



Beautiful Maria of My Soul

By Oscar Hijuelos

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"Savor the mysterious power of a master's *pentimento*." --*Los Angeles Times* "It takes a lot of nerve and skill to pull off something as rich as *Beautiful María of My Soul*, but pull it off Hijuelos does." --*Cleveland Plain Dealer* "I fell instantly in love with the glorious soul of *Beautiful María of My Soul*. Hijuelos has created and brought to life two beloved characters, a heart-stealing heroine and Havana during an epoch of changing fate." --Amy Tan, bestselling author of *The Joy Luck Club* In *Beautiful María of My Soul*, Oscar Hijuelos returns to the passionate tale he began twenty years ago in *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*. María is the great Cuban beauty who stole musician Nestor Castillo's heart and broke it, inspiring him to write the Mambo Kings' biggest hit, "Beautiful María of My Soul." Now in her sixties and living as an exile in Miami, María remains a beauty, still capable of turning heads. But while she left Cuba decades ago, she has never forgotten Nestor. As she thinks back to her days--and nights--in Havana, an entirely new perspective on the *Mambo Kings* story unfolds. *Beautiful María of My Soul* is a stunning act of reinvention, and another contemporary classic from an extraordinarily talented writer.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In a sequel of sorts to *The Mambo King Play Songs of Love*, Hijuelos examines the life of the muse of that novel as she moves from childhood to the fast lane in mid-20th century Cuba. María enchants whether she's dancing in clubs, appearing in advertisements, or walking the sweltering streets of Havana. Her story is one of fierce love, luscious sex, and otherworldly beauty, but also of heartbreak and hardness, as she carries painful memories of the death of her sister and her dear mother. The two main men in her life are Ignacio, a nefarious, strong-willed businessman who provides poor María with extravagant clothes and an apartment, and Nestor, a poor musician whom she loves passionately. Less prominent but still present is María's daughter, Teresa, and her growing up in America. Hijuelos's Havana is as much a full-fledged character as María as it endures the rise of Castro and the mass exodus of Cubans to Miami in the 1960s. An intelligent and playful ending caps off a vivid story that should delight readers of *The Mambo Kings* and enthrall those new to Hijuelos's imaginative and florid voice. (June)

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

Though *Beautiful Maria of My Soul* may not match the emotional depth of *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, critics generally considered Hijuelos's new novel a success. A seasoned storyteller, Hijuelos vividly evokes the vibrant lost world of prerevolutionary Havana, the Cuban Revolution, and modern-day Miami, and he audaciously inserts himself into the narrative's contemporary scenes to bring the story full circle—a device commended by the critics. However, Maria, defined by her appearance, fails to develop into a full-fledged character, and Hijuelos's relentless reminders of her extraordinary beauty and her effect on men grow tedious. Some readers may also object to the book's robust sexuality. Despite these complaints, *Beautiful Maria of My Soul* is a welcome expansion on the much-loved *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, as well as a finely written novel in its own right.

From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Hijuelos returns to his 1990 Pulitzer Prize winner, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, but this time he tells the story from the point of view of Maria, the young Cuban woman with whom Nestor Castillo fell in love and about whom he wrote the Mambo Kings hit bolero, "Beautiful Maria of My Soul." Maria is mostly offstage in the first book, remaining in Cuba after the Castillo brothers immigrate to New York and find success as the Mambo Kings. Here we learn that while the stunningly beautiful Maria, a featured dancer in Havana's pre-Castro nightclubs, did indeed dump Nestor, prompting his exit for New York, she, like him, spent the rest of her life remembering their time together. Yes, it is a story of grand passion found, lost, and mourned, but it is also the story of a young, illiterate girl escaping a life of rural poverty and making a career for herself in the city. Nobody writes sex scenes like Hijuelos—graphic and poetic at once, a symphony of lush language, both sweaty and transcendent—but he brings the same passion to his descriptions of Maria learning to read ("the way the letters of the alphabet arranged themselves in words and began to follow her everywhere"). The novel cools a little when Maria immigrates to Miami, but the story of Maria the mother and the survivor provides a fitting finale to her story's narrative arc. As with *Madame Bovary*, the life force fills Maria's passionate soul, but she also craves security ("Who will take care of me?"), and that hardheadedness is both her salvation and her tragedy. To fully appreciate this novel's wondrous language and its multifaceted story, it needs to be read in tandem with *Mambo Kings*; to do otherwise would be like listening to a symphony through only one speaker. --Bill Ott

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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