

READER'S **GUIDE

About the Book

The Last Prince of the Mexican Empire is a meticulously researched, strongly felt, and vividly rendered novel from history. It tells a story that in its time was infamous, an international scandal, but ended up lost, reduced to a footnote – literally, in one accounting – to history. As the author explains in the Epilogue to the novel, "The Story of the Story," it grew from a "germ" so perfectly Jamesian that she couldn't have made it up if she tried. Having lived in Mexico City for several years and considering herself to be relatively well educated and informed, fluent in Spanish, Mayo came across a painting on the wall over lunch at someone's home, a portrait of a little English looking boy, cradling a rifle, with Chapultepec Castle in the background. When she asked, she was told that the subject is Augustin de Iturbide y Green, "the prince of Mexico." Astonished by her ignorance of that period in Mexican history and understandably intrigued by the notion of monarchy in the New World, she tried for several months to find out more, to no avail, until she was halfway through reading Jasper Ridley's Maximilian and Juarez and came upon the chapter, "Alice Iturbide":

My surprise at finding my own countrywoman, long ago, at the apex of the Mexican aristocracy – both antagonist and victim, motivated and blinded by who knew what medley of ambition, avarice, love, borrowed patriotism or naiveté – so intrigued me I knew at once I wanted to explore and expand the story into a novel.

The core story is that during the short lived Second Empire in Mexico, Emperor Maximilian and Empress Carlota take custody of the toddler son of a Mexican aristocrat and an American mother, grandchild of the first Emperor of Mexico, to be their heir presumptive. But in the way that novels have of doing, it took on a life of its own, and the story of two heartbroken parents trying to get their little boy back from a callous pair of Royals growing more unstable by the day as the French withdraw from Mexico and their Second Empire comes crashing down around them, grew into something much larger: an international story of political intrigue, war and diplomacy that plays out in Mexico City, Washington, D.C., England, Paris, and even Rome, that overlaps the U.S. Civil War and tells of the complex border politics between Mexico and the U.S., especially with the Confederacy, both before and afterwards. Most of all, The Last Prince of the Mexican Empire is a novel about the very question of what it would mean to be Mexican. Would the people of Mexico be subjects, or citizens? Just as important, however, we learn along the way how we historically, politically, and culturally share so much more with our neighbor to the South than we commonly think we do.

Lucky for us, Mayo decided that the only way she could get at this question was to tell "an emotional truth," and only the novelist has the tools to do that, to explore the emotions and motivations of the characters involved in the events of the narrative: the creative imagination and what Mayo calls the use of "armchair sociology." One such use is a fortunate consequence of her decision to tell the story from multiple points of view, including the multiple points of view among the characters about each other. They reveal

themselves through their interactions and gossip about the other characters, drawn from the letters, journals, diaries, and other materials Mayo spent years combing through and, best of all, we come to realize that some questions are ultimately unanswerable – the essence of good writing. Further, by recreating on the page the sights, smells and sounds of Mexico City, Cuernavaca, Georgetown, Paris, and the novel's other settings, both outside and inside, Mayo is not just painting a backdrop against which the characters play out the drama. Rather, she creates a "virtual reality" for the reader to stroll about in, to see things as the characters perceive and experience them, including what they wear, where and why they wear it, how they behave, and what they talk about, all of which serve to carry the narrative. Our noses tingle from the dust in Doña Juliana's parlor that coats the knick knacks on the shelves, each of which tells us something about her personal and political history. We positively taste Alicia's strawberry pies, for which she is famous, which remind us of her personal history and values, and reinforce the bicultural nature of her marriage and relationship with her husband. Finally, by enabling us to see her characters within their particular worlds, both public and private, to hear what they are saying and how they are behaving about and to one another, we empathize with them, create our own versions of them, and draw our own conclusions about them, to better understand the larger and essential meanings of the narrative.

