

 BOOK CLUB KIT 

"A sweeping multigenerational story. . . Make room on your shelves, readers, for this strong new voice with an old soul." —JULIA ALVAREZ

Family Lore



A Novel

Elizabeth Acevedo

Winner of the National Book Award

A Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

Is there any single origin story to a novel?

I could pick at so many different threads to explain how I arrived at *Family Lore*, and each one would be true, and each one would be incomplete. Perhaps the best and most unorthodox approach, but the most honest to me and how I write, would be to give some examples of the different streams of thoughts that grounded the novel; the confluence of these inspirational bursts and many more similar moments led to this amalgam of a book.

At some point in 2009, a few weeks before the live performance of my senior honor's thesis, I was walking over a bridge near Townsend Avenue in the Bronx. I thought about my Tia Margarita, whose apartment I was leaving. She'd arrived in the U.S. a few years before, and firecracker of a woman that she is, she wrangled New York into a city that did her bidding. She is tough and joyous, and she is the woman who acted as my Substitute Mami when I visited the Dominican Republic every summer as a child. She is the kind of woman novels should be written about. But thinking that led me to the fact that my mom is one of nine sisters, and each one of them has attributes, quirks, and contradictions that make them perfect fodder for an unputdownable story. At the time, I was still in undergraduate school, a spoken word poet who performed and had a fear of prose, and I had no idea what my trajectory as a writer would be, but I remember thinking: one day I will write a story in vignettes about my mother's sisters.

Let's drop into September 2019. I sit down at a restaurant with my cousin Limer. We've made it a point to love up on each other and keep each other well-informed on family business, since as DC residents, we are the only two living on this side of the Delaware River. She's three years younger than me and decades wiser, and I often turn to her for advice, which on this day I especially needed. But before I could ask about a major career change, with our green curry and pad thai orders placed, Limer turned to me and said, "I know what you should write a book about." I abhor this sentence. Most people don't know what a book should be about, shit, most writers don't know what a book should be about. It's through the writing that the purpose for a story is discovered, not in a tidbit of gossip or random encounter. But, as I mentioned, Limer, like her mother Tia Margarita, ain't no fool. And she proceeded to hip me to some family history she'd learned through the grapevine. I went home that day and I knew I'd found the way into a character, and a moment in time, and a relationship that quickly usurped the anxiety I'd felt when I walked into lunch. I wrote four thousand words in two hours. To be clear, I didn't transcribe the exact scenario Limer had told me, but while she'd been speaking, I cast an inner eye at the

ways families hold secrets, tell each other's truths, and protect one another or harm their favorite people...there was a texture I could feel in my cousin's conversation, my writer's mind reading the braille there and noting, *here there be story*.

At some point a few years back, I listened to a lecturer give a presentation on the way that funereal practices are changing. People are turning their ashes into seeds that can be planted into a tree, offering a different approach to limiting global warming. Some folks are making their caskets biodegradable. The practice of living wakes has started taking hold in small communities where the ill want a more formal way to say goodbye. In a different life, I would have been an anthropologist. I am moved by how humans create culture and tradition. The rituals and ceremonies that make us unlike other animals, that we pass down, turn away from, or rediscover. I listened to this lecture on the formalities of death without any thought that I'd ever write about it. I love being a student, and all I knew at the time was that human beings who are preparing for death come up with the wildest and most magical ways of dealing with their corporal selves...and with their loved ones.

In October of 2020, I went to my primary care doctor after some uncommon menstruation patterns. I described my symptoms and laid back on the exam table as she pressed firm fingers into my pelvis and then proceeded to put my feet into stirrups so she could perform a vaginal exam. "Your uterus is heavy," she said. "I know it sounds odd, but it's the only way to describe it. Maybe you're carrying twins." My doctor is very kind to my often-anxious self, and in this instance, she knew how hopeful I was at the prospect I might have conceived. "But I want to order an MCAT just to be sure." What I *was* carrying was a fibroid the size of a small orange, which made it difficult for me to sit down and had shifted my uterus into a funny uptilt, more than likely the cause for my inability to get pregnant. The surgery to remove the tumor that's implanted into the back of this particular baby-making organ was planned for the top of the following year.

And of course, I'm driven by language. I keep a notebook of words that strike my ear and ring like a boxing match bell. I listen to my mother with one antenna directed towards what she's saying and another perked at the way phrases translate into English or conjugate into double meanings. My mother-in-law and husband speak every day, and they fall into a family cadence that I am privileged to listen to; there's magic in the North Carolina idioms they use, what they say and don't say, and how the space in between speaks a world on its own. It makes me look at conversations with my own family differently, offers another lens with which to make sense of our patterns of disclosure, familiarity, and falsehoods. This too drove the beginnings to the story—the need to encapsulate moments in language where ancestral bonds blossomed or rotted.

There were so many more doorways that led into this book: while on tour, the librarian in Arkansas who told me she developed a love of lemons only after her mother passed; my best friend's creative and gratuitous descriptions of her alpha vagina; the memory of not

being allowed to close the bathroom door in my aunt's house because she wanted to check my excrement for parasites. And...and...and. I wrote scenes and characters out of order, in what many organized folks might deem chaos, but I knew I was building and layering a story with each glinting bit of narrative, each one kickstarting the story anew.

Writing a novel for me is like writing this letter to you. I search through the bins of happenstances, vernacular, and human interactions, and I pull at the threads that make me curious, pained, or joyous. *Ah, I say, this one has a bold hue of truth that will hurt me to write but will gratify me to capture well. Oh, I think, this one is frayed—an old wound that will only heal through being thoroughly thumbbed.* And then I weave. And weave. And weave again. I don't worry about what I'm making. I preoccupy myself only with: is this true? Note, I am not saying "truth." *Family Lore* is not a factual novel or autobiographical fiction, and I was not aiming for either. My true North is only ever what is true. What shines emotionally true within this muddled, glittery, and imaginative human experience that I reveal to myself—and to you—through writing and rewriting.

