



## Sirena Selena Vestida de Pena

*Mayra Santos-Febres*

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## **Sirena Selena Vestida de Pena** Mayra Santos-Febres

According to Puerto Rican author Mayra Santos-Febres, theorist, poet, and award-winning writer, "for many years the Caribbean has been a desire factory for the rest of the World.[.]," thus her writing seeks to "include those issues considered exotic and reveal them as a different kind of knowledge: there is laughter, joy, a way of imagining desire and experiencing the body differently that is unique. There is where I place myself, because I do not want to be anything but Caribbean." The result is one of the most original and powerful voices in contemporary Latin American fiction. Not surprisingly her first novel explores the world of Puerto Rican drag queens. *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* ("Syren Selena, dressed in sorrow" might be a fair translation) tells the story of the title character -Sirena Selena- and his/her Puerto Rico drag queen cabaret-owner mentor -Miss Martha Divine- as they travel, glamour and all, to the still chaste Dominican Republic to present his/her bolero singing drag performance. The author imbues the main character with the enigma of seduction, both beautiful and monstrous, and what could be considered an opposition between Truth and Reality. Leocadio, formerly a drug addicted child -owner of an extraordinary bolero singing voice- has been rescued from the streets of Puerto Rico and transformed by his rescuer into Sirena Selena, the mesmerizing trans vestite singer-entertainer, both characters setting their respective hopes in making a fortune to escape a haphazard life. To Martha Divine the child must "become who she really is," a Caribbean bolero singing drag queen, because the only way she will be able to harmonize his/her interior and exterior self is by being reborn as the diva Sirena Selena. Ironically truth and harmony stem from the bifurcated nature of a mythical figure -half human, half monster- unstoppable in its seduction. The tragic aspect arises from Sirena Selena's awareness that his/her attraction resides equally in the awesome perfection of her presence and in the knowledge that it is merely a performance, the dramatization of a gender identity that simultaneously is and is not essentially hers. The fluent and musical Spanish prose of *Sirena Selena* constitutes a rare reading pleasure on many different levels, including that of the casual reader who, like the audience in the cabaret, will succumb to the mysterious and seductive divas, as well as on a level of sharp literary critique that will find in the identity creating "protectress" a twin soul in the process of concealing desires under layers of quotes and counter-quotes. In this edition the foreword by prof. Debra A. Castillo discloses these clever mechanisms, while her footnotes help readers to enjoy this intelligent and intrinsically poetic text.

## **Sirena Selena Vestida de Pena Details**

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## From Reader Review Sirena Selena Vestida de Pena for online ebook

### Mrs. Luettchau says

This book did not meet my expectations. I thought it had great potential, but compared to other LGBTQ books I've read, it falls short. The lyric prose and poetic descriptions was an enjoyable part of the read, but the fractured nature of the text and the constant switching of characters' names made it difficult to follow.

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### Cristhian says

(Ésta va en español)

¿Saben cómo, dentro del imaginario colectivo gay, muchos de nosotros tenemos la imagen de RuPaul como LA drag queen? En parte, claro está, por la fama mundial que ha alcanzado debido al reality que gira en torno de la búsqueda de nuevas reinas en Estados Unidos. Ciertamente, esa percepción de la cultura drag en un entorno latinoamericano se queda muy corta puesto que muchas veces tendemos a idealizar el producto extranjero y menospreciar el producto nacional/regional.

En este sentido, "Sirena Selena vestida de pena" arroja un rayo de luz a la cultura drag latinoamericana poniendo en el centro del escenario la historia de una reina desde la perspectiva de un habitante de la República Dominicana. Mayra Santos-Febres logra descentralizar la identidad de la cultura drag y la posiciona lejos del imaginario estadounidense de la identidad drag.

La estructura de la novela la hacen bastante amena de leer (capítulos cortos y lenguaje conciso) pero sin dejar de lado las metáforas que Santos-Febres utiliza de manera tragicómica sobre el sexo gay y los procesos que conlleva la creación de una persona artística como lo hacen las reinas. Esta novela está llena de tintes dramáticos y cómicos (justo como lo es un show de drags) que todos aquellos que buscan separarse un poco de los ideales estadounidenses de diversidad deben leer. :)

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### Dinahw says

Intersection of race, sexuality and bolero, set in Puerto Rico. A pleasant read and digs deep into issues of identity, particularly for transgender individuals and their struggle in a hyper-patriarchal society.