About the Author

C. M. Mayo was born in Texas in 1961 and grew up in California. Having written since she was a child, Mayo wanted to start taking her writing seriously when she was in her early 20's, but didn't know how to proceed. She did study for a summer under Paul Bowles, in Morocco, but after coming back found herself still baffled by "how to go about being a writer," not to mention a little intimidated by the "jumping off into the abyss" images of how she would make a living as a writer. So she took the more practical path, earning her Master's Degree in economics from the University of Chicago in 1985, where she met her husband, a prominent Mexican economist. After moving with him to Mexico City, she taught international and development finance in both the undergraduate and the MBA programs at ITAM, a private university, and (as Catherine Mansell Carstens) published two books on finance, before turning to literary writing:

"I realize now that it's tricky to start writing serious fiction until you are in your 30's, anyway. I think that you have to settle down, and have a sense of compassion for other people, which is what you really need to flesh out fictional characters. Most people in their 20's are about "me" and to write fiction, you have to come from a more spiritual place than that. And that just takes a little time. So I went into economics, which has its fascinating aspects, but for me, alas, not enough of them. When I turned 30, I decided it was time to fish or cut bait: if I wanted to be a writer, I had to start taking that seriously. I did some research, and found some good writers conferences to go to, and just took it from there. One really does have to educate oneself as a writer, and it's not always easy or obvious as to how to go about doing that; certainly it helped that I was a little bit older."

C.M. Mayo started by writing short fiction, and her first book, *Sky Over El Nido*, won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. Her second book, *Miraculous Air: Journey Of A Thousand Miles through Baja California, the Other Mexico*, is a widely-lauded travel memoir. It was written at a time when Mexico was going through a major political crisis. She undertook it to try to come to understand Mexico better, "when all I wanted to do was to leave." An avid translator of contemporary Mexican literature, Mayo is founding editor of *Tameme Chapbooks ~ Cuadernos*, and has also edited the anthology *Mexico: A Traveler's Literary Companion*, a portrait of Mexico in the fiction and literary prose of 24 Mexican writers.

Her other awards include three Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Awards and three Washington Writing Awards, most recently for her essay about a visit to Maximilian's Italian castle, "From Mexico to Miramar or, Across the Lake of Oblivion," published in the *Massachusetts Review* (also available online at cmmayo.com/publications). Mayo currently divides her time between Mexico City and Washington, D.C.

Interview with the Author

You started writing with short fiction, followed by your memoir of Baja California, *Miraculous Air*. Did it serve as a transition into the novel, and such a massive undertaking, at that?

Definitely, especially with narrative structure, a huge issue for me as a writer. Before the travel memoir, I had written two books on finance, which helped me learn how to structure a book length argument and, well, to just keep plodding away at it! The travel memoir has a much more complex structure, and then of course, the novel has an intricate, even labyrinthical structure. So with each book, I think I have progressed in terms of mastering structure. At least I hope I have. And of course *Miraculous Air*, in recounting a series of journeys through "the Other Mexico" that explores its independence from and connections to mainland Mexico, is a kind of meditation on Mexico itself.

I wanted to ask you about your decision to structure the novel by specific calendar days. Was that an organic outcome of the creative process, or did those dates correspond to historical events?

Yes, in most cases they corresponded, but the structure of the novel is that the opening three chapters, Book One, are set in a certain time period but not on a particular day. The same can be said of Book Three. But the bulk of the novel, the eighteen chapters that comprise Book Two, has a very different structure. Each chapter is set on one specific date, beginning with "September 17, 1865: The Prince Is in the Castle", when the secret contract between Maximilian and the Iturbide family has begun, and ending with "October 25, 1866: The Road to Orizaba", the date on which Maximilian, in writing the

