

A Mayan Astronomer in Hell's Kitchen

by Martín Espada

W. W. Norton & Company

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY:

In *A Mayan Astronomer in Hell's Kitchen*, Martín Espada creates a collection of narrative poems that deal with ethics in an honest, unafraid way. He does not moralize, but uses the language of his poetry and the stories told in the poems to address the world. Many of the poems seem to come from life experience, but no less powerful are the poems that are imagined scenes from the past. In “The Eleventh Reason,” the poet dreams he is the lawyer for Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. He must come up with eleven reasons why they should not be executed. Espada allows this moment to expand to all of society, saying, “They will whisper their prison letters in voices that linger, / so we turn the knobs on the radio to crackle them away, / but their silence will swarm us, and we will swat the air, / howling that a million flies haunt the spirals of our ears.”

Some of the poems are searing indictments. The poem “For the Jim Crow Mexican Restaurant in Cambridge, Massachusetts Where My Cousin Esteban Was Forbidden to Wait Tables Because He Wears Dreadlocks” reads like a prayer to God to exact justice on the people who perpetrate this crime. “The Governor of Puerto Rico Reveals at His Inauguration That He Is the Reincarnation of Ponce de Leon” indicts those in power for using the poverty of the people as a tool against them. There is no summing up, no moment in which the writer reveals what is right; rather, the music of his poetry leads the reader toward a new understanding of these situations, one that is moving and beautiful, even when sad or upsetting.

Human sympathy is also a primary concern. The poem, “The Mexican Cabdriver’s Poem for His Wife, Who Has Left Him,” is the writer’s take on a moment from the point of view of someone else. The cabdriver asks the poets in the backseat of his cab to write a poem for his wife, but it is his own description of her that becomes the poem; “She is like the bridge/ when there is so much traffic/ I have time/ to watch the boats/ on the river.” Particularly beautiful is Espada’s sympathetic take on a man trying to escape from a fire above a deli in Hell’s Kitchen. The man is more than just this; he is “A Mayan astronomer in Hell’s Kitchen/ watching galaxies spiral in the fingerprints of smoke, / smoking a cigarette.” Espada’s book continually portrays people as though the universe

were passing a spotlight on them for an instant in which their actions may mean something important to all of us.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Espada organizes his book into three sections, “A Tarantula in the Bananas,” “A Mayan Astronomer in Hell’s Kitchen,” and “A Library of Lions.” How does the scope of the poems change from section to section? Do they succeed in organizing your thoughts on the book?
2. What is the role of family in these poems?

ACTIVITIES:

1. In the poem “The Mexican Cabdriver’s Poem For His Wife, Who Has Left Him,” Espada writes a poem from the perspective of someone he barely knows. Try writing a poem from the perspective of someone who briefly provided you a service, like a cabdriver, or a supermarket clerk.
2. The first poem in the book, “My Name is Espada,” deals with the connections between a person and his name. Try looking up the meaning of your name. Write about how it does or does not apply to your own life.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Martín Espada was born in 1957 in Brooklyn, New York. He has written numerous books of poems, as well as a collection of prose titled *Zapata’s Disciple: Essays* which was published in 1998. He has also edited anthologies of poems, such as *Poetry Like Bread: Poets of the Political Imagination*. He has won many prizes, including the PEN/Revson Fellowship and the Paterson Poetry Prize. He has received two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, and has also received a Massachusetts Artists Foundation fellowship. He lives in Amherst, Massachusetts and teaches poetry at the University of Massachusetts.

HELPFUL LINKS:

For more information about Martin Espada, try these websites:

<http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?prmID=250>

The Academy of American Poets website. Includes two poems, as well as biographical information.

<http://www.martinespada.net/>

The poet's website. Includes reviews, poems, links, reading information, and other resources.



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