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### Larry Fountain says

A stunning debut novel originally written in Spanish about gay and trans lives in Puerto Rico. Engaging plot focusing on young homeless man with a beautiful voice that seduces all that hear him. A vivid portrait of Santurce, a central district of San Juan.

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## Melvin Rodríguez-Rodríguez says

Una novela poética sobre los terrenos movedizos del Caribe y la sexualidad, narrada con catarsis y humor.

Sirena Selena es menor de edad, pobre y gay, pero tiene una voz prodigiosa para cantar boleros que captura la atención de Martha Divine, una mujer trans veterana en el arte de sobrevivir. Martha se lleva a Sirena a la República Dominicana con la intención de hacerla famosa y desde ahí la novela se convierte en un laberinto de historias sobre la marginalidad. La novela explora las diversas ramificaciones de la sexualidad, desde la oposición binaria entre hombre y mujer, hasta el área gris que existe entre el travestismo y lo transgénero. Es también una historia sobre la noche y las identidades alternas que asumen ciertos personajes en busca de un modo de vida más cercano a la realidad que desean esconder. A la vez, la novela hace una profunda reflexión sobre el Caribe, puente del mundo siempre acechado por poderes imperialistas, del mismo modo que unos adolescentes dominicanos son acechados por turistas europeos. Puerto Rico se transfigura en sus protagonistas, nación o estado latino, hombre o mujer, algo entremedio de ambas, etc. Sin embargo, por serios que se escuchen los temas, en la novela pulsa constantemente el humor y la ironía con la que los caribeños desafían la desgracia. En un monólogo Martha Divine presenta la caída de la Unión Soviética como una oportunidad para convertirse en maestra de los travestis rusos. Si acaso la única falla que puede atribuirse a la novela, es el hecho de que los personajes son algo acartonados, sin crecimiento, aunque eso pueda ser un artificio más para su supervivencia.

"Sirena Selena, vestida de pena" hace una radiografía de la historia gay de Puerto Rico, que a su vez explora de forma tragicómica las relaciones e intercambios entre la supervivencia y el poder.

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## Lindy says

Yeah, I take issue with portraying a fifteen year old Puerto Rican trans woman/drag queen as a seductress.

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## David says

Really impressed.

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## Eduardo Santiago says

I so wanted to like this book.

The situations felt intensely real. The places, the language, yes, mostly. The characters, alas, were hollow and lifeless. I'm going to hate myself in the morning for saying this but the parallel is too eerie to ignore: the book I stopped reading to read this one is Feet of Clay, in which golems figure prominently, and I found myself musing that Sir Terry's soulless speechless automatons have more emotional depth, more complex desires and whims and conflicts than are found anywhere in Sirena Selena. This strikes me as unjust because these are stories that need to be heard and which I want to hear.

Language note: for complex reasons I read the English translation, not the original. The translation mostly reads well, though some places felt awkward in ways that made sense only if I thought about the phrase in

Spanish. Proofreading was poor, and it depresses the hell out of me to realize that I just started writing "...but I'm getting used to that." Misspellings (boriqua, señor); inconsistent spellings, sometimes in places that matter, leading to confusion ("Finn" / "Finín", a name); even punctuation marks in the middle of a word. Why are publishers so careless these days?

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### **Luzadriana Nuñez says**

El travestismo es una metáfora de los personajes y máscaras que nos inventamos a diario por temor al rechazo. El temor creciente día con día, de estar solo y enfrentarse como individuo a la masa, nos vuelve hostiles y brujeriles, utilizando los encantos que tengamos a nuestro alcance para ejercer la coacción a nuestro favor y sobrevivir (pero sobre todo ganar) en la salvaje y desasosegadora (pos) modernidad. La sirena que engaña con su canto por las noches aprovecha las ventajas de la oscuridad y la debilidad visual para decirnos lo que se ve a plena luz sin que se pueda juzgar su discurso por el aspecto artificioso que se ha procurado.