letter releasing the child to his parents, breaks the contract. In sum, Book Two is the life of the contract, and though we have multiple flashbacks and flashforwards, it has a linear, tick-tick-tick, structure. But there is a second reason why each chapter corresponds to one day: the novel not only has multiple points of view, it's a transnational international story – we have the French army, we have the Austrian aristocrats, we have Americans, we have Mexicans, and Belgians, and Hungarians and Queen Victoria and the Pope... it's complicated! And I realize, it would be challenging beyond reason for the reader to follow who's who and what's what without an anchor. That anchor is the date. And there is a third reason: to emphasize the long lags between events and news of those events. In Mexico, for example, people would learn about things that had happened in Europe weeks, even months earlier. As the telegraph developed and the trans-Atlantic Cable was laid in 1866, the news speeded up. But compared to our world, it was so very slow and affected – sometimes tragically– some of the characters's decisions. This is a recurring theme in the novel.

You have said that this novel is about what it means, or meant to be, a Mexican. Could you elaborate on that?

The Second Empire was the assertion by the French, the Catholic Church, and a group of Mexican conservatives that Mexicans should be subjects. On the other hand, the Juarista response – ultimately victorious – was that, no, Mexicans are citizens. Citizens of a Republic. There is a fundamental difference between being a subject and being a citizen. The former requires obedience while the latter calls for participation. I could go on. But more than that: Maximilian, for instance, genuinely saw himself as Mexican, whereas any modern Mexican would probably roll their eyes and huff, "how ridiculous!" Maximilian was an Austrian aristocrat, imposed by a foreign army. Yet let's not forget, in fact there were many Mexicans who welcomed and supported him. So, what it is to be a Mexican is in part a cultural question, but it's also a political question, as in "Who says?" So if you're a person from Czechoslovakia living in Mexico, are you Mexican? In part that's a legal question, depending on your documents, and it's also a cultural question. Modern Mexico is incredibly diverse. I know of people who are 4th generation Mexicans who have English names and consider themselves ethnically English. We also have many indigenous peoples, some of whom who don't speak Spanish. There are Russian and Polish Jews, a large Lebanese community, Italians, French, Irish, Cubans, Guatemalans. In recent years an increasing number of U.S. citizens have moved down to Mexico and become naturalized Mexican citizens. In sum, Mexico is more complex and diverse than many Americans perceive.

You have said that this very brief, three year period, going on at the same time as our Civil War, was a crucial turning point in Mexican history. How so?

This is the story of the defeat of an idea: the monarchy. Today Mexicans are not subjects but citizens. Let's not forget, one hundred fifty years ago, the monarchical form of government, while not universally, was widely accepted. This period in history is also significant because, though Mexico has had a long history of foreign invasions, and this was the ugliest of all. It was massive and brutal, and though strenuous efforts, it was

defeated. This is why Cinco de Mayo, the commemoration of the battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862, is so important to Mexicans. It was not a definitive defeat of the French – only a temporary one, it turned out, for the French regrouped and took Puebla a year later. However, it was powerfully symbolic. That the rag-tag Army of the Republic of Mexico could humiliate the French Imperial Forces, then considered the greatest in the world, was no small thing. It was David slingshotting Goliath: an international sensation.

What about the issue of church and state? Was that part of the Republican movement?

It would be difficult to overstate the power of the Church in Mexico at that time. Just in Mexico City, when you see how much real estate they owned, and how much money the Church had, it is really jaw-dropping. And they also owned huge haciendas worked with slaves. So that was a continuing issue throughout the 19th century in Mexico – how much power does the church have, and how much the state? The Church supported Maximilian and the French invasion in part because the Republicans had confiscated Church property. It turned out, however, that Maximilian did not reinstate the Church's properties. It just wasn't feasible. But this remained a source of friction between Maximilian and the Church. Another was that Maximilian was a little too liberal for the Church; among other things the Church objected to, he wanted to encourage immigration from the ex-Confederacy and from Europe, and he was willing to accept (gasp!) freedom of worship for Protestants. In sum, though the Church supported the Mexican Empire, it had its own interests and they did not invariably align with Maximilian's.

