



Kissing the Virgin's Mouth

By Donna M. Gershten
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Introduction

This is the fictional memoir of Mexican-born Guadalupe Magdalena Molina Vasquez -- wife, scoundrel, courtesan, mother, and survivor. Living in a world where gender and class roles are unbending and religion predominant, Magda creates a philosophy of life that she can thrive on, one which embraces deeply felt gratitude, cynical optimism, and pragmatism. Invincible yet fallible, proud Magda climbs from the depths of poverty in the barrio to American affluence, from ambitious youth to humbling blindness.

Living in the prosperous neighborhood she once came to as a child to visit the shrine of the miracle baby Jesus, Magda performs her daily rituals and shares her life's lessons with her half-American daughter Martina, and Magda's little cousin Isabel. This is the story of women, their strengths, the power of their sex, and their secrets of survival.

Topics for Discussion

1. Guadalupe Magdalena Molina Vásquez is known by as many names as by the many lives she has lived. Magda to her fellow Mexicans, Maggie to her American husband, and as an infant, Chupita -- "the Sucker" -- to her mother. How has each of these stages of her life shaped the grown woman she becomes?
2. From the moment Magda becomes a mother, her goal is to pass on all of her savvy knowledge to her only daughter Martina so that she will survive, as Magda did, the harsh world. When Martina cleverly cons the Mexican police, Magda is torn between pride and grief as she realizes her daughter has learned her lessons well. Do you feel a mother's role is to toughen her daughter, as Magda did with Martina? Is Martina a different person than her mother? Do you feel she walked away more scarred than hardened from the day of the roadblock incident?
3. When Magda marries the wealthy Miguel Angel, both he and his mother strive to teach Magda about manners, dressing well, and most importantly, how to shed the telltale signs of her barrio background. All of Señora de Aguilar's lessons are about appearances. Take away the Aguilar's veiled world of appearances, and who did you find to be most cheap in manners? Why? What lessons did Magda learn during this period of her life that would help her during what stages of the rest of her life?
4. *Kissing the Virgin's Mouth* is about strong women and their influences on one another. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Tía Chucha, Mami, Magda, Martina, and Señora de Aguilar.
5. Magda lives in a very religious society, yet she herself has contrived her own religion, one that has allowed her to survive her hardships and still feel gratitude for what she has and has not achieved. Why has Magda chosen the Virgin Guadalupe as her patron saint?
6. Though Magda ultimately lives a prosperous life, never having to experience hunger again, she still "hungers" for some aspects of her barrio childhood. Do you feel that Magda tried to shake off her past and was unable to, or do you feel that she was always proud of who she was and where she came from, and that she only tried to make a better life for herself and her family?
7. The men in Magda's life have all tried to change her. Her father and brothers tried to stop her from selling tejuino in her sexy outfit; Miguel Angel tried to refine her; her boyfriend Julio told her to stay out of the sun so she wouldn't get any darker; and Robert tried to get her to shake her cultural beliefs. Magda defied all of them and ultimately lived alone. Yet Magda has no hard feelings for men. Martina thinks Magda is at fault for the powerlessness of women. What lessons does Magda strive to teach her daughter about how to handle men in her life?
8. Discuss similarities and difference between *The Book of Dead Birds* and *Kissing the Virgin's Mouth*. What issues do Ava, Helen, and Magda have in common? Do you think many women have had to go through the same experiences in real life? Discuss the mother-daughter relationship of each book. Discuss the important roles family, culture and society play in both novels. How do the women deal with the men in their lives? How have the women overcome their pasts?

About the Author

Donna M. Gershten was born in eastern North Carolina and later lived for some years in Sinaloa, Mexico, where she ran a fitness and community center. She returned to the United States, received a M.F.A. in creative writing from Warren Wilson College, and began to publish short stories in literary journals. Gershten now divides her time between the Huerfano Valley in southern Colorado and Denver. *Kissing the Virgin's Mouth* is her first novel.