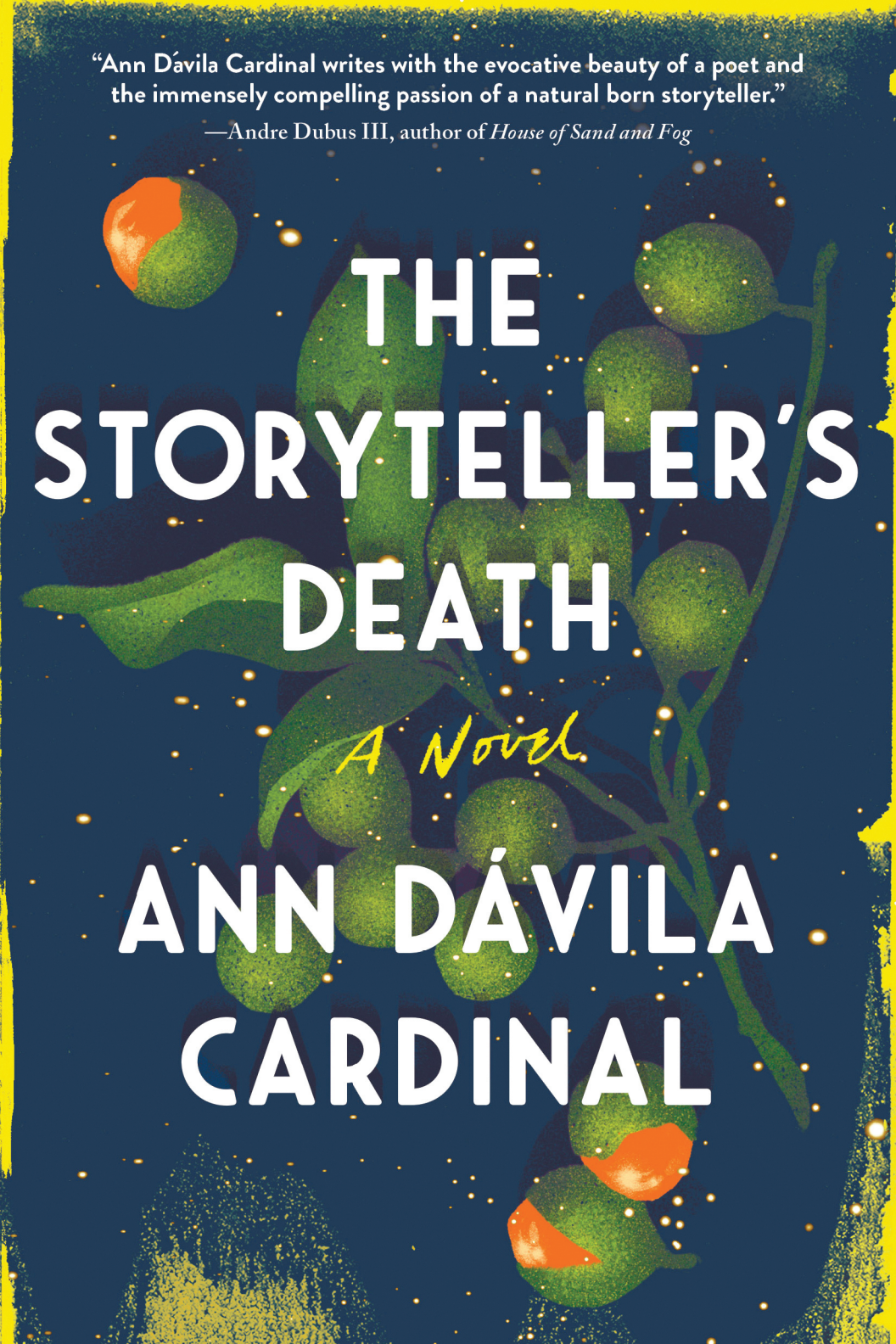


"Ann Dávila Cardinal writes with the evocative beauty of a poet and the immensely compelling passion of a natural born storyteller."

