

Discussion Guide

The Murmur of Bees

By Sofia Segovia

This lyrical novel offers many paths to follow as you may learn about a different corner of the world and make connections to your own experiences. What follows are a selection of topics to explore. I often like to start with how a story is told and this novel in particular puts storytelling front and center.

Storytelling

The novel explicitly shares a perspective on storytelling in pages compared to owning your own story:

“Simonopio knew there were stories that one could read in books, with black words on white pages. He was not interested in those, because once printed they were indelible, unchanging. Each reader had to follow the order of words indicated in those pages exactly, until they each arrived inexorably at the same outcome.” (p. 145) and *“Being in possession of that story meant Simonopio could make endless changes, could add or remove characters as he saw fit and give them the traits of the people around him.”* (p. 146)

How does the writing style of *The Murmur of Bees* reflect storytelling? How did you find the non-linear pathways? Were they intriguing? Confusing? Poetic? What other novels have you read with non-linear storylines and how did the arc of those novels unfold?

How do you tell your own stories? Does a story you share about your day over the dinner table or to a colleague during a break differ in style from a story you might tell on a long drive?

Love of Family and Love of Land

Sofía Segovia shares that the novel explores both the love of family and the love of land. From Nana Rega losing her child and becoming a wet nurse to the brotherhood between Simonopio and Francisco, Jr., the family bonds are tight and loving.

What moments and descriptions best encompass love in your reading of the novel?

Memory

Explore how your memories change over time. In the novel Francisco Morales, Jr. muses:

“Memories are a curious thing: while I always felt fortunate to have a few photographs of my father, they ended up contaminating my memories of him, because I looked at them so much, they gradually replaced the flesh-and-blood man whose body had a smell, whose voice had a timbre, whose hair would ruffle, and whose smile, when he unleashed it, was more contagious than the flu.” (p. 437).

Does this is true? How have your memories been altered with the passage of time? When and how do you remember a photographed experience and when and how do you remember a moment for which you have never seen a photo? Are the qualities of the memory different?

Many people say that scent in particular can trigger memories, whether in the clothing of someone who has died, or in the aroma of something cooking that transports you back to your childhood. The narrator reflects that,

“Someone can tear open an orange nearby, and the aroma transports me to my mama’s kitchen or my papa’s orchard.” (p. 16)

Has this ever happened to you? What aromas bring forward the strongest memories for you?

Secrets



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In the end, Beatrix chooses not to ask Simonopia what happened on the day that her husband died and her son speculates on myriad reasons why she didn't, among them:

"And there were things that it was better not to know. We would leave in order to forget the bad things: the absences and the abandonments. We would go to remember just the good things. And in our ignorance, we would heal." (p. 430)

Have you ever felt that not knowing would help you move on better than knowing? Do you have memories of events that you heard about rather than experienced directly and wish you hadn't learned about them? When has knowing been beneficial and when has it been harmful?

Magical Realism

There is mysticism and magic woven into the fabric of daily life through the bees that follow and lead Simonopia, through Simonopia's mysterious disease that saves the family from contracting the flu during the pandemic, and through Simonopia and Francisco Morales Jr's ability to communicate clearly with one another. Many passages float lightly above reality.

The author says that she didn't think about magical realism as she was writing, that it "can't be attained when you plant it, it has to come or it feels contrived."

Reading [Vox's 11 questions you're too embarrassed to ask about magical realism](#) may provide you with some new perspectives on the depth and breadth of magical realism.

What is your reaction to this magical realism? Do you let yourself be immersed in it? Do you ignore or discount it? Have you read other novels that incorporate events that seem just past your periphery of factual? [Everyone Knows You Go Home](#), by Natalia Sylvester has an opening sentence that is one of my favorites of any novel:

"They were married on the Day of the Dead, el Día de los Muertos, which no one gave much thought to in all the months of planning, until the bride's deceased father-in-law showed up in the car following the ceremony." p. 1) which seems mystical to me. Do you experience magical realism in your life?

Growing Old

Aging and its effects on one's mind and body are shared through both narrators, most especially through Francisco, Jr.

"I'm made of everything that touched my senses during that time and entered the part of my brain where I keep my memories... I know a memory from reality, even if I grow more attached to my memories than to reality with each day." (p. 16)

And both Beatriz and Francisco Senior wonder about aging: *"not even in her old age would she allow herself to become anyone's shadow."* (p. 416)

"Francisco Senior wondered how long ago he had stopped doing the same thing: jumping higher than necessary without knowing how he would land or what consequences there would be." (p. 347).

"As a young woman, Beatriz had always reflected on how it would feel to grow old. She observed her mother — old fashioned, elderly, diminished, prudish—and wondered if a person woke up one day saying, This is the moment my old age begins. Starting today, my brain will stop tolerating new ideas, my taste in clothing will stop evolving, my hairstyle will remain the same forevermore, I will read and reread the novels that brought me pleasure in my youth with nostalgia, and I will let the next generation—whom I no longer understand because I only speak "Old"—make my decisions for me, because I have nothing to teach them anymore. I'll be company for everyone,



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but little more than that for anyone.” (p. 137)

How reliable is Francisco, Jr. as a narrator as he tells this story as an old man? How do you think isage and recollection have changed events or moments?

When do you think about aging? Do you remember jumping higher than necessary without knowing how you would land or what consequences there would be? Do you remember when you stopped doing that? Are there other actions that you stopped doing as you have aged? Do you recall when was the last time you performed some of those actions?

Death

Death is presented in all its humanity, with sorrow and grief and guilt and even humor in the story of Lázaro rising from the dead and the reflections the living have as they mourn their dead.

“Now they felt devastated, understanding—for the first time, perhaps, and firsthand—the true meaning of death: that there is no going back and that anything that was not said in time would never be said.” (p. 273)

Have you ever seen someone die? Is it a story you are willing to share? How do you remember those who have died? What comes to mind as you read the last part of the quote above that there is no going back and anything that was not said would never be said?

Pandemic

The 1918 pandemic forms the traumatic start to the novel.

“She might say, When we were girls, Mercedes and I would hide in a hollow in the trunk of a pecan tree so that her sister Luisa wouldn’t find us, but she refused to talk about the last time she saw her friend alive, much less about being unable to attend her funeral or about how that entire family disappeared from this earth in less than three days.” (pp. 85-86)

What did you know about that pandemic before reading the novel? What did you learn or feel reading the historical fiction account of the pandemic in Linares? Did you find any parallels to Covid-19?

Life Gifts

The novel closes with hope and with reflections on life gifts:

“while life offers no guarantees, sometimes it does offer gifts; and understanding that, accepting it even without being fully aware of it, the bitterness, the grief, and the deep wound of Beatriz Cortés, now the widow of Morales, began to heal, and her determined streak began to reemerge.” (p. 426)

“Tell them to walk in the shade. To listen with their eyes, to see with their skin, and to feel with their ears, because life speaks to us all and we just need to know and wait to listen to it, see it, feel it.” (p. 460)

What gifts do you feel life offers and where and when does healing occur?

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