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### **Jessica says**

i read this in brasil....it is incredible...

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### **Gabby says**

For a book about transgender women in Puerto Rico, written by a cisgender author, it was okay. There is better transgender fiction written by transgender authors that does not include the same naïve sensationalism and othering that this book offered. The author missed the mark, and regurgitated many common transgender stereotypes, such as confusing drag queens and transgender women, a misogynistic viewpoint that painted many of the characters as goldiggers, and too much emphasis on physical transitions, for the sake of shocking the audience.

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### **DKM says**

This is gay porn. It pretends to be "literature" and aspires to make profound statements on the commodification of the Caribbean and the nature of gender dysmorphia, but it's really just cheap porn trying to masquerade as Caribbean literature.

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### **MC says**

Sirena Selena by Mayra Santos-Febres is about an ambitious Puerto Rican drag queen named Martha Divine and her young protege, Sirena Selena. They head to the Dominican Republic hoping to capitalize on Sirena's captivating voice by performing boleros live when she captures the fascination of a local, wealthy businessman.

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Written more than 17 years ago, this book predates progressive gender movements like Latinx, #Ownvoices and the popularity of RuPaul's Drag Race – which could explain some of the rather unforgiving reviews on Goodreads and Amazon.

I picked this book up in June to read as part of Pride Month. And, I'm glad I took a chance on this little sleeper-gem of a book. There's a lot to unpack with less than 230 pages: multiple, shifting POVs; transcendence of performance art; erotic encounters; and sucker-punch moments of love and cruelty. Apparently, I do not know how to do light summer reading.

But, guys, just look at this stuff:

“She was a diva from beyond, honoring us with her luminous presence, a goddess who had descended from Mount Olympus to mingle in the dark with us mortals in the hidden bars of gay San Juan.”

Upon seeing Sirena descend from a spiral staircase during a performance, the audience nearly loses their damn minds:

"The calla lilies wither and, nearly dead, they faint before Selena's hungry chest. Her moon approaches the balcony, full. The apocalypse is about to occur. Sirena, standing still in the center of the staircase, sings..."

To be clear, this ain't your mama's "To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar" kind of story for mass consumption. And, I also don't think this is meant to be read as some kind of comprehensive codex of the queer experience in the Caribbean. But, it's a story and one about the roles we all play (whether forced on us, coerced, imagined or self-imposed) in order to get what we want.

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### **Billy says**

Un des plus beaux romans sur la thématique du travestisme et LGBT que j'ai lu ! Un lyrisme d'une beauté toute simple mais tres touchant . Beaucoup de narrateurs mais on s'y retrouve bien . Sublime!

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### **Ahyoung says**

Intoxicating. Poetic. One of my favorite novels I had to read for a class.

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### **Maggie Chidester says**

A story of what it takes to survive. A story of accepting who you are. Sirena Selena is a fifteen year old boy, who was homeless and singing in a back alley digging for food scraps when he was discovered by drag queen Martha Divine. You learn of both their stories and how they came to this turning point in their lives. One wants fame, one wants love, both want to survive. This is a great read on gender role expectations, gender fluidity, sexual fetishes, the life of drag, the chasing of dreams, and the realization that not all dreams come to light. It also gives you a look into the culture of San Juan, the beautiful things about it and the dangerous. Highly recommend.

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## Ashley Flores Ramos says

Siguiendo con "nuevas lecturas" estos días estuve leyendo "Sirena Selena, vestida de pena" desde que lo vi en la FILMTY2017 me entró una enorme curiosidad por hacerme de él, este libro nos cuenta como cambia la vida de un chico de 15 años desde que es descubierto por una drag queen, La Martha Divine (mi personaje favorito), su próxima oportunidad de salir de República Dominicana para ir a probar suerte a Puerto Rico y las aventuras que pasan por ahí. La novela en si es un poco cruda, me gustaría decir que es una lectura que todos pueden disfrutar, pero tal vez muchos aún se saquen de onda, eso si lleva con sigo ese humor que a veces no sabes si reír o guardartelo.