Tell us about "falling into the eggplant patch." This is a Mexican expression used in the novel which might apply to your difficulties in researching this novel.

On its face, this is a confusing story. Why did Maximilian take the little boy away from his parents and exile them? And why did the parents, at least initially, agree to this? To answer these questions we have to first, understand the social and political context at the time, and second, get beyond our common understanding of the meaning of a family. Many historians talk about Maximilian's "adopting" the little boy, but that is not quite the right word. Maximilian understood it as more or less analogous to the relationship between Louis Napoleon, the Emperor of France, and the Murat Princes. And in this day and age, for heavensakes, who remembers the Murat princes?! But if you don't know who they were, it's very difficult to understand what Maximilian was thinking. Basically what he was saying was, I grant the Iturbides the status of Highnesses and as such they join my house. So he did not think of the child as his own but rather as a kind of cousin—a member of an extended family under his leadership and protection. It's that concept that's very difficult to understand with a 20th-21st century mentality. And to add to the confusion, many people who were close to Maximilian at the time were themselves quite flummoxed.

The second reason why it was difficult to tell the story is that the period itself is incredibly complex. In fact we cannot consider it "Mexican" history so much as it is transnational history. Why did French invade Mexico? Why did the Church support this? Why did the Kaiser of Austria allow his younger brother go? Who was Maximilian's

wife, the Empress Carlota? She was the Princess of Belgium and the first cousin of Queen Victoria. And both King Leopold of the Belgians and Queen Victoria had plenty to say about Mexico. England had many important businesses in mining and textiles and so on, so the British Ambassador was an important figure in Mexico, and in any event, what Queen Victoria thought of all this was vital to all concerned. And of course the United States were scheming to get the French out of Mexico, plus there was the business of the Confederacy and its relationship to Mexico. So it was an extraordinarily complex period.

A third reason: for many Mexicans the period is politically embarrassing. It's easier to say, well, these were foreign invaders, and we repelled them – a truth that is not the whole big, messy, and oh-so human truth. To take one of many examples, there is a museum in Mexico City of the Mexican equivalent of the Secret Service. But are there photos, uniforms, or arms of any of Maximilian's Palatine Guards in there? Not on your life! So you see, there are many stories that have been hidden or buried.

Finally: when I looked at the main works on the Second Empire what I found about the little prince, Maximilian's the arrangement with the Iturbides, was really peculiar. In the memoirs of those who had been close to Maximilian or in Mexico City society at the time, the affair was barely mentioned, or garbled in the strangest ways. For example, Sara Yorke Stevenson's otherwise excellent memoir crammed the whole story of the prince into a brief footnote near the end. I found this especially strange because she would have known the family socially, and she knew General Bazaine. The Juarista versions of things one has to take with a truck-load of salt – let's not forget, they were at war with the Empire, and they did not hesitate to use malicious rumors as weapons (for example, that Maximilian supposedly had syphilis). Also, various memoirists claim that the father of the prince was dead or that the mother had been married to someone else or that the child was older– all wrong. It was as if there was this matter those close to the court just didn't want to acknowledge– there was some sort of cognitive dissonance going on. The affair with the Iturbides was of course, a painful embarrassment for both Maximilian and Carlota, both personally and politically.

You had to research this novel all over the world, for several years, just to put the story together. At what point did you start writing, creating scenes, "hearing voices" so to speak as characters became real to you?

