



Tales from the Town of Widows

By James Cañón
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Introduction

Sociology, religion, gender, politics, sexual politics, history, women studies, Latin American studies. It's hard to imagine a more stimulating combination of discussion topics. I hope that the following questions will enrich your group's reading of Mariquita's parable of hope.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does the opening scene reveal about the women of Mariquita?
2. In the first chapter, a guerrilla boy says to the Morales widow: "This is and will always be a land of men." Discuss the implications of the boy's statement?
3. After the guerrilla attack in which most men disappeared from Mariquita, Julio César Morales becomes Julia Morales—and permanently mute. Discuss the symbolism behind his transformation.
4. When their men are taken away by communist guerrillas, the women of Mariquita lose their family providers. What else, in your opinion, did the women lose? What did they gain?
5. Was Rosalba right to take on the job of magistrate or should that role have gone to someone else? What were Rosalba's strengths and weaknesses?
6. In what ways does Cleotilde de Guarnizo defy popular notions of older women?
7. Chapter five begins with Francisca having a dream in which the men of Mariquita return, only they're faceless and naked and all of them have small penises and enormous testicles. Discuss the symbolism behind this image. What's the significance of the dream in Francisca's tale?
8. At the end of chapter six, Santiago takes Pablo to the river. "He fixed his gaze on Pablo's face, filling himself full of the man he loved, and gently began to release his hold on him, his solid arms slowly separating from the smallness of his lover's back, giving him to the current like a gift." In what ways is the novel as a whole about the importance of letting go of the past in order to move forward?
9. Love and sexuality are two strong themes in the novel. How do the women use their sexuality to their advantage? What is the most powerful love story in the novel and why?
10. What role does el Padre Rafael play in Mariquita's fate?
11. Discuss the hidden reasons why el Padre Rafael kills the four boys.
12. Chapter nine poses a question about the importance of time. Do you think time is an overrated concept? Do you agree with Magnolia when she says that time only exists in one's mind? If you were in the same situation as the women of Mariquita, how would you keep track of time?
13. Discuss the "Theory of Female Time" of Rosalba and Cleotilde. What are the benefits of it? What are the disadvantages?
14. In chapter eleven, a cow named Perestroika saves the village. What does the cow's name suggest for the future of Mariquita?
15. Is the idea of living in a society without men a far-fetched notion, or is it something that could be possible? Discuss.
16. Why do you think Cañón chose to intersperse the narrative with accounts of war? Does it add anything to the story or was it distracting?
17. The book embodies many contradictions. It is at once lyrical and brutal, subversive and idealistic, satirical and affecting, wickedly funny and profoundly sad. Do you like this paradoxical approach? In what ways do you find this style effective or ineffective?
18. Is *Tales from the Town of Widows* a tragedy, romance, comedy, or tragicomedy? Discuss.
19. Cañón chose to write his debut novel in English, a language he learned as an adult. Do you think this would be a completely different book had he written it in his first language? Discuss.
20. In an interview, Cañón said that the last line of his novel was meant to be a reply to *One Hundred Years of Solitude's* last line, in

which "races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth." Discuss Cañón's last line and his attitude toward the future of his "race".

21. At the end of the book, Mariquita's all-female utopia is put to the test when four men return to the village, forcing the women to negotiate between the world they've lost and the imperfect, peaceful existence they've created. What do you think of the women's final decision? Does it seem like a realistic solution?

22. Do you think the story's ending would have been different if a woman had written the book? How would you end the story?

23. One of the biggest debates about this novel is whether or not it is a feminist work. What are your thoughts on this issue?

24. A reviewer described *Tales from the Town of Widows* as "prime magical realism a la García Márquez, Cortázar and Vargas Llosa." Do you agree with that characterization? How would you characterize this book? How does this book compare to other South American novels?

25. Although Colombia has the second largest displaced population in the world after Sudan, its war—the longest and bloodiest civil war in the Western Hemisphere—has gotten little attention on human rights and refugee issues. Do you think this book can play a role in achieving social justice in Colombia? Do you think a book of fiction can influence the politics of a region? How?

About the Author

James Cañón was born and raised in Colombia. He moved to New York to study English and later earned his MFA in Creative Writing from Columbia University. Cañón was awarded the 2001 Henfield Prize for Excellence in Fiction. He lives in New York.