

Daughters OF THE Stone

A NOVEL

DAHLMA LLANOS-FIGUEROA

PEN/
Robert W. Bingham
Prize
2010
Finalist

PRAISE

“Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa’s *Daughters of the Stone* sings as few novels can. It also tells us of a culture and nation that is underrepresented in our literature: Puerto Rico. And it does so with brilliant flourishes, in a narrative both gripping and intimate. Conveying a wide sweep of history, as witnessed by several generations of women, the book has the warmth of autobiography while sustaining a firm and stately control of technique and language.”

— PEN/ROBERT W. BINGHAM PRIZE 2010 FINALIST

“This first novel traces the lives of succeeding generations of Puerto Rican women from the 19th century onward. Though its ambitious historical narrative is reminiscent of the Latin American boom writers, it has a distinct personality of its own. In particular, I enjoyed its feminist perspective as well as the author’s tender loving care about language, a quality I find badly wanting in many a book published today.”

— OSCAR HIJUELOS

Pulitzer Prize winning author of *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*

“Rejoice! Here is a novel you have never read before: the story of a long line of extraordinary Afro-Puerto Rican women silenced by history. In *Daughters of the Stone*, Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa rescues them from oblivion and richly, compellingly, magically introduces them to literature—and to the world. ¡Bienvenidas!”

— CRISTINA GARCIA

Author of *Dreaming in Cuban: A Novel* and *Here in Berlin*

A lyrical powerful novel about a family of Afro-Puerto Rican women spanning five generations, detailing their physical and spiritual journey from the Old World to the New.

It is the mid-1800s. Fela, taken from Africa, is working at her second sugar plantation in colonial Puerto Rico, where her mistress is only too happy to benefit from her impressive embroidery skills. But Fela has a secret. Before she and her husband were separated and sold into slavery, they performed a tribal ceremony in which they poured the essence of their unborn child into a very special stone. Fela keeps the stone with her, waiting for the chance to finish what she started. When the plantation owner approaches her, Fela sees a better opportunity for her child, and allows the man to act out his desire. Such is the beginning of a line of daughters connected by their intense love for one another, and the stories of a lost land.

Mati, a powerful healer and noted craftswoman, is grounded in a life that is disappearing in a quickly changing world.

Concha, unsure of her place, doesn't realize the price she will pay for rejecting her past.

Elena, modern and educated, tries to navigate between two cultures, moving to New York, where she struggles to keep her family together.

Carisa turns to the past for wisdom and strength when her life in New York falls apart.

The stone becomes meaningful to each of the women, pulling them through times of crisis. Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa shows great skill and warmth in the telling of this heartbreaking, inspirational story about mothers and daughters, and the ways in which they hurt and save one another.

DAUGHTERS OF THE STONE



Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa

1 ARRIVAL

A gray braid falling over each shoulder, Tía Josefa stuck her head out of the window of Las Agujas, the embroiderers' cabin located just behind the main plantation house. The wagon returning from town swung around the main house and came to a final halt in the *batey* of Hacienda Las Mercedes, a sugar plantation near the northern coast of Puerto Rico.

She recognized Romero, the mulatto *mayoral*, sitting high next to the driver. His shadow crawled over the supplies that filled the wagon behind him. The man wore all black, even under the scorching sun. The brim of his black hat, tilted forward, hid his eyes, leaving only his pointy chin and beak of a nose visible. The bony shoulders under his black cape looked nailed to the blue sky beyond. He gripped his whip, handy, ready.

In her day, Tía had seen many black people come and go, but there had been no new ones in a long time. She knew Don Tomás had recently acquired a new *parcela* and needed more hands to work it into cane fields. One thing Tía knew for sure, where there was more work to be done, it would be black hands that would do it. So she stretched her skinny neck to take a good look at the men hoisting the monthly supplies—sacks of flour and rice, bolts of cloth, sides of smoked beef—out of the wagons.

Then came the rest of the cargo—frightened young boys, stone-faced men, and hesitant women. Almost as an afterthought, they poured out into the courtyard, brown and slow, like molasses, the human purchases of the day. Tía searched for Fela, the tall woman she'd heard about and couldn't put out of her mind. She was the last to descend, a young woman in her early twenties. There was something familiar about the girl. But Tía couldn't place it and was too drawn to the scene to think about it for very long.

There was much activity in the yard—men unhitching horses, curious children scurrying about, Romero assigning quarters to the new slaves. The young woman eyed her surroundings from her height of over six feet. The others were herded into the cabins that stretched out beyond the wagons. Fela began to follow when Romero, the overseer, blocked her way and pointed his whip to Las Agujas, where she would be living. The woman just stared at him.

"*Vamos, muévete,*" Tía Josefa heard Romero command "*¿Qué? ¿No me oyes?* Are you deaf as well as dumb, or just another stupid *negra sucia?*"

Fela examined him as though he were an unreliable animal. She didn't move. Romero stood directly in front of her and shouted his command into her face. But the woman Fela held her ground.

Never known for patience, Romero snatched his whip and swung it overhead. But his hand froze in midair, the whip swinging impotently in the morning breeze.

