idea of celebrity in Israel's time? How did the advantages and drawback of fame differ from those today?

10. Mistaken by the Nazis for a Jew, Israel's life in Paris becomes one of restriction, discrimination, and eventually imprisonment. How would you feel if you were cruelly persecuted for being something you are not? Could he have tried harder to convince the Nazis that he was not Jewish? Should he have done more to further the cause of the resistance?

11. If Israel had escaped imprisonment by the Nazis, how do you think his life would have turned out? Would he have professed his love for Rosa? Would he have continued to write music? Would he still maintain his devotion to Catholicism?

12. Do you agree with Israel that his life "as a composer and conductor of orchestras was really the life of a clown, or an impostor, of someone tricked by fate"(p. 23)? How important is a "simple melody" when compared to the suffering of innocents, or the destruction of a dictator's regime?

13. The novel is composed of vignettes, often very brief, and descriptively titled. What is the effect of this structure on the novel? Does it make Israel seem more real as a character?

14. At the beginning of his novel, Hijuelos defines the term, zarzuela, the kind of Cuban song Israel becomes famous for composing. How is the definition significant to the novel?

About the Author

Oscar Hijuelos was born in New York City in 1951, the son of Cuban immigrants. He attended City College of New York where one of his instructors in the creative writing program was Donald Barthelme.

After leaving the university, Hijuelos wrote a number of short stories, some of which were included in The Best of Pushcart Press III anthology in 1978. One of his first professional works, "Columbus Discovering America," received an outstanding writer citation from Pushcart Press in 1978. The exposure from this award led to an Oscar Cintas fiction writing grant, a Breadloaf Writers Conference scholarship, and grants from the Creative Artists Programs Service and the Ingram Merrill Foundation.

Hijuelos published his first novel in 1983. Our House in the Last World examines the life of a Cuban immigrant family in America during the 1940s. Critics praised the novel as a warm and vibrant depiction of the family's experiences in America and noted that the work reflected a departure from other Cuban writers who often focused on the political struggles in Cuba or life in exile. In 1985 Hijuelos received a creative writing fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1989, he published his second novel, The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love, which became a critical and popular success. It was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award in 1989, as well as the National Book Award. A year later, the work earned Hijuelos the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction -- the first Hispanic American novelist to win the prize.

Hijuelos's third novel, The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien, appeared in 1993. Hijuelos said that he wanted the novel "to portray a world in which women were very powerful. I took the idea of machismo and pushed it, getting inside the skin of the characters.... I wanted to look behind the basic images of women." It was followed in 1999 by his fourth novel, Mr. I've's Christmas. Empress of the Splendid Season was his fifth novel. This book portrays the joys and frustrations of Lydia España, a Cuban émigré who works as a cleaning woman in Manhattan, while exploring stories of the secret lives she uncovers in her clients' apartments.

While writing is obviously a large part of his life, Oscar Hijuelos has a wide range of other interests, including music. In 1998, he appeared along with other prominent authors on a double-CD collection of 32 songs titled "Stranger Than Fiction." In addition, Hijuelos is a collector of old maps, turn-of-the-century books, and graphics.