After a few years of flailing about, the novel suddenly started coming together with "November 23, 1865: The Charm of Her Existence," the chapter now in the middle of the novel when Alicia goes to Paris, and appeals to John Bigelow, the U.S. ambassador to France, for help. It's written in John Bigelow's point of view. I was only able to write this chapter after delving into his papers at the New York Public Library. It took me a while to realize that there is no single character that can carry the novel; by necessity, it had to be written in multiple points of view. The novel has this Roshomon quality, that is, we go back and see the same story– Alice, frantic with grief, returning for her child and instead of finding compassion, she ends up under arrest– from various points of view, each one a completely different lens, a very different interpretation. Bigelow's couldn't be more

different than Maximilian's, or say, Frau von Kuhacsevich's or Princess (Pepa) Iturbide's or, for that matter, a vacationing Prussian count's or the Scottish bookshop owner's in Paris. Writing this chapter from Bieglow's point of view was so liberating: oh, you know, I can do this!

But about the multiple points of view. Usually when you see multiple points of view it means that the author has lost control of the narrative, or doesn't know what she is doing. The author is asking a lot of the reader when she uses multiple points of view. But what I realized was that the main character, the last prince of the Mexican Empire, is not a person so much as an idea, the living symbol of the future of the Mexican Empire.

As for hearing voices, yes, that happens at all points. It's startling sometimes, but also quite normal when writing fiction. I don't hear voices as if they were coming out of a radio; rather, a sort of vague nudge, like remembering a line of dialogue.

So it sounds like you did start work on the novel before finishing the research.

Yes, and in fact, I had a complete draft of the novel when I suddenly realized that of course, the educated people of that time and particularly Maximilian would have seen everything through the lens of classical antiquity. I hadn't emphasized quite as much as I should have, so I brought in some more Tacitus and Cicero and Augustus, and so on. And even as the book was in its final stages, I was able to splice in some bits and pieces (and corrections) thanks to Dr Konrad Ratz's splendid and very recently published work on Maximilian, *Tras las huellas de un desconocido* (In the footsteps of an unknown), which relies heavily on his original translations from various German language documents.

I should note that Dr Ratz' also translated and edited a collection of letters between Maximilian and Carlota. Anyone who reads these letters will see that their relationship was very different than that painted in most of the histories. To be sure, their relationship had its challenges, but Maximilian and Carlota did deeply love and respect one another. With so many letters over such a long period, this becomes clear.

But what was going on between them? The novel is full of gossip and rumors, and at one point, there is the blatant suggestion that Maximilian was homosexual. And we learn that Maximilian and Carlota do not have a physical relationship, much to Carlota's frustration. Or was he asexual?

The answer I prefer is that we will never know. When you work as a novelist, you try to put yourself into the place of your characters and imagine what it must have been like for them. In that spirit, I do think it is pertinent to note how young they were (he was in his very early thirties, she was only 25), and how intense the pressure they were under, constantly, with never a moment of privacy, ever. They were in great danger; there were assassination attempts. People around them died of yellow fever, a kind of hemorrhagic fever, one of the most ghastly ways to die. And add to that the fact that Maximilian was

plagued with diarrhea, pains in the liver, fevers, malaria. And as everything began to collapse around them, they were both suffering unbelievable stress. His health collapsed and, famously, while visiting the Pope in the Vatican in 1866, Carlota had a psychotic breakdown from which she never recovered. Well, but going back to the times in Mexico: this sort of pressure would have dampened anyone's interest in sex, no?

But the fact is that Maximilian and Carlota had been married for several years before they came to Mexico, and apparently they thought they never would have children. In the novel, Alice, the mother of the prince, has her pet theories— which by the way, are based on an actual interview she gave to Bigelow when he visited Mexico City in 1882. For those who haven't yet read the novel, I don't want to give it away here, but I will say, it's spicely! And she's a source much closer than most. That said, who knows? There is endless gossip. People will believe what they want to believe. The whole novel has this house-of-mirrors quality. That was my intent.

I know that John Bigelow is one of your favorite characters, but how about the whole cast? Do you have personal feelings about them one way or the other at this point?

