



Voices
from the
Gaps

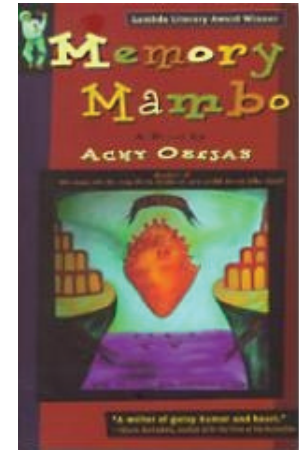
Memory Mambo by Achy Obejas

Lies and Love

Memory Mambo by Achy Obejas is as much about memory as it is about truth. The main character is a 24 year-old lesbian named Juani who lives in Chicago with her - very extended - Cuban family. Coming to the United States when she was only six years old, Juani's memory of her home country is patchy and second-hand at best. In her quest to define these memories, she takes readers through a whirlwind journey of what makes your relationships with lovers, with friends, and with your family - even if they don't make you happy - a vital and thriving part of your life.

One of the strongest aspects of Obejas's writing, is her characterization. Within the first ten pages the reader is exposed to at least ten different characters. But instead of letting all of these names fall flat and one-dimensional, you are drawn to each and every one of them until the very last page of the book. Other character-heavy novels have left me feeling annoyed. It is usually terribly difficult to keep track; one name mentioned in the first chapter might not show up again until you're two-thirds of the way through the novel. And not only that, the author will also assume that you have kept track of this and can remember exactly why it was important that they were wearing purple mittens. Even though I will admit to turning back to the beginning of this book a few times to refresh my memory, it never felt like a chore. Obejas does a wonderful job of making all of her characters full and well-rounded - the kind that stick in your mind well after you've finished the book, whether you want them to or not. She makes sure to show her characters not only in their best moments, but in their weakest as well. One of the most detested characters is Jimmy, Juani's cousin-in-law. He is a generally horrible person who beats his wife and commits heinous acts - the most notable of which is at the end of the book. As much as I wanted to really hate him, though, I ended up just pitying the sorry S.O.B. - which I would blame on the fact that he was constructed in the novel so skillfully.

Part of what Juani struggles with in the novel is deciphering between the memories she actually remembers happening, and the memories that are just stories she has heard over and over again. At the beginning of the novel, this deals directly with the memories of her childhood and her journey to America.



Publisher: Cleis Press,
1996



Memory Mambo by Achy Obejas

Later on in the novel this theme comes to the forefront again as she deals [and struggles] with something that recently occurred, but thanks to a conniving cousin-in-law, can't quite bring herself to remember how it all exactly happened.

In the midst of all these memories about the past is a very real present - full of fierce love and vicious hate. In addition to learning of Juani's loves, the reader is also sitting shotgun to the relationships of her parents, siblings, and many cousins. These are no storybook romances. There's deceit, adultery, abuse, and, worst of all, lying. As Obejas says through Juani, "the message of Tio Raul and Tia Zenaida is that lies destroy everything, especially love." But even with all of their misdeeds and misgivings, you still find yourself genuinely concerned - for the same reasons that you find yourself thinking about Jimmy long after the book is over: incredibly intricate and deep characters that essentially prohibit you from being detached from the story.

Don't let all of this scare or confuse you. Despite all the character changes and flashbacks, it's an incredibly fast-paced and coherent story. You are swept in right away, starting with the stories of her family's humble beginning as fresh immigrants in a strange country. From there you're moved in and out of her cousin's tempestuous marriage as Juani moves in and out of her own, discovering what she is really meant to do.

Her (Juani's) openness about being gay is at times in sharp contrast to how the rest of her family moves and operates. Her parents deny that her homosexuality is really there, and she is constantly ridiculed by her cousin Caridad's husband, Jimmy. Yet none of this seems to faze her, and I found myself respecting and admiring her incredible openness amongst so much adversity.

In spite all their familial differences, though, they somehow manage to come together in such a way that if there ever was such a thing as a dysfunctional yet intensely cohesive family, this would be it. An extremely large climactic shock at the very end of the novel - the kind that would tear apart any family like mine or yours - somehow still brings them closer together. In the end you're left with the feeling that because of this closeness, this sort of amazing family seems to only have been able to be born outside of the suburban United States - where the compounding magnitude of their conflicts seem to go far beyond anything that we (suburban America) see in our everyday.

This was a wonderful, intoxicating read that stays with you and leaves you emotionally charged long after you've turned the last page.