

Reader's Guide for *The Accidental Native*

About the Book

Rennie Falto moves to Puerto Rico, a place and culture he knows only through his dead parents' memories, to reconnect with a woman whom he discovers is his biological mother. Julia is beautiful, elegant, and a high-powered attorney determined to reclaim the son she gave up many years before.

Once there, he must deal with Julia's strong-willed nature, a department chair not thrilled with having a Nuyorican on staff, squatters living in the house he inherited, students frequently on strike, and a thirtysomething lover anxious to settle down. Most disturbing, though, is the rumor that faculty and staff are dying from cancer because the campus is a former U.S. military base where toxic ammunitions have been buried.

Rennie soon finds himself working to expose the government's lies, though he risks losing his job, his home and even the woman he loves. In his debut novel, J.L. Torres captures the conflict and challenges experienced by Puerto Ricans returning to their "homeland."

About the Author



J.L. Torres is the author of a short-story collection, *The Family Terrorist and Other Stories* (Arte Público Press). His stories and poetry have been published widely in anthologies and magazines. Born in Puerto Rico and raised in the South Bronx, he currently lives with his wife and two sons in upstate New York, where he teaches American literature and creative writing at SUNY, Plattsburgh.

Webpage: <https://www.jltorres.net/wp>

Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/RicanWriter>

Interview with J.L. Torres

- 1. What prompted you to write *The Accidental Native*? Where did you get the idea for the story?***

Like Rennie, I was born in Puerto Rico, raised in the U.S., and returned to Puerto Rico. I lived there close to twenty years and on returning to the States, I wanted to write something based on that experience. My main motivation was that such a story really hadn't been written; and, many problems and issues with the Island were not being addressed openly and from an outsider's perspective.

- 2. Rennie, the main character, is much younger than you. Was writing from a younger man's perspective challenging? What problems did it present?***

Well, I still have fond memories of my twenties. I certainly drew from the experience of being young and uncertain about one's future, being tentative about love and loving. But I'm also a professor who comes across young adults with every new semester I teach. I love talking to my students about their lives and how they see the world. I'm fascinated by language and love to listen to their way of speaking, their use or misuse of the language. All of that helped me create Rennie as a contemporary, young man.

- 3. Did you do any research to write this novel?***

I think every novelist must do some research with every project. You want to make sure that you do not commit egregious errors of fact. For *The Accidental Native*, the research ranged from breast cancer to tenant laws in Puerto Rico. I also did a considerable amount of research on environmental issues.

- 4. The novel touches on the status issue in Puerto Rico. What is your own opinion on that?***

My view is similar to Rennie's at the end of the novel, although in my heart I feel Puerto Rico should be a sovereign nation. The present status is undeniably a colonial one that has become ineffectual and stifling. Puerto Ricans need to decide on one of the two viable solutions: statehood or independence.

5. You set several important scenes of the novel in different scenic locations of Puerto Rico. Why did you do this?

Several reasons. One, I felt that Julia wanted to teach her son the importance of connecting to the land. Two, the trips, as Rennie finally comprehends, were a way for his mother to connect with him. And I also wanted the readers, many of whom might not know Puerto Rico at all, to get a physical sense of the island.

6. How would you categorize your novel, generically speaking?

I'd rather not categorize it. But I must say that it has elements of the academic novel (such as *Straight Man* by Richard Russo or *Moo* by Jane Smiley), but it also has the makings of a satirical, political novel.

7. You made Marisol, Rennie's lover, older and Cuban. Were these conscious, intentional decisions on your part?

Intentional, yes. I liked the idea of Marisol also being a foreigner of sorts. Someone obviously assimilated to Puerto Rican culture who was still seen as an outsider. Making her older made their relationship more challenging to me as a writer. It presented issues and problems that complicated the story.

8. Your previous book is a collection of short stories. This is your debut novel. What did you learn from writing a novel?

The most important thing I learned is not to send your novel out to agents with a couple of revisions. Revision is crucial to anything you write, but a novel requires many drafts to get it right. You need to put it away and return to it with fresh eyes periodically.

