



Swallowing Stones

By Lisa St. Aubin de Terán
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Introduction

Sprawling from one continent to the next, one revolution to another, *Swallowing Stones* is the fictionalized autobiography of Oswaldo Antonio Barreto Miliano, a veritable Zelig among revolutionaries. Oswaldo, codenamed Otto, was an advisor to Fidel Castro, a friend of deposed Chilean President Salvador Allende, a confidant of Che Guevara, and the husband of an Iranian aristocrat who was imprisoned for 19 years for leading a Kurdish rebellion.

Born in Venezuela to a right-wing, middle-class family, Oswaldo narrates the unlikely manner in which he became a Marxist guerrilla in this tour-de-force of literary ventriloquism as Lisa St Aubin de Terán recounts the many lives and loves of an extraordinarily charismatic man.

Questions for Discussion

1. What are Oswaldo's reasons for setting the record straight? How would you describe his tone, whether repeating the rumors that swirl about him, or when describing the details of each insurrection?
2. How does the strictly hierarchical and hypocritical society of Oswaldo's youth inform his communist/socialist sensibilities? When his faith in communism falters, why do you think he still, "went round in circles lugging a decaying ideology around"?
3. Consider his analysis of the Holocaust and the "German paradox." Do you agree that, "elements of the Holocaust have been initiated and carried out by other nations?" Discuss the role of individual choice in transforming an idea into action.
4. Whether the "whitewashing exercise" of the Allies in post-war Germany, or CIA involvement in the Chilean coup, what do you think of the narrator's historical perspective? What is the danger posed by revisionist history, of believing that "swatting mosquitoes in the tropics is a minor part of a bigger plan for the pursuit of comfort"?
5. How does chance play a central role in determining the direction of Oswaldo's life?
6. As Oswaldo combats the many ribald rumors generated by hometown scandalmongers he says, "There are no books in their houses yet their mouths are full of metaphors and venomous words." Is it possible that gossip is in some ways another emanation of the creative urge?
7. What are the five strands of Spanish conquest that are present in Latin America today? Do these elements, like the "correlation between cruelty and sugar," provide an explanation for the surreal aspects of Latin American life loosely termed "magical realism"?
8. In what manner do the words of a speech delivered while Oswaldo was still a schoolboy -- "who is he? Who sent him? Where does he come from?" -- resonate throughout the novel? When Oswaldo begins to ask *himself* those questions, is he able to answer?
9. "Keeping secrets is like *Swallowing Stones*," says Oswaldo, yet he refuses to discuss the torture he experienced while imprisoned. Why?
10. How are the novel's themes of ambiguity and contradiction, whether in love or in ideological conviction, reflected in Pablo Neruda's *Poem 20*, "I no longer love her, that is certain, but maybe I love her"?

About the Author

Lisa St Aubin de Terán is the award-winning author of several novels, a volume of poetry, a collection of short stories, and a memoir, *The Hacienda*, which was a *New York Times* Notable Book. She is the founder and managing director of the Teran Foundation (www.teranfoundation.org), a charitable organization that works to establish schools and farm projects in the north of Mozambique. She lives in Amsterdam.