Alice / Alicia was not an easy character; in my first drafts I was too hard on her. It's easy to condemn her for giving up her son to Maximilian, but who hasn't been "a little dazzled maybe," as she put it, about it something, some time? She had a both adventurous and tenacious spirit and yet, she was so young and naive. Also, she was under enormous pressure from a very powerful personality: her older sister-in-law, who had a great deal to gain from the arrangement with Maximilian. Maximilian, well, over the years, I feel I made enormous strides in trying to understand him, but at some level I've lost patience with him. He was so wrapped up in appearances. You can see that in his handwriting. And by the way, I did go to books on graphology to try and understand many of these characters, because my research was all with handwritten documents. While Alice's handwriting is forward-slanting, spikey, rhythmic, Maximilian's looks almost like Arab calligraphy with all these sweeping backward loops. It's gorgeous, but it must have taken him twice the time it would take anyone else to write anything! Though his less formal notes devolve into something rather like Alice's handwriting, now that I think about it.. Angelo's handwriting was over-large; Carlota's (before her break down) rigidly neat.

I had a lot of fun with the minor characters. Frau von Kuhacsevich is just the total id, you know? And Baron d'Huart at once so petulant and sunny, always alert to beauty and flavor... Lupe the runaway nanny, this sort of lost lamb. In sum, I feel affection for all of the characters; there is a little piece of me in all of them. That is part of the fun of writing a novel. You have to ask yourself, have I ever felt that way? Maybe you don't approve of a person who felt that way, but have you ever, even just a little bit, felt that way yourself?

When you have been asked why, after all this research, you decided to write this story as fiction, you have said that you wanted to tell an emotional truth. Could you elaborate on that?

Why Maximilian and Carlota came to Mexico, why Maximilian took the Iturbide child and why the Iturbides agreed to sign his contract are all questions impossible to answer without an understanding of their personalities and motives. Put another way, these are all matters of character and emotions, and for this kind of exploration the novel, as a form, is unsurpassed. I think of the form as a kind of vivid dream or, to use a more modern term, "virtual reality"— it allows you to experience what it would be like to, say, come into the parlor and sip ginger tea and pass around a *carte-de-visite*; dance at a ball; push through a cheering crowd; smell of the razorsharp air in a pine forest. And this very vividness is what invites people, I hope, to feel more empathy with the people in this time, this place, and caught in these situations. I'm not saying I want the reader to approve of any of this, but to come into the experience of it, and so understand it all a little better. Put another way, the novelist has more tools to engage the reader.

One of the tools you use to engage the reader is with the upstairs downstairs interplay. You say that you researched these people sociologically -- the nurses, the bodyguards, the cooks -- but that they are made up. How did this interplay help you to tell an emotional truth?

Once I realized that this was a novel about an idea— the last prince not as a person but as the living symbol of the future of the Empire— and that therefore it had to be told from multiple points of view, I realized that I had to have some character or characters, beyond John Bigelow, who were opposed to Maximilian. And I didn't want to go to a higher level, someone like President Benito Juárez himself, because that would have made the novel unmanageably big. But I needed a Mexican character who was opposed to the empire and who was, in some way, going to interact with the other characters. And it made sense that it might be someone who was working as a guerilla, who might be a bandit, and the wonderful thing of making him a bandit is that I could have him take on the nanny, who runs off when the Iturbides leave Mexico City. Another wonderful thing about choosing a bandit is that I could take the action to Rio Frio, a place on the highway in the mountains between Mexico City and Puebla where bandits often attacked the stagecoaches. A true and absolutely devastating embarrassment for Maximilian — mentioned in all the histories of the empire — was the murder of Baron Charles d'Huart, the Belgian envoy and close friend of Carlota's brother of the Duke of Flanders, at Rio Frio. This story is told in the chapter "March 4, 1866: Rio Frio" and (in Maximilian's flashbacks) "July 10, 1866: One Stays the Course".

Why do you think we in the United States are generally so ignorant about our immediate neighbor to the South?

