

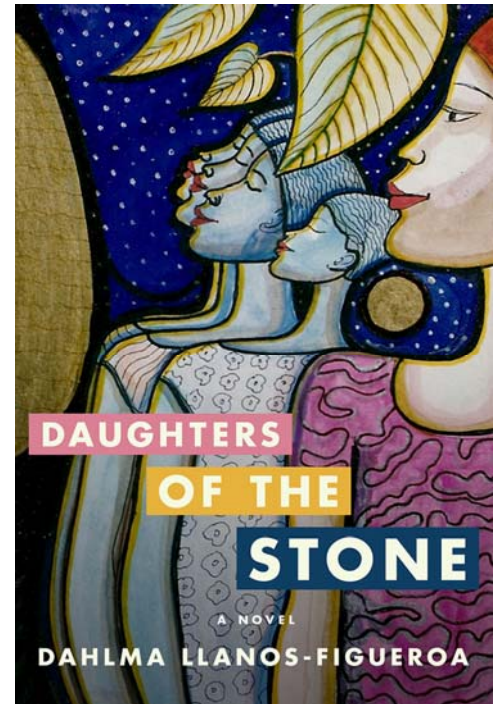


# *Daughters of the Stone*

By **Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa**

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## About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Daughters of the Stone* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Daughters of the Stone*.

## About the Book

It's the mid-1800's in colonial Puerto Rico. Fela is brought from Africa to work as a seamstress at a sugar plantation. Her former mistress had her tongue cut out, so she cannot speak. But she is very skilled with a needle and thread, a talent her new mistress will happily exploit. Fela carries a special stone with her; before she and her husband were separated, they performed a tribal ceremony which poured the essence of their unborn child into the stone. She is biding her time, waiting for the chance to finish what she started. So when the plantation owner approaches her, Fela allows him to act out his desires. She becomes pregnant and gives birth to Mati, who will become a powerful curandera.

Such is the beginning of this matriarchy. The stone becomes meaningful to each of the women, pulling them through times of crisis. Finally, Carisa, born and raised in New York City, becomes the one to write down the stories of her family, many of them forgotten or shifted aside, and repair the hurts of the past.

Ultimately, each story serves as an allegory to the greater theme of the novel by echoing that fate, chance, and perhaps even divine providence, are all woven into the fabric of everyday life. And it's through each character's defining moment in his or her past that the reader understands

how each child has become its parent's purpose for living. In the end, it's a novel of forgiveness, redemption, survival, faith and family.

## Praise for *Daughters of the Stone*

"This commanding exploration of women's history will resonate with readers of strong African American feminist narratives like those of Toni Morrison and Ntozake Shange. With its unflinching description of slavery, it should also appeal to readers of slave narratives like Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* and Manu Herbstein's *Ama: A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade*."

--**Library Journal** (starred review)

"[A] compelling debut... Beautifully told by Llanos-Figueroa, this is an unforgettable saga of the magical beliefs binding one family for generations."

--**Booklist**

"Rejoice! Here is a novel you've never read before: the story of a long line of extraordinary Afro-Puerto Rican women silenced by history. In *Daughters of the Stone*, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa rescues them from oblivion and richly, compellingly, magically, introduces them to literature-- and to the world. Bienvenidas!"

--**Cristina García**, author of *A Handbook to Luck*

"This is a remarkable first novel, both magical and deeply real, that vividly renders the power of storytelling to a diasporic people. The story of each woman in her own time and place is like a luminous fiber, meticulously spun from hay into gold, which woven together creates an unforgettable history, grounded in a black stone that symbolizes the legends and rituals of the Old Ones, but spiraling into a wider world that connects stone to memory and earth to continents. I am happy to add such a clairvoyant new voice to the Latina literary heritage. Llanos-Figueroa's 'Fela', with her embroidery skills, her dreaming, and her dance of loss and survival, is kindred spirit to my own 'Concepción'. I could not resist the magnetic pull of these stories."

--**Alicia Gaspar de Alba**, author of *Calligraphy of the Witch*

## About the Author

Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa was born in Puerto Rico and raised in New York City. She taught in the New York City school system before becoming a young-adult librarian. Dahlma has won the Bronx Council on the Arts ACE and BRIO awards, as well as a Literary Arts Fellowship. This is her first novel. She lives in the Bronx. Visit Dahlma's website at <http://www.llanosfigueroa.com>.



## Discussion Questions

1. What is the legacy that Fela passes on?
2. Romero is a menacing and evil presence in the book. Why is he so brutal?
3. Who is The Lady and what role does she play in the lives of the main characters? How does she change during the course of the novel?
4. Do you consider the encounter between Tomas and Fela a rape? Why?
5. The gift is passed down from one generation to the next. How does the gift manifest itself in the lives of each woman? How does it change with each generation?
6. Who are some of the mentors in the story and how do they affect the lives of the women?
7. A number of characters are "outsiders" in the novel. Which characters do you consider outsiders and what makes them so?
8. What is the importance of storytelling in the book and what role does it play in each woman's life?
9. Mati is very concerned that Concha will lose her traditional "ways of knowing". What are the different ways of knowing explored in the novel?
10. What do Carisa and Maria Luisa share in common?
11. Although separated by a hundred years, Fela and Elena both deal with the problems of adapting to a new society. What are some of the challenges they face? What are some of the similarities and differences in how they deal with those challenges?
12. What elements of African spirituality survive over the generations and how are these transmitted from one generation to the next?
13. How have the elders in your family passed on tradition and strength from one generation to the next? How do the youth receive these?
14. If you could leave one meaningful object to your great great grandchild, what would that object be?