No quiero decir más, si tienen oportunidad y la curiosidad, léanlo, que la Martha Divine los va a acompañar.

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## Chelsea McGill says

Miss Martha Divine, an old veteran of the Drag Queen scene in New York and Puerto Rico, has found her ticket to glory: a 15-year-old with a voice like an angel, who takes on the artist name of Sirena Selena. Miss Martha takes her young protege to the neighboring Dominican Republic, in an attempt to sell the act to one of the fancy tourist hotels there - where they won't mind that the performer is underage.

After seeing Sirena Selena's audition, one very wealthy businessman, Hugo Graubel, is captivated by the young star - in her enchanting performance, he thinks that he has finally found the person that he can love "as I have always wanted to love a woman" (p. 175). Filled with desire, Hugo arranges to have Sirena Selena come to his house, to perform for his business associates at a dinner he will be throwing later that week. His wife, unsatisfied with her husband's continued disinterest in her, is not pleased to have a travesti in the house. Hugo doesn't care what his wife thinks; even if she decides to divorce him over it, he just wants to have Sirena Selena for his very own.

Interspersed with Miss Martha Divine's reminiscences about the gay scene in Puerto Rico and New York and a tangentially related look at the friendship between two young boys, this novel questions the stability of gender, sexuality, and dress in the hot Caribbean world of travestis.

The original Spanish title of this novel is "Sirena Selena Vestida de Pena" which means both "Sirena Selena, dressed in pain" or "Sirena Selena, dressed with care." (If I remember my formerly-fluent but long-disused Spanish correctly.) No wonder the translator chose to just shorten the title!

This original title captures the essence of the book and of Sirena's character. After a terribly difficult childhood, involving living on the streets after his grandmother's death, drugs, and being raped, the young performer finally has the opportunity to make something of her life. After dressing carefully for the role (she is a consummate actress), she wows her audiences with her soul-filled renditions of her grandmother's boleros. It is the emotion, the pain imbued in the songs, that gives her voice the power to enchant her listeners.

Perhaps it is for this reason that Hugo is so drawn to this young travesti. It seems that, his whole life, he has been hiding the fact that he is gay, something that is frowned upon by his family and Dominican society, especially for someone of his social standing. Feeling pressured to act and appear straight, he married a woman and had children, but did not enjoy any of it. He sees his salvation in Sirena: while she appears to be the perfect woman, her male genitalia will allow him to truly love her physically for the first time.

Read the rest on my blog: <http://thegloballycurious.blogspot.co...>

## Dusty says

Puerto Rico: not exactly the United States, not exactly independent. Transvestites: not exactly male, not exactly female. Or at least that's how it works in Maya Santos-Febres's outstanding debut novel, *Sirena Selena*, in which the two properties (Puerto Rico and transvestites) become metaphors for each other.

The book is sublimely fulfilling on a number of levels -- as an allegory (the Caribbean as an object of male American/European desire), as an "inside critique" of the dominant literary aesthetic in Latin America (the *macho* Boom novels), as a statement about the artificiality of sex roles, and as a moving narrative about people (mostly established and aspiring drag queens) who, like everyone, struggle for power over their own destinies.

The last of these, the utter *realness* of the characters, surprised me most. Consider Selena, the book's namesake, who as a child is orphaned over, and over, and over, until he finds his "true" self (ironically, in drag) and his true talent: singing aching boleros. Consider his first "protectora", the drug-addicted street tranny Valentina, who comes without makeup, in her unnatural state, to visit Selena in the hospital, and who sacrifices her entire body and soul to shelter her. Consider Miss Martha Divine, Selena's second "protectora", who identifies her bolero's marketability and travels her to the Dominican Republic for auditions. Or consider minor characters like Dominican boys Migueles and Leocadio who, in adolescence, learn how to make the most of their predetermined roles as Caribbean men in a country whose (financial and social) economy depends upon tourists who come in search for pleasure, and perhaps for women.

Much has been written about *Selena's* politics, and for good reason, but the book's characters are what made me love, and not just admire, it. Santos-Febres is a keeper.

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## RSterling says

I just didn't enjoy this book. The author has a very unique writing style that I just didn't enjoy/follow.

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