

Telex from Cuba Reading Guide

A few things to keep in mind as you read....

Much of the book is historically accurate—United Fruit Company as landowner and overlord, the US ambassador as emissary of the company, Fidel and Raul Castro's elite backgrounds, Cuba's dependence on cane sugar (monoculture), the dictator Batista, President Prio who was his predecessor, agricultural fires, and more.

Individuals and sometimes families are stand-ins for entire social strata (very Brechtian in this regard). The main character's family (Stites) are an example. The Allain brothers (Hatch and Rudy) and their families from Louisiana are another. There are differences of class and status between these two families as well as different relationships that each have with the Cuban population.

Seemingly minor details often encapsulate class and race issues, for example on page 7, Kushner mentions that the Stites' cook, Annie, was allowed to prepare Cuban dishes for the family, something that other American families didn't allow. In this short passage, Kushner has told us quite a lot about notions of purity and contamination as well as class and race notions regarding food, decision-making, the eradication of native traditions, and relations of subservience.

The tone of the book changes when the nightclub dancer and courtesan Rachel K is introduced into the narrative. What function does she play in the book? What does the author want us to know about?

Also, the author's sense of history—fascism, the Haitian revolution, Vichy France.

And keep reading. The ending is very dramatic. *Shades of Vietnam 1975*.

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Discussion Questions

The author presents the Castro brothers as motivated by a mix of political ideals and strategies. What were some of these different strands of ideas and actions that they pursued simultaneously? What does this combination tell you about them?

A range of attitudes are represented by the different United Fruit personnel. Some are interested in and sympathetic to the Cubans, others are hostile or even racist. How important are these types of distinctions among the colonizers? Should oppositional politics be shaped around differences among the elite? If not, why bother to acknowledge that those differences exist?

What is so important about fictional Rachel K? That she is female? That she is a sex worker? That she caters to the Cuban elite? What essential roles does she play in the narrative? The author portrays her as all-important, in one way or another connected to all the major players within Cuba. Why such an exalted role for her?

In what way are the ex-pats who work in Cuba misfits from the United States? Is it the condition of being a misfit that motivates their work overseas? Or is it something about being an ex-pat that turns everyone into a misfit at home?

The author often presents situations as a matter of choices and oppositions: flee the island or stay, secretly sympathize with the rebels or hope that nothing fundamental changes, negotiate with Batista and/or negotiate with the Castro brothers, sell guns to dictators or join the rebel camp, stay married or have an affair, etc. Why does Kushner rely on oppositions and choices? A literary device or a political statement on her part?

As an author, Kushner seems to represent a 'sensitivity' about radical politics, rather than an easily-identified political orientation. What can we say about her politics and political motivation?