There are constellations of reasons, and everyone, including our most celebrated PhDs in Mexican Whatever, is to some degree ignorant, for no one can know everything! But I prefer to flip the question and ask, why are people in other countries so ignorant about the United States? Is it arrogance? Laziness? Cowardice? Other priorities? Cognitive dissonance? This is a many-faceted question and for each individual at each moment in time, the answer can change. So, coming back to Mexico, *The Last Prince of the Mexican*

Empire is a story to open your mind, however closed, however open it may already be. Come in and hear all about it!

What are some of the things you want the reader who accepts your invitation "to come on in and hear all about it" to discover?

First, that the prince's mother was not only an American, but an American from very prominent family in Washington society– the aristocracy of her time and place. She was the granddaughter of the Revolutionary War General Uriah Forrest and she was also descended from Maryland's Governor Plater, major figures in their time. So it shouldn't be a surprise that she had the wherewithal to get up what was truly an international scandal over Maximilian's refusal to return her child. And though his novel takes place mostly in Mexico and in Europe, this is very much an American story. It was only with the U.S. embroiled in its own Civil War that France dared to invade Mexico. And later, after the Confederates surrender, without the support of the United States, it would have been a far tougher battle for the Juaristas to retake Mexico.

Second, this is a story of foreign intervention. I was working on this novel when our government invaded Iraq, and most of the people opposed to this brought up the specter of Vietnam. But it seems to me that a more apt comparison would have been to the French in Mexico which, alas, most Americans know little if anything about.

Finally, this is a novel about compassion and forgiveness.

If there is any one thing that you want the reader to take away from this novel, what would that be?

That there are infinite layers of complexity. And that every time we hold a candle to the past, we also illuminate the present.

Questions for Discussion

What was your immediate response to this novel? Have you ever visited Mexico? How much about Mexico did you know, or think you knew, before reading this novel? How and in what ways did this novel add to or change your impressions and knowledge of Mexican history and culture?

How would you describe the tone and style of this novel? What did you enjoy most about the novel?

Do you agree with the author's decision to tell this story as fiction? Discuss the pros and cons of her reasons for doing so, including her contention that novelists are, or should be, "armchair sociologists." What do you think she means by that? What do you think she means by wanting to tell "an emotional truth?"

The author says that the main character of the novel is an Idea – the Idea being the future of Empire in Mexico, so she had to tell it from multiple points of view, which she thinks is asking a lot of the reader. Did you find that to be so? How satisfied were you with her structure of organizing Book Two of the novel around dates delineating the life of the contract between the Iturbides and Maximilian? Do you think she succeeded in making the multiple points of view easier for readers to follow by using that structure?

Discuss the way the author uses gossip and rumor (all of which is historically accurate, from her meticulous research) to tell her story. What do you think she wants the reader to conclude from its use?

Who are your favorite characters in the novel? Why? Which ones are the most interesting to you, and why? How and why, or why not, did you identify with any of them? Why do you suppose the author would say that there were things about Alicia that she could relate to?

What were your initial impressions, or opinions about, Maximilian and Carlota? If they changed or evolved as the novel progressed, identify and discuss one or more scenes from the novel that changed your point of view about them. Do the same exercise for Alicia and Angelo Iturbide, and Pepa.

Why do you think the Iturbides entered into the contract with Maximilian to grant him custody of their son, Augustin? Discuss from the points of view of all members of the family. Why do you think Maximilian and Carlota wanted to take custody of him?

When the author describes this novel as "an American story," what does that mean to you? Do you agree with her? Why, or why not, as the case may be?

If you could talk with the author, what are some questions that are unanswered in Book Three and the Epilogue you would want to ask her about?

This novel is remarkable in its attention to the accurate, historical detail of daily life – how people dressed, what they ate, where they lived, how they entertained, how the table was set for a state dinner, the protocol for lunch, the social structure in a bandit's lair, and more, much like the HBO mini-series, John Adams. If you were producing a movie or mini-series version of this novel, who would you cast in the major roles?