Let's go back to the top. The impetus for *Family Lore* is past, present, and tomorrow; it's beauty, poetry, and our deepest fears. It's my kin—alive and ancestral—and my devotion towards writing my people in a way that is full of tenderness, integrity, and cutting honesty. It's my inclination to ending a chapter with the most precise image or snippet of dialogue, and my project as a writer to allow many points of entry into my work.

And so. I told you how it began. And began again and again. And now I invite you to see how it ends, and maybe, spoiler alert, the ending has tributaries, too. So this is an invitation. Come join me in the water; don't worry about getting your feet wet. Convergences, like families, real or fictitious, are always messy.

With warmth,
Elizabeth Acevedo



Meet the Marte Matriarchs

Each Marte woman possesses a gift,
each magical in its own way



FLOR

Can predict the exact day
when someone will die



MATILDE

Is an expert dancer



CAMILA

Has an affinity for
herbalism



PASTORA

Can determine the truth of
someone's heart



ONA

Is an anthropologist
with a magical
alpha vagina



YADI

Is a chef and heiress to
a taste for limes

Mamajuana Recipe

INGREDIENTS:

- A handful of mamajuana mix
- 2 cups dark rum (preferably Dominican, like Brugal)
- 1 cup red table wine
- 1 cup honey

DIRECTIONS:

- In a jar, add the wine to the mamajuana mix. Cover with a tight-fitting lid and let it sit for 3-5 days in the fridge.
- After 3-5 days, pour out wine. The wine should have removed any bitterness.
- Add the rum and honey to the mamajuana mix that has now been cured. Optional: Top off with a bit of wine.
- Serve chilled after dinner.



Family Lore Playlist

Listen to the playlist at bit.ly/FLPLAYLIST

1. Teyana Taylor – “We Got Love” (p. 38)
2. Oscar D’León – “Lloraras” (p. 57)
3. Ja Rule – “Put It on Me” (p. 120)
4. Fania Records – “Diosa Del Ritmo” Live at Yankee Stadium, 1975 (p. 136)
5. Cuco Valoy – “Juliana” ((p. 136)
6. Aventura – “Obsesión” (ft. Judy Santos) (p. 143)
7. Joe Arroyo – “La Rebelion” (No le pegue a la negra) (p. 346)



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Each of the sisters and nieces in *Family Lore* possesses a gift, with Flor's gift at the center of the novel—if she dreams about teeth shattering, has terrible jaw pain, or her own teeth chatter, she knows when someone will die. What lore or gifts have been passed down in your family? What are your thoughts on them?
2. *Family Lore* alternates between the Marte women's six distinct voices throughout the story, with chapters highlighting Matilde, Flor, Pastora, Camila, Ona, and Yadi. What traits about each sister are similar and different, and how does this affect their decision-making throughout the novel?
3. *Family Lore* weaves the past and the present, taking us from Santo Domingo and New York City over the course of three days and also seventy years. What differences do you notice between the first generation and the second generation women in the text?
4. What roles do family land, herbalism, and natural food/ingredients play in this novel?
5. Each Marte woman has a different relationship with Santo Domingo: Yadi misses home while Pastora was traumatized by home. Discuss each sister's relationship to her ancestral land and how this plays out throughout the story.
6. Discuss the role of matriarchs in the Marte family and compare this to your own family. What similarities and differences do you spot?



7. Now compare the Marte matriarchs to their partners. What roles do these men play in uplifting and also disparaging their spouses?
8. “I was not born with a gift, and I never developed one in the ways of my sisters, whose uncanny senses of the world came from beyond. I cobbled together my own gift. Claimed magic where I'd be told none could exist. That is what dancing was for me. And it is as powerful as any second sight or inclination toward healing.” Matilde is said to be the sister who “was not born with a gift” but “cobbled together” her own. Do you feel her dancing could be considered just as much of a gift as the other Marte sisters' gifts?

9. This book uses folk tradition to incorporate magical realism in the text. “My mother’s magic . . . is not an orderly system like how fantasy novels can describe the exact structure of where and whence and thusly. The women in my family get struck by an unknown lightning rod.” What parts of it felt real to you? All of it? Some of it? Now compare this to your own cultural traditions. Are there similar elements?
10. Soraya encourages Ona to research her own bloodline, yet Ona collects her family stories with no real intention of using them. What do you think Ona’s research is motivated by, then? What are some creative ways Ona could turn her family’s lore into something shareable? If you were in Ona’s profession, how would you showcase your family history?
11. Throughout the text, Ona sprinkles in historical facts about the Latin Kings, Dominicans being descendants of Taino people, Christopher Columbus, and the 1521 slave rebellion at the sugarcane estate of Diego Colón. Did you learn about this history growing up? If so, where did you learn? If not, consider using this time to research these events and discuss within your group.
12. This novel shows different forms of self-care—Flor locking herself in the bathroom to lie in the tub and imitate the meditation she saw on television or putting on a mud mask once a week, and Ona going to therapy. How do the boundary and self-care practices and rituals mother and daughter exhibit change across generations, and how do they influence one another?
13. Do you relate to any of the characters? If so, which character best represents you and why?
14. The snake dream is a significant omen in this story. Discuss what it means and its importance.
15. Flor gives a compelling speech about her life at the end of *Family Lore*, which raises the question of how we want to spend our lives. What does it mean to live well and die well? What kind of life do you want to live so that you can be okay about coming to terms with your own death?