—Andre Dubus III, author of *House of Sand and Fog*



THE STORYTELLER'S DEATH

A Novel

ANN DÁVILA
CARDINAL

Reading Group Guide

1. Family secrets play a huge role in *The Storyteller's Death*. How do family secrets start and take on a life of their own? Have you ever discovered something shocking about a relative's past that changed your understanding of them? Who are the storytellers in your family?
2. Describe Isla as a character. What circumstances make her an outsider both in Puerto Rico and New Jersey? What is her biggest obstacle?
3. What makes someone a cuentista throughout the story? How do stories gain power even when they aren't strictly true?
4. Alma quickly separates Isla and José when they first meet as children. When you first read that scene, why did you think she stopped their budding friendship? Does knowing more about Alma's own past change your understanding?
5. How do Isla's visions change her view of her family's place in

their community? What does she learn about their wealth, politics, and personal pride?

6. The Sanchezes are very proud of their Spanish heritage. Why do Alma and Tío Ramón emphasize this aspect of their lineage? How does that focus on the past contrast with the environment around them?
7. José dismisses Isla at the Partido Popular Democrático rally because he believes her family is pro-statehood. Why does he think that? Why does the PPD oppose the possibility of Puerto Rico becoming a U.S. state?
8. What do quenepas represent for José? How does sharing the fruit with Isla mark a change in their relationship?
9. What motivated Marisol, Alma's sister, to arrange for both Pedro's and her own father's deaths?
10. What's next for the Sanchez family? Do you think they'll be able to follow Isla and Elena's example and move toward greater openness?

A Conversation with the Author

What inspired *The Storyteller's Death*? How do you begin a new story?

Years ago, I had a conversation with two writer friends where we were discussing how different cultures treat their old people. I told them about how in Puerto Rico, the elderly family members are often right in the house. I said, "There was always some old woman dying in the back room when I was a kid." One of my companions yelled, "That's it! That's the beginning of a story!" I'm grateful for her insight as otherwise the whole story might have passed me by. I started it as a short story for my first MFA workshop, and it grew over the two years in the program. I worked on it for seventeen years, all told, but that was where it began. My stories tend to start in very similar ways, sparks that flare and either catch or fizzle out. Little did I know, this story was a looong burning candle.

Like Isla, you spent your childhood summers in Puerto Rico. How do your experiences compare with hers?

Though they differ in specifics, my experiences are at the heart of Isla's. My father died when I was eight, and my mother started shipping me off to her family in Puerto Rico for the summers while

her drinking worsened. It was a very painful time but also beautiful, as it allowed me to dig some roots in that fertile soil. I credit my Puerto Rican family for saving my life. They taught me that adults could take care of things. At home, I did the laundry, the shopping, hid the car keys. When I was in Puerto Rico, I could be a child, though in many ways, that ship had sailed. As a result of my circumstances (and genes, let's be honest), I was a strange and somewhat feral kid, a *sinvergüenza*, as my great-aunt used to call me, or one without shame. It was those summers that bonded me so strongly with that side, with that part of my blood. In Puerto Rico, those who are born there are said to have "la mancha," the mark of the island, on them. Though it might not be visible, I like to think that I have something of la mancha on the inside, riding through my veins on tiny rafts alongside the platelets and anti-anxiety meds.

Who were your favorite storytellers growing up, either in your family or in print? How did they shape your own storytelling?

So many members of my family can tell a story. In fact, all of the *cuentistas'* stories in the book are based on Dávila family tales, but I grew up hearing mostly my mother's. They were rich and dramatic, filled with slashing storms and vengeful shootings. Later, I found out that many of those she told weren't exactly *true*. My mother had already passed on, and I was hurt and angry, feeling as though I'd been lied to. But then my cousin José Luis said, "Why does that bother you, Prima? Isn't our family as defined by the stories that aren't true as by the ones that are?" He changed my thinking about the role of storytelling in a family, that memory is a movable feast and there is more meaning in the telling of the stories themselves than the "truth" behind them.