"*¡Maldita sea!*" he growled.

Fela still hadn't moved. She showed no sign of fear or even apprehension. Romero's arm remained frozen in position. He looked from his arm to the whip and back to his arm. Confusion and then rage twisted his face.

Finally, Fela turned and walked in the direction he had indicated. As soon as she moved away, his arm dropped. By the time the *mayoral* recovered from his moment of confusion, Fela was making her way up the slope that led to the main house.

Romero gathered himself to his full height. Adjusting his hold on the whip, he was about to advance on her retreating figure when a commotion suddenly filled the *batey*.

The horses had spooked and reared, toppling supplies that were still being unloaded. Bags of beans exploded under the trampling hooves. Sacks of flour burst into clouds of white, covering the yard in a layer of ghostly powder. Children ran. Men cursed. Drivers struggled to get the teams of horses under control. Frantic voices filled the air.

“¡Corre!”

Men ran to help.

“¡Mira, nena...!”

“¡Ven aquí!”

Women pulled children out of the way.

“¡Cuidado!”

Warnings rang out as huge containers toppled over and spilled corn meal, olives, and oil on those standing nearby.

“¡Ay, Dios mío...!”

A man was pinned under the weight of several huge sacks of rice.

Romero glared at the pandemonium and then back at the woman who was now beyond the whip’s reach. “¡Carajo!” he yelled.

He wound his whip and hooked it onto his belt. Before turning to the commotion, he propelled a long stream of spittle in the direction of Fela’s retreating figure.

As Tía watched this scene, her breath caught at the audacity of the young girl. She could almost feel Fela’s and Romero’s wills clashing in the air overhead and had braced herself for the outcome.

Fela approached Tía’s window and stopped just on the far side. For a moment, the old woman got a glimpse of the sadness that collected in the outer corners of Fela’s eyes and weighed them down. But immediately the girl’s face shut tight against the old woman. Her eyes, shiny as steel doors, were dressed in armor. Such stubbornness was familiar to Tía, like a long-forgotten melody of her youth. A finger of

cold fear crept into Tía's heart. She knew that a slave, any slave, would have to yield or be broken.

Tía wondered how long this young woman had been a slave and how much longer she would be able to stand so tall and distant. For black people, pride was a sin punishable by death.

The two women stood at opposite sides of the window as each examined the other. Tía went around to the door and motioned Fela inside, holding out her hand in welcome as the girl entered the room.

“Entra, entra m'hija.”

Fela walked in, squeezing by the older woman and avoiding her welcoming arms.

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Don Tomás, son of Don Aurelio and master of Hacienda Las Mercedes, stood at his second-floor rear window and watched the action below. The tip of his *cigarro* burned orange as he watched. He inhaled the acrid smoke, having noted the palpable tension between his overseer and the new woman. He'd heard the neighing horses and screaming women and Romero's curses. He took note of all the activity, but the tall black woman who walked away from it all with not as much as a halting step or a backward glance captured his attention. She never broke her stride, ignoring the danger coiled and growing inside Romero, moving on as if she lived on another plane altogether.

He had bought this woman because of her hands. The auctioneer said she had magic fingers, and his wife, Filomena, insisted she needed another woman in her *taller*. He had granted his wife's wish, barely glancing at the woman before paying the man and moving on with the rest of his more important purchases. But now, now he watched her as she towered over everyone, her back stiff and shoulders pushed back, breasts held aloft. She looked straight ahead as she made her way up the incline toward him, to Las Agujas, her torn rags barely covering her body. Despite her position, she carried herself with no less dignity than his wife in her silk and lace gowns.

Don Tomás drew on his cigar and let out a satisfying stream of smoke. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, slipped his hand down the front of his breeches, and let it linger there. He heard footsteps in the hallway and quickly adjusted himself before turning to face his approaching wife.

BIOGRAPHY

Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa was born in Puerto Rico and raised in New York City. She is a product of the Puerto Rican communities on the island and in the South Bronx. She attended the New York City public school system and received her academic degrees from the State University of New York at Buffalo and Queens College-City University of New York. As a child she was sent to live with her grandparents in Puerto Rico where she was introduced to the culture of rural Puerto Rico, including the storytelling that came naturally to the women in her family, especially the older women. Much of her work is based on her experiences during this time. Dahlma taught creative writing and language and literature in the New York City public school system before becoming a young-adult librarian. She has also taught creative writing to teenagers, adults, and senior citizens throughout New York while honing her own skills as a fiction writer and memoirist.

The 2009 hardcover edition of *Daughters of the Stone* was listed as a 2010 Finalist for the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize. Her short stories appear in the following anthologies: *Bronx Memoir Project*, *Latina Authors and Their Muses*, *Chicken Soup for the Latino Soul*, and *Growing Up Girl*. Dahlma's work also appears in various literary magazines such as the *Afro-Hispanic Review* and *Kweli Journal*. Since her retirement, Dahlma continues to dedicate herself to her writing, speaking engagements, and workshops. She resides in the Bronx with her husband, photographer Jonathan Lessuck.

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