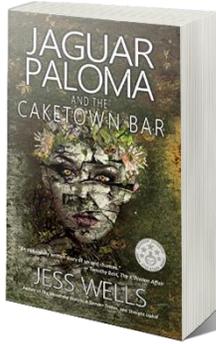


Book Club Guide for *Jaguar Paloma and the Caketown Bar* by Jess Wells



Jaguar Paloma and the Caketown Bar is a novel of historical fiction and magical realism set in 1865 in the southern shanty town of Tartatenango, or Caketown, a site of both mirth and mayhem. Cast-off mothers and their illegitimate children, traders, the itinerant, runaways and the Romany build a village around a vodka distillery, and a business hosting wild faux weddings for the lonely and the extravagant. Muleteers and boaters make the bar a regular stop for raucous fun, and monied women from afar drive their carriages in for another chance to party like a bride. As women discover that Caketown is a safe place, they move to the town, becoming bakers or professional bridesmaids while the village fills with men and women on their second chance.

They are led by Jaguar Paloma, an enormously tall woman unaware of her impact on weather and water, the fertility of animals, and the blooming of flowers, all of which change with her moods. Throughout the story, her despair brings droughts or oddly colored mold; her joy causes floods, and low-hanging blue fog. She falls in love with a muleteer but loses him to the road, marries a blacksmith but loses him to the army, becomes pregnant with twins by an Irishman recaptured by the Navy, finally rescued by her first love, the muleteer.

The co-founder of Caketown is Orietta Becerra, a breathtakingly gorgeous woman who keeps herself shrouded so that she is free from the downside of great beauty. She is the founder of the distillery, responsible for most of Caketown's prosperity, and she causes a rift with her best friend Paloma when she violates her own rules to use her beauty to secure loans. Orietta moves into Araca, the city across the tracks, and marries the town's mayor but must live a double life to run her business: shrouded at work, a beautiful bauble at home. The business is so successful that the mayor is convinced that it must be run by a man, and he becomes jealous of the 'man' who is now more powerful than him. The mayor first vows destruction of the mystery man's business, then of the entire town he came from, Tartatenango.

The happy shantytown also draws in a murderous forger specializing in the production of government bonds. Her work comes to the attention of the Rebel army, which embroils the entire village in dangerous activities, at the same time that the mayor resorts to increasingly deadly tactics to drive the residents away.

1. What are your favorite images in this highly visual book?
2. If you could have a *faux* wedding like the ones offered in Caketown, what would it be like? How many would you have? If you had it to do again, what would you change about your own wedding?
3. Would you want Old Man Orjuela at your wedding, or in your life? What would he say?
4. Do the consequences of Orietta's beauty still exist today?
5. Who are your favorites among Paloma's lovers and why?
6. Discuss the social situation of single mothers. Have you had any similar experiences? What do you think of the idea of 'paper and cake'?
7. The story dramatizes the links between twins and the strong connections between women. Have there been any examples of this in your life?
8. Have you read other writers in the [magical realism](#) genre?
9. The author imagines this, in part, as an homage to Gabriel Garcia Marquez and the women of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. What parallels can you draw between the two works?

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