9. Where did you get your inspiration for Julia's character?

As with most characters, certainly mine, they are composites of people—some real and others who inhabit my unconscious or imaginary world. I've been fortunate to know many strong, intelligent women in my life. So, it wasn't hard to draw from them to create Julia. I named her as a tribute to Julia de Burgos, the famous Puerto Rican poet.

Discussion Questions

1. What knowledge of Puerto Rico did you bring to the reading of *The Accidental Native*? What did you learn about the island and its people from reading it? What was the most surprising thing you learned?
2. The novel contains several flashbacks to Rennie's past life with his parents. Why do you think Torres put these in separate chapters? How did these separate chapters affect your reading of the story?
3. What does this novel say about "home?"
4. The theme of "finding the truth" runs throughout much of the novel. By the end, what truths have been found?
5. What is the significance of Rennie's problems with the Riveras, the squatters in his house?
6. Who *is* Jake Foley working for?
7. What do you think of Marisol's relationship with Rennie? Do you think they are right for each other?
8. Do you agree with Rennie's decision to get actively involved in organizing against the college? Would you do the same?
9. There are three funerals in the story. What does each one represent for Rennie and the narrative as a whole?
10. At the beginning of the novel, Rennie states that that the fantasy image of the island is different than the reality of living there. Do you feel the rest of the novel supports that assertion?
11. What do you think of Julia's decision to give up custody of her son? Could you see yourself in that position doing the same?
12. After reading this novel, what is your opinion on the political status of Puerto Rico? Should it be a state or independent?

Related Books of Interest

Ayala, Cesar J. and Rafael Bernabé. *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898.*

Braschi, Giannina. *Yo-Yo Boing.*

Cofer, Judith Ortiz. *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood.*

Delano, Jack. *Puerto Rico Mio: Four Decades of Change, in Photographs.*

Ferré, Rosario. *The House on the Lagoon.*

Llanos Figueroa, Dahlma. *Daughters of the Stone.*

Montero, Mayra. *Captain of the Sleepers.*

Sanchez, Luis Rafael. *Macho Camacho's Beat.*

Santiago, Esmeralda. *When I Was Puerto Rican.*

Map of Puerto Rico



Places and Events of Interest Cited in the Novel

La Parguera <http://www.laparguera.com/Aboutlaparguera.htm>

Las Cuevas de Camuy <http://www.puertoricodaytrips.com/rio-camuy-caves-park/>

Culebra <http://www.topuertorico.org/city/culebra.shtml>

Las Fiestas de Loiza <http://repeatingislands.com/2009/04/10/whats-on-our-nightstands-revisions-of-santiago-apostol/>

El Monumento al Jibaro <http://www.puertoricodaytrips.com/jibaro-monument/>

La Heladeria de Lares <http://www.puertoricodaytrips.com/lares-ice-cream/>

El Grito de Lares <http://www.elboricua.com/lares.html>

A Puerto Rican Menu for your Group Reading

Recipes for these dishes may be found in *Puerto Rican Cookery* by Carmen Aboy Valldejuli.

Appetizers

Alcapurrias (stuffed yucca fritters)

Guineitos verdes en Escabeche (Pickled green bananas)

Tostones (fried plaintains)

Soup

Caldo gallego (Galician sausage and greens soup)

Salad

Bacalao a la Vizcaína (shredded codfish with capers and olives)

Ensalada de aguacate y frutas frescas (stuffed avocado salad)

Main Dishes

Arroz con pollo (chicken with rice)

Albondigas con papas (meatballs and potatoes)

Camarones en cerveza (shrimp in beer)

Mofongo (mashed plaintains and pork cracklings)

Desserts

Flan (caramel custard)

Tembleque (coconut pudding)

Dulce de Mangó (mango dessert)

Beverages

Piña Colada

Cerveza (Medalla, if possible)

Café con Leche (Puerto Rican coffee: Crema, Yaucono, Pico; or Bustelo)