## **A Conversation with Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa**

### **If you could visit any time, place, or person, when, where or who would you visit?**

I think I would love to see the future, two hundred years from now. I'd love to see what kind of world we are building towards.

### **Besides being an author, what is your fantasy job?**

I always wanted to be a dancer. I still love to move to music, especially live drumming. I would have loved to have been in the Katherine Dunham or Alvin Ailey companies.

### **What music, food, drink, toys, etc... do you keep by your side when you're writing?**

I do my original writing in silence, usually in my journal but not always. I may have incense burning in the corner. But when I'm working at my computer I listen to instrumental music. Generally, I listen to jazz or Latin jazz—Dexter Gordon, Lionel Hampton, Earl Garner, Cal Tjader, Chet Baker, Paquito D'Rivera, Antonio Carlos Jobim and Hilton Ruiz are some favorites. And as always, my journals are not far away. My Native American storyteller figures are sitting all around my work area. I also have a New Yorker cartoon by Shanahan of a little girl kneeling on the sidewalk, chalk in hand having just scribbled something in the ground. The caption says, "I try to write a little bit every day."

### **Besides writing, what other forms of art and creativity do you indulge in?**

I love doing fine art reproductions on needlepoint canvass, knitting, traveling and watching 'noir' movies from the forties and fifties.

### **Where do you travel and what does traveling do for you?**

I'm drawn to very old places, like Egypt or the pyramids outside Mexico City or the ruins in Rome or Greece. When I am there, I try to find the spirit of place, the essence of the people who lived there. It's a different way of seeing and feeling the world. I keep a detailed journal of my feelings, reactions, interpretations and draw from these journal entries for some of my travel pieces. For instance, after my trip to Cuba I had a wealth of ideas and impressions that were fresh in my mind because I recorded them as they came to me. This lent my writing immediacy. Much later, I wrote a short memoir piece based on those journal entries. It was published the very first time I submitted it to a journal.

### **It's obvious you feel a great love for Puerto Rico and its culture. Why do you choose to live in New York City?**

I am a hybrid, a product of both places and both cultures, a true Newyorican. Wherever I go, Puerto Rico and New York are always home. Puerto Rico is my ancestral home. It holds memories and family. When I think of natural beauty and calm and emotional support, I think of the island. But NYC is my day-to-day reality. I love the city's energy; it's diverse flavor, its drive and creative force. I love its resiliency, its never-ending ability to change for the future and yet retain the past. Although I love all these things about my frenetic city, I choose to live in a very quiet and peaceful corner of it. After I'm done running around, enjoying all the cultural and social aspects of the NYC, I need a sanctuary to retreat into when I need to think and create. Luckily for me, the city offers both.

**What have you been reading recently?**

While I was preparing my book for publication, I read books that had nothing to do with my work because I didn't want what I was reading to bleed into what I was writing. So I read primarily international mystery novels that are character rather than plot driven. I love David Rotenberg's Shanghai series, Qiu Xialong's contemporary China series, Henning Mankell's Swedish detective Wallendar and of course, Elizabeth George's Lindley/Havers books. Once I finished revising my novel, I turned to the books on my reading list. Recently, I've read *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz, *Unaccustomed Earth* by Jhumpa Lahiri, *Evening* by Susan Minot, *Mercy* by Toni Morrison and *The Shadow in the Wind* by Carlos Ruiz Zafón.

**How and when did you discover writing was important to you?**

I had a wonderful creative writing teacher in high school named Cynthia Reeman Handler. She gave me an opportunity to write for the high school literary magazine. I was hooked from then on.

**What insights or lessons have you learned from this writing this book?**

At the beginning of my process, I am a totally intuitive writer. When I started writing this novel, I didn't know where I was going or how I would get there. The book wasn't written in sequential order. In fact, I didn't really know it would be a novel. It came to me as it came, in pieces of dreams, apparently random thoughts and strong images. Later I realized what I had in front of me. So the biggest lesson I've learned is to trust myself. If my creative self is generating this story, it will eventually complete its mission and I will see where I've been headed all along. I've learned to get out of the way and let the story happen. I've learned how to listen. Later, it's my job as a writer to hone and polish and craft a readable and (hopefully) enjoyable book. But the creative source? I don't know where it comes from. I just know it often wakes me up, pushes me out of bed and says write me a story.

To have **Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa** visit your reading group or call-in for discussion visit: <http://www.llanosfigueroa.com/contact/index.php>.



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