



## Dear First Love

By Zoe Valdes  
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### Introduction

*What immediately seduced me was the sensation that I could not control that space, even if I'd wanted to.*

Imagine a world where imagination and nature are suppressed. Where life is confined to a small square footage of cinderblock walls with little relief from the oppressive heat and humidity. Where a force outside your power regulates every facet of your life: your education, your job, your income, and your home, even your food. Now, imagine that you are an adolescent girl living this life, and suddenly you are brought to the country. Suddenly the air smells sweet and the sun sets and rises in blazing color. All about you are amazing plants and animals that you have never seen before, open space that you have never experienced before, and people with a kind of power you have never felt before. Such is the perspective we are given by the author of *Dear First Love*. This dazzling, multi-faceted novel delivers a lyrical challenge to Cuba's repressive regime, while offering portraits of adolescence and middle age that are both convincingly real and hypnotically surreal. Dánae is an impressionable teenager when she first arrives at a youth work camp in rural La Fe. On the surface she is a normal adolescent, able to joke and tease with the rest of the girls at her camp. But she is different, and she knows it. "The normal thing, or almost normal, was for a country girl to move to the city. Not Dánae. Dánae longed for the countryside, yearned to get away from all that bound her to her age, her family." When she meets Tierra Fortuna Munda, Dánae's life changes forever. A member of a remote enclave of indigenous Cubans whose superior farming skills have made them useful to the government (who consequently leave them alone), Tierra, too, is not "normal." She has twelve fingers, six nipples, and guava jelly pours forth from her navel. Most amazing of all is the fact that she appears to Dánae in a dream before the two girls actually meet. When the dream becomes a reality, these two young women from disparate worlds find much in common with one another. Their mutual attraction yields to passion, and they become lovers. For the most part, Tierra brings Dánae into her "natural" world, where trees have personalities, and manatees save lives. However, Dánae must return to Havana, and to the normal life of a city teenager. Although she never forgets Tierra, Dánae has no contact with her for many years, during which time she completes her education, finds menial government work, gets married, and gives birth to two girls. Eventually Dánae's yearning for this "first love" -- so long repressed by the daily strains of life in modern Havana -- becomes unquenchable. She suffers from a breakdown of sorts, and at last flees the city and her family to find Dánae in the forests of La Fe. Zoé Valdés leaves the fate of these two women, who together and individually defy accepted standards of behavior, largely in doubt. Is Dánae sent off to wither away in a mental institution, never to see Tierra again? Is she accused of actions "dangerous to world security" and sentenced to death by the firing squad, only to be vindicated by the testimony of various forces of nature who restore justice to the courtroom, and throughout Cuba? Which is the stronger force: the state or nature? These are questions Valdés puts forth to her readers. Her depiction of the country's natural beauty, of its poetry, music, colors, and spirit, renders Cuba a magical land, where all living things possess the potential for communication and cooperation. But this parable of innocent love struggling against supreme injustice is a reality too often played out in the daily lives of its citizens. Most compelling of all is Valdés's portrait of a spirit crushed by a soulless power. This is a danger we all live with, and its ramifications are vividly and bravely put forth in a work of dazzling imagination and courage. **Questions for Discussion**

1. Valdés's unusual narrative technique employs a variety of narrators: a wooden suitcase, a ceiba tree, a palm tree, a manatee, Mandinga chichereku (a spirit) and the light of the city. How aware were you that the story was being "told" by these natural phenomena and artifacts? Why do you think Valdés chose their voices as opposed to human narrators?
2. What forces are responsible for the adult Dánae's disillusionment? Do you think she should be more willing to put up with the sacrifices of daily life? What, if anything, distinguishes Dánae from other women in her predicament?
3. How is the adolescent Dánae different from the forty-year old woman she becomes? Are these changes part of the typical maturing process? What is it about adolescence that makes Dánae susceptible to romance, poetry, and nature?
4. All of the girls in Dánae's brigade are given nicknames that identify personal or physical traits. There is an albino, a girl who won't stop talking, one who is promiscuous, another who assesses others on their physical appearance, and Dánae herself, who is called "duckbill lips" because of her wide mouth. How do the nicknames, and their associations, enforce the novel's lyrical and visual power? How do they enforce some of the novel's themes, such as the power of the state, the fragility of the individual, and the power of nature?
5. How did you respond to Valdés's use of grotesque imagery and scatological detail? Were these passages distracting? Did their frequency lessen or augment their impact? Why do you think she described the camp's repulsive conditions, human anatomy, excrement, and other bodily functions in such detail?
6. Tierra's mother gave birth to her at the root of a majestic ceiba tree that is also one of the novel's voices. These giant trees, whose trunks are "more solid than walls and revolutions," are often given mythological status. In parts of the country, these trees are left standing in otherwise deforested areas. How is the significance of this tree reflected in the novel?
7. Tierra and her family are part of a community of peasants who are known for their physical abnormalities -- the result of inbreeding. They have been working the land for generations, and have been largely overlooked by the revolution. The government considers them "aberrations of nature" and "outlaws," even though they are living on land they have farmed for centuries. How does the existence of this freakish community compare with the camps, with the "higher-ups" who want to evict them and sell their land, and with those living in the city completely unaware of their existence? How are they a threat to the state? What do they offer Dánae?
8. Why do you think Tierra chose to leave the country and return to Havana with Dánae? What does the city offer Tierra?
9. How does Valdés set up a dialogue between what is natural and what is un-natural? Discuss this in relation to Dánae's love for Tierra, her life in and escape from Havana, the novel's narrative structure, and its various endings.
10. Dánae spends much of her life as an outsider. Even when she marries, the relatively "normal" life she adopts with Andres leaves her feeling deprived and depressed. Wouldn't it have been easier for her to give in to her desires early on and go live with Tierra? What might have Dánae's life been had she never gone to La Fe?
11. Why do you think Valdés chose different endings for the story? Which do you think is the "real" ending?

**About the Author:** Zoé Valdés was born in 1959 in Havana, where she wrote poetry and fiction and worked as a cultural critic. In 1995 she fled Castro's regime and moved to Paris where she continues to write. She is the author of nine novels, many of which have been

bestsellers in Europe. Ms. Valdés writes a monthly column for the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo*.