As for in print, I was always an avid reader and was particularly

drawn to magical realism and horror. Magical realism because so much of Latin culture seems infused with magic. No one questions the existence of ghosts, for instance. And I think I've always been drawn to horror because it made me feel better about my own difficult life, because though it might have sucked, at least there weren't zombies.

Puerto Rico comes alive throughout the story, and there are subtle signs that the times are changing. What do you feel the biggest changes have been in Puerto Rico in your lifetime?

First, I'm so glad I was able to bring some aspect of the island of my heart alive, thank you. But since I don't live on the island year-round, I hesitate to speak as an expert of any kind. That's why I set the book in the era when I spent the most time there: the 1970s. In part because I knew it best but also because it was a fascinating time in Bayamón and on the island. My older siblings had grown up with the family property surrounded by mostly farmland. They talked about chickens and pigs running around the property, miles of farmland, our tíos riding around on horseback. But in the seventies, all that started to change. It was interesting to see how much from summer to summer, interesting and difficult since not all changes were good. But one thing remains a constant: family is always first, and Puerto Rico survives hurricanes, earthquakes, political unrest, and a pandemic, sometimes all in a row! I am proud of that heritage of resilience.

How does Isla's lack of physical wealth prevent her from seeing the privileges her family holds? Do you see a difference between privilege and personal circumstances?

This is something I've been examining my entire adult life. Like

Isla's mother, mine made the choice to support herself, my brother, and me—the only ones still living at home after our father died—with no help from her family. It made for lean times, but we always had a roof over our heads, food in the cupboard, and clothes on our back. But this was because generations of her family had worked hard and built resources, putting the strongest emphasis on education, and had sent my mother to Columbia, where she studied architecture. So even though we lived simply, we benefited from the privilege of her family through the foundation of her education. During the summers I spent on the island, however, there were servants and swimming pools and dinners out, and as a kid, I felt as though we were the poor relations. With adulthood, I realized that wealth was entirely subjective, and though we lived differently, I grew up with a tremendous amount of privilege. It was such a revelation that it pretty much had to be a theme in the novel.

Maria is an important ally for Isla in the Sanchez family. How does each generation change the course of a family's history?

We're in such a time of change these days, and I'm grateful to be around to see it. I was raised differently in New York and New Jersey, and when I was on the island, I encountered shock about everything from wearing flip-flops off the beach to tattoos to living with a boyfriend before marriage. But that was from the older generations. With my cousins? I could talk about anything. As our generations and the ones after us have come into power, some of the old ways of thinking are falling away, like scales from the societal eye. I have tremendous hope for Gen Z. They are not as constrained by binaries and outdated traditions as we were, as my mother was. Each generation finds a way to honor those who have come before but also allow the family to evolve.

In many different ways throughout the book, love paves the way for learning and greater understanding. How do you view the relationship between love and curiosity?

Love has always inspired me to look closer, deeper, to explore. And it keeps things new and interesting. The only way to learn is to ask questions and listen more. This book was inspired by my love and gratitude to the Puerto Rican side of my family, and sometimes you must look into the dark corners to bring out the textures and patterns that make life interesting and bring greater understanding. The friendship with José was based on a real incident with a boy when I was a child. The realization that a family member who was so very dear to me was a racist was almost unbearable for years. But love sometimes requires discord to reach understanding. I think this book is, in many ways, the way I came to terms with that.

What books are on your bedside table right now?

What, you mean the teetering stack that's so big it might fall over and kill me in my sleep? Right now, I'm savoring Zoraida Córdova's novel *The Inheritance of Orquídea Divina*. I love her work, and this book feels like...family. I don't want it to end. I just finished *Tender Is the Flesh* by Agustina Bazterrica (translated from the Spanish edition). This dystopian/horror novel is very dark and not for the faint of heart, but it was one of the most thought-provoking books I've read in a long time. And finally, I'm relishing the essays in Kei Miller's *Things I Have Withheld*. His stunning "The Old Black Woman Who Sat in the Corner" captures the heart of what I hope *The Storyteller's Death* brings forth—the stories we dare not tell and the beauty of the women at the heart of them.