

FIND ME

*in*

HAVANA

*a novel*

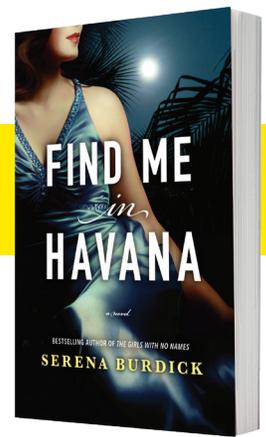
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE GIRLS WITH NO NAMES*

**SERENA BURDICK**



# Discussion Guide

## Q&A FOR *FIND ME IN HAVANA*



- 1) *Find Me in Havana* is a historical novel, but in what ways is it relevant to contemporary society? Are women treated differently now than they were then? If not, why? If so, how?
- 2) Written as a conversation between mother and daughter, which character resonated with you the most and why?
- 3) By the end of the book, Estelita has had several husbands. After so many marriages gone wrong, why do you think she continues getting involved with men who don't have her best interests at heart? How do these relationships impact how Nina views men?
- 4) The novel takes place in Cuba, Mexico and the United States. Where do you think Estelita considers her home to be? Where for Nina?
- 5) Why do you think Estelita's mother decided to go with her to America and to leave behind her other children in Cuba? What makes her relationship with Estelita different than with her other children?
- 6) After her mother's death, no one believes Nina when she says her mother was murdered. Why do you think no one would listen to her? Do you think the same thing would happen today?
- 7) For Estelita, music and singing is an outlet for her emotions. What are key moments in the book where singing is essential for her? How does singing change her life?
- 8) *Find Me in Havana* is based on the true events that happened to Estelita and Nina, as told by the real Nina to the author. Were there any questions about their story that you wish had been addressed in the novel? Does the true-story element add to your reading experience?

# Behind the Book

## *FIND ME IN HAVANA*

I first heard the story of Estelita Rodriguez, a 1950s Cuban Hollywood actress and singer, twenty years ago sitting at the kitchen table of her daughter's home in Big Sur, California. Her daughter, Nina Lopez, is the sister-in-law of my mother's childhood friend. Before that day, I had never met Nina, but within minutes she was telling me her mother's glamorous, outrageous and tragic tale, including being "discovered" singing at the Havana night clubs and getting her start at the Copacabana, multiple marriages—one to the movie star Grant Withers—Nina's kidnapping by her father and how her mother rescued her from Mexico City, their house arrest in Cuba under Fidel Castro, and finally, her mother's unresolved murder at the hands of an abusive husband.

I was riveted.

Back in Los Angeles where I was pursuing an acting career, my own mother and I began researching Estelita's life in what would cumulate into a screenplay we wrote together. Without internet, we scoured libraries for publicity records and newspaper articles and discovered that in the 1950s Estelita was the only female Cuban actress in Hollywood. She was signed to Republic Studios with the verbiage that since Lupe Vélez—a tragic Mexican actress who committed suicide four months pregnant—Hollywood hadn't had a real "Latin pepper pot," and Estelita Rodriguez "had just what it takes to step into the late Mexican star's shoes." She was tagged the Cuban Fireball, a vivacious and stunningly beautiful woman, a combination of Lupe Vélez and Carmen Miranda, with the acting ability of the former and the singing and dancing talents of the latter.

Twenty years ago, I couldn't believe Estelita's story hadn't been told. Two years ago, I decided it was high time it was.

Still in touch with Nina, I returned to California to interview her, this time with a recorder. Over croissants, in a brightly lit, modern kitchen, I heard in her voice the same desperation I had heard so many years ago. Time had not given her answers, or peace of mind. Nina Lopez is a seventy-year-old woman who still longs for her mother, and wants her story to be told. *The Night She Left Havana* is a tale of mother and daughter, a conversation, each telling her side of the story. It is a pursuit of truth and resolution and forgiveness. The book is fiction, timelines have been changed and a few characters invented, but I have stuck to the facts of Estelita's life and death.

Despite the elements of fantastic drama, Estelita's murder was a powerful motivator for my desire to give the world this book. In 1966, domestic violence was still considered a private family affair, and not seen as a violent criminal act by the American criminal justice system. Estelita had no support, and neither did Nina.

It's one daughter's story, but one I wholeheartedly believe, a story of male dominance over women who had no chance of speaking out for themselves. In putting Estelita back in the spotlight, in breathing life into her on these pages, it is my desire that she is in some small way avenged, and that her daughter, Nina, can in some small way finally make peace with her mother's death.

