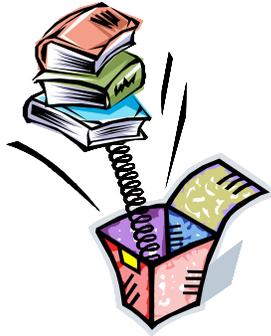


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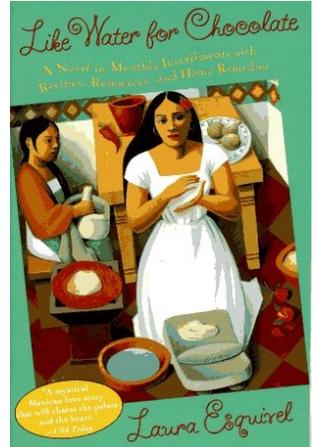


Book Club in a Box

LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE

About the Book

Earthy, magical, and utterly charming, this tale of family life in turn-of-the-century Mexico became a best-selling phenomenon with its winning blend of poignant romance and bittersweet wit. The classic love story takes place on the De la Garza ranch, as the tyrannical owner, Mama Elena, chops onions at the kitchen table in her final days of pregnancy. While still in her mother's womb, her daughter to be weeps so violently she causes an early labor, and little Tita slips out amid the spices and fixings for noodle soup. This early encounter with food soon becomes a way of life, and Tita grows up to be a master chef. She shares special points of her favorite preparations with listeners throughout the story.



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About the Author



The Mexican screenwriter and novelist Laura Esquivel (ehs-kee-VEHL), who became widely known for her first published novel, *Like Water for Chocolate*, was raised in a middle-class family in Mexico City. She received a teaching degree from the Escuela Normal de Maestros and spent eight years teaching before embarking on a career as a writer and director of children's theater and as a screenwriter. In 1985 she and her husband, the film director, producer, and actor Alfonso Arau, collaborated on a film project, *Chido One*, for which she wrote the screenplay. For this work Esquivel won a nomination from the Mexican Academy of Motion Pictures for the prestigious Ariel Award.

The novel *Like Water for Chocolate* was widely read both in Mexico and in the United States. Once again, collaborating with her husband, the author adapted the work for the screen several years later, a venture that was financially and criti-

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cally successful. In fact, the internationally acclaimed film was one of the highest grossing foreign films in the United States. Among the ten Ariel awards the film received, one was for Esquivel's screenplay.

Set in Mexico during the first half of the twentieth century, *Like Water for Chocolate* chronicles the life of the De la Garza family, which is headed by the domineering matriarch Mamá Elena. A cruel family tradition ordains that Tita, the youngest of three daughters, is forced to care for her mother to the end of her days and thus never marry. Relegated to the kitchen, Tita learns the secrets both of food and of love from the devoted family cook, Nacha, in a relationship that evokes the author's childhood memories of her grandmother's kitchen. Indeed, as this tale unfolds, the scenery changes from that of northern Mexico to that of San Antonio, which is reminiscent of Esquivel's own childhood, when she often traveled with her family to visit relatives in her mother's hometown of Piedras Negras and in San Antonio.

As the title suggests, *Like Water for Chocolate* is written in cookbook style. Each chapter begins with a monthly recipe for an authentic Mexican dish; all the recipes, purported to be from the author's own family collection, are interwoven in the text of the book. Often compared with Gabriel García Márquez, Esquivel imbues her story with the quality of a fairy tale that is populated with spirits, extraordinary events, and exaggerated plot lines. Food is an especially magical force, through which the repressed passions of Tita and other main characters are revealed as they live their lives "like water for chocolate," seething under the surface with sexual desire and rage.

In the foreword to the cookbook *An Appetite for Passion*, Esquivel comments, "I wrote my first novel with the intention of giving the transferring of love in the kitchen the appreciation it deserves. I am convinced, just as Tita is in my novel, that we can impregnate food with emotion, just as we can every other activity we engage in. When this affective charge is powerful, it is impossible for it to pass unnoticed. Others feel it, touch it, enjoy it. I find confirmation of that each day that passes."

