



## Empress of the Splendid Season

By Oscar Hijuelos  
ISBN: 9780060928704

### Plot Summary

*Empress of the Splendid Season*, Oscar Hijuelos' fifth novel, tells the story of the beautiful Lydia Espana, an emigre from pre-Castro Cuba who lives and works on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Once the spoiled, pampered daughter of a small town mayor, Lydia has been banished from Cuba by her father because of a youthful sexual indiscretion, and finds employment cleaning the apartments of New Yorkers much better off than herself. She is wooed and wedded by Raul, a waiter with a weak heart, who calls her "the Empress... of the most beautiful and splendid season, which is love." As Raul's health falters, Lydia--now the mother of two children, Rico and Alicia--must struggle to keep her family afloat. Amidst the turmoil of Spanish Harlem in the 1960's, Lydia attempts to hold her clan together and maintain her proud Cuban heritage. But as the years pass and her life of hard labor takes its toll, "Lydia the Empress" is forced to come to terms with the reality of her life as one of the working poor. As she goes from apartment to apartment uncovering her clients' secret lives, Hijuelos weaves a portrait--not just of one family's complex road toward assimilation, but of a pulsing, vibrant, and dangerous New York City . . . a city of music and dreams, a city of love and loss.

### Topics for Discussion

1. How does Lydia manage to hold on to her identity as a "proper girl from a good family" even as she endures a life of cleaning other people's toilets? What enables her to walk down Harlem's streets with so much pride that the neighborhood kids call her "Queenie" ?
2. What is Lydia's relationship to Cuba? Though not exactly a political exile, she shares many of the feelings of her Cuban neighbors. What measures does she take to retain her Cuban identity? What are the steps she takes to assimilate in her new country?
3. How does Lydia's relationship with her son Rico change as he grows from adoring child to rebellious teenager to successful adult? What are some of the struggles that Lydia faces in trying to maintain a cohesive family? How might these struggles be applicable to all immigrant and first-generation Americans?
4. Lydia believes she has found a kindred spirit in Mr. Osprey and fantasizes about an adulterous affair. What is it that draws her to him, and what is it that restrains her from acting upon her amorous impulses?
5. Both Alicia and Rico are caught committing crimes. In both instances, Lydia's connections save her children from dire legal consequences. But what price do the children pay in terms of their mother's trust and affection? What are the long-term effects of their youthful indiscretions?
6. What has Lydia gained, and what has she lost, in her journey from being "the Empress of the Splendid Season," to becoming Lydia, the Spanish cleaning woman?

### About the Author:

The son of Cuban immigrants, Oscar Hijuelos was born in New York City in 1951. He received a B.A. from New York's City College where he studied writing under Donald Barthelme. Before he became a full-time author, Hijuelos endured a series of odd jobs: raising insects in Wisconsin, selling shoes in Macy's, and writing ads that appeared in New York City subway cars. His first novel, *Our House in the Last World*, won him the American Academy of Arts and Letters' 1985 Rome Prize, enabling him to spend a year in Italy and begin his second novel, the Pulitzer Prize-winning, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*. This was followed by *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien*, and *Mr. Ives' Christmas*. Hijuelos still lives in New York City, and is currently at work on a new novel.