
Thoughts Without Cigarettes: A Memoir

by Oscar Hijuelos



About the Book

The beloved Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist turns his pen to the real people and places that have influenced his life and, in turn, his literature. Growing up in 1950's working-class New York City to Cuban immigrants, Hijuelos' journey to literary acclaim is the evolution of an unlikely writer.

Oscar Hijuelos has enchanted readers with vibrant characters who hunger for success, love, and self-acceptance. In his first work of nonfiction, Hijuelos writes from the heart about the people and places that inspired his international bestselling novels.

Born in Manhattan's Morningside Heights to Cuban immigrants in 1951, Hijuelos introduces readers to the colorful circumstances of his upbringing. The son of a Cuban hotel worker and exuberant poetry-writing mother, his story, played out against the backdrop of an often prejudiced working-class neighborhood, takes on an even richer dimension when his relationship to his family and culture changes forever. During a sojourn in pre-Castro Cuba with his mother, he catches a disease that sends him into a Dickensian home for terminally ill children. The yearlong stay estranges him from the very language and people he had so loved.

With a cast of characters whose stories are both funny and tragic, **Thoughts Without Cigarettes** follows Hijuelos's subsequent quest for his true identity into adulthood, through college and beyond—a mystery whose resolution he eventually discovers hidden away in the trappings of his fiction, and which finds its most glorious expression in his best-known book, **The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love**. Illuminating the most dazzling scenes from his novels, **Thoughts Without Cigarettes** reveals the true stories and indelible memories that shaped a literary genius.

Discussion Guide

1. In his memoir, Oscar Hijuelos brings to life the locales that shaped his sense of self, from Morningside Heights to his

mother's hometown in Cuba and his glorious sojourn in Spain and Italy. Which neighborhoods, towns, or countries capture who you are? Where were your most important memories formed?

2. Thoughts Without Cigarettes describes a life that defies stereotypes. How did Hijuelos's youth compare to your assumptions about him?

3. Hijuelos describes his father's world of work, in an era when salaries were distributed in envelopes of cash and time off was a rare luxury. Later, his father seemed quietly surprised by his daughter-in-law's good salary in a white-collar job. How was Hijuelos's relationship to money different from his father's? How did they define rich and poor?

4. What did Pascual and Magdalena teach their sons about love and romance? How did Hijuelos's relationships, including his first marriage, reflect his evolving idea of who he was and his place in the world?

5. What sets this memoir apart from others you have read? How do Hijuelos's storytelling gifts, combining nostalgia with raw candor, make **Thoughts Without Cigarettes** read like a novel?

6. Hijuelos's novels are steeped in memory with characters who (like his parents) look back on their lives wistfully, sometimes haunted by a pivotal decision. What aspects of Hijuelos's best-known characters, the Castillo brothers from **The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love**, recur in the real-life figures of this memoir? How do the flashy César and the poet Nestor capture two sides of Hijuelos himself?

7. Discuss the role of food in the formation of memories. What are your most powerful childhood memories of food? How did it affect Hijuelos to be deprived of his mother's cooking? What other types of hunger did Hijuelos experience as a child?

8. Hijuelos vividly captures the cultural transformation of New York in the 1960s and 1970s as drugs and crime (and Columbia University construction projects) spread throughout his neighborhood. How did this cultural revolution make Hijuelos a better writer? How did this time and place compare to the village atmosphere where his parents had spent their youth?

9. How did Catholicism influence Magdalena's view of the world? What rituals, religious or otherwise, gave comfort to the other immigrants living in Morningside Heights?

10. Even after he was released from the Connecticut convalescent hospital, Hijuelos continued to feel isolated in school, among neighborhood boys, in his family, and eventually in college. How was he able to create such pitch-perfect renderings of the communities he did not feel welcomed by?

11. In many ways, Hijuelos's success beat the odds. What does his journey --- enduring a literary community rife with snobs and harsh critics --- say about the way creative talent is developed in America?

12. On the surface, Pascual and Magdalena seem to have a household that would never foster creative sons. Yet both Oscar and José follow unconventional career paths in the humanities after leaving behind stable careers in advertising and the military. How did their upbringing enable them to make these leaps of faith?

13. Which members of Hijuelos's extended family made a lasting impression on you? How was Oscar affected by being the namesake of a beloved uncle who had died tragically? What led Aunt Maya to finally let Pascual manage his own life? Would you have felt more at home with Magdalena's relatives or Pascual's?

14. Discuss the themes in **Thoughts Without Cigarettes** that echo throughout the author's fiction. Out of the Hijuelos novels you have read, which ones had the greatest effect on you?

Author Bio

Oscar Hijuelos, the son of Cuban immigrants, was in New York City in 1951. He is a recipient of the Rome Prize, the Pulitzer Prize, and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. His novels --- MAMBO KINGS, OUR HOUSE IN THE LAST WORLD, THE FOURTEEN SISTERS OF EMILIO MONTEZ O'BRIEN, MR. IVES' CHRISTMAS, EMPRESS OF THE SPLENDID SEASON and A SIMPLE HABANA MELODY --- have been translated into 25 languages.

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