After their collaboration on *Like Water for Chocolate* Esquivel completed two other screenplays for Alfonso Arau, from whom she was later divorced. The first, *Little Ocean Star*, was written for children. The second, unproduced one was based on Antonio Velasco Piña's 1987 novel *Regina*, about a female Christ. In the 1990's Esquivel began work on the novel *The Law of Love*, the screenplay of which she was commissioned to prepare for a film project with Robert Redford. Esquivel also agreed to do an original screenplay for the filmmaker Sydney Pollack.

The Law of Love appeared in 1996, a combination of science fiction and Magical Realism that relates the picaresque adventures of a twenty-third century "astroanalyst" searching her past lives for her lover and encountering Montezuma and a diabolical Mother Teresa along the way; the novel was accompanied by a music CD and full-color illustrations by Miguelano Prado in an at times incoherent but nevertheless bold attempt to fuse narrative with other media. In 2001, Esquivel returned to the novel proper with another magical story, a tribute to her dead father, *Swift as Desire*, which attempts to uncover the mystery of why the author-persona's parents, once deeply in love, eventually stopped communicating. Making this silence all the more poignant is the novel's protagonist, Julio (who is to become Esquivel's father), born with a gift for interpreting both the natural world and people's hearts. Esquivel traces his life from his miraculous childhood to his deathbed, where the daughter finally is able to communicate with him.

Marx, Joan F., and Marx Joan F. "Laura Esquivel." *Cyclopedia Of World Authors, Fourth Revised Edition* (2003): 1. *Biography Reference Center*. Web. 2 Aug. 2014.

Further Reading

If you liked *Like Water for Chocolate*, you might like:

Chocolat by Joanne Harris

Esperanza's Box of Saints by María Amparo Escandón

The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros

In the Time of the Butterflies by Julia Alvarez

The Mistress of Spices by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

One Hundred Years of Solitude by Gabriel Garcia Marquez

Stones from the River by Ursula Hegi

Under the Tuscan Sun by Frances Mayes

Discussion Questions

1. Talk about the three De La Garza sisters—Gertudis, Rosaura, and Tita. How do they differ from one another?
2. Do you consider Tita a strong or weak female heroine? Does she change by the end of the novel? If so, how? Or if not, why?
3. Describe the matriarch of the family, Mama Elena. Does the revelation later in the book about her own history alter your opinion of her?
4. What about Nacha? Both she and Mama Elena represent maternal figures for Tita. How do their maternal qualities differ?
5. What role does tradition play in this book? Is it always a negative role, as exemplified by Mama Elena? What might the author be suggesting about family or cultural customs in general?
6. Discuss the magical properties of food and cooking in this book. In what way is food a central metaphor in the novel—what does it represent? How does Tita use food—as a weapon? Or does she use it for solace, seduction, or healing? Is her use of it unwitting or purposeful? How does food affect the actions of various characters?
7. What does the title of the book refer to—and what is its thematic significance? How does the title relate to the internal passions of characters?
8. Follow-up to Question 7: Discuss the images of heat and fire (as a symbol of desire) found throughout the novel. How does heat affect different characters? Are heat and fire sources of strength...or destruction?
9. Different characters are plagued with illnesses in *Like Water for Chocolate*. What is the significance—psychological or symbolic or spiritual—of those physical ailments?
10. What role do spirits (ghosts) play in the novel?
11. Talk about what happens when Tita finally stands up to her mother's ghost.
12. Compare the two male figures—Pedro and John Brown. What is each of the men's relationship with Tita? Why does she make the choice she does?
13. What do Tita's and Pedro's deaths suggest about love? About their love in particular?
14. What is the significance of the narrator's identity. What does it mean that she is the one who tells the story?

<http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-fiction/8751-like-water-for-chocolate-esquivel?start=3>