

Reading Guide

The Spanish Bow

By Andromeda Romano-Lax

INTRODUCTION

Andromeda Romano-Lax originally conceived the work that would become *The Spanish Bow* as a nonfiction book about the great Spanish cellist Pablo Casals. But as she immersed herself in the research, her imagination was stirred by personalities and themes that overflowed the bounds of Casals's life and times—especially the dilemmas faced by other artists and performers in wartime who struggled to reconcile the demands of their craft with the demands of conscience. Before long, Romano-Lax abandoned the limitations of nonfiction, choosing instead to compose a work of historical fiction based on her extensive research.

The result is an unusually searching and accomplished debut novel that evokes the personalities, ideas, and art of the turbulent half century that produced the contemporary world. The novel's protagonist, Feliu Delargo, is a late-blooming musical prodigy whose future as a world-class cellist has been set in motion by his dead father's final gift: a cello bow. When Delargo leaves the sleepy Spanish town of his childhood to learn the instrument he feels destined to master, he begins a journey that takes him from anarchist Barcelona to the intrigue-laden court of the last king of Spain and his bewitching English queen, through cosmopolitan 1920s Paris and the desperate idealism of the Spanish Civil War to the despair of Nazi-occupied Europe and a final exile in Castro's Cuba.

With his companion, the charming, self-indulgent pianist Justo Al-Cerraz, Feliu sits in on rehearsals with the Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht, provides inspiration for Pablo Picasso's greatest painting, and serves as a pawn in a game of insults and intimidation between two of the most feared dictators of the twentieth century, Adolf Hitler and Francisco Franco. But it is love that puts him to the harshest test, when he meets Aviva, a Jewish Italian violinist whose obsession with her own haunted past threatens to doom all three musicians.

We hope these questions will enhance your reading and discussion of *The Spanish Bow*.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What role does Feliu's handicap play in his life? How might the course of his life and career have been different if he were not handicapped?
2. Discuss how Feliu is influenced by the women in his life, from his mother to Isabel to Queen Ena to Aviva. What does he learn from each? Compare their influence to that of his various male teachers and mentors.

3. Feliu learns from performing for Queen Ena that “one must not ask for acceptance. One must assume it, and value actions over words” (page 195). Does he continue to ask for acceptance after this realization? From whom else does Feliu desire acceptance or approval? How does he value actions over words later in his life?
4. Why does Feliu never tell Aviva that he loves her? Why is he unable to see that, as Al-Cerraz says, she would have accepted a marriage proposal?
5. Early in Feliu’s life, his teacher Alberto asks him, “What point does it serve? What is music for?” (page 85) Why did Alberto’s involvement in an anarchist bombing cause him to stop playing his instrument and to question the purpose of music? How does Feliu answer Alberto’s question over the course of his life? Can music—or any art—exist solely for its own sake?
6. On page 153, the Count says that he can imagine “one day when there won’t be a King at all, when a painter or a writer or a cellist will be as powerful as a King.” Do you think artists have become more powerful over the past century? Have the constraints of royal patronage been replaced by other constraints? Are today’s celebrity artists more or less revered than musicians like Al-Cerraz and Feliu were when they toured small towns one hundred years ago?
7. There are many references to *Don Quixote* throughout *The Spanish Bow*. How does this quintessentially Spanish work about a deluded, idealistic knight resonate with the themes and characters of Romano-Lax’s novel? Is Feliu like Quixote? Does standing on principle, as Feliu does throughout his life, necessitate quixotic self-deception? Does the modern world’s emphasis on the individual make us all more quixotic?
8. At what point does Feliu become a “moral purist,” as Al-Cerraz describes him on page 527? Does he develop this moral sense over the course of his life, or do you think the seeds of it are present in his childhood? Who or what develops it in him?
9. What is the symbolic importance of Brecht and Weill’s *Der Jasager (The Yea-Sayer)*? Which of the novel’s characters could you compare with the boy in the opera who sacrifices himself for tradition and the good of a larger group? Is Feliu a yea-sayer? Is Aviva?
10. In what ways are Feliu and Aviva alike, and in what ways are they different from each other? Does Feliu have his own quest, similar to Aviva’s search for her child?
11. How does Al-Cerraz change over the course of the novel? How did your opinion of the character evolve as you read? What is the arc of his relationship with Feliu? What does the novel imply about the strengths and benefits of his mostly apolitical, self-centered stance towards the world? Is he more or less brave than Feliu?
12. In her author’s note, Romano-Lax describes *The Spanish Bow* as “a collage” of fact and fiction (page 550). What are the advantages and challenges of this collage-style

approach to history? What is historical fiction able to achieve that history or biography cannot?

13. Al-Cerraz's final works, his Spanish Suites, make up a different kind of collage. Feliu describes them as "inspired by Impressionism, by the idea of capturing the real Spain in these small, disconnected pieces" (page 544). Compare and contrast the description of the Spanish Suites with other works of art in the novel—for example, Bach's Six Unaccompanied Suites for Cello, Brecht and Weill's didactic political opera, Picasso's *Guernica*. Discuss the different artistic innovations we encounter in the novel, and how they are related (or not related) to one another.

14. On page 420, Feliu describes the questions being asked by artists in the new Second Republic: "Does art belong to the elite? Does art belong to the masses? Should intellectuals be involved in politics?" Does art belong to the masses today? Are artists and intellectuals successful at affecting politics in this novel? Are today's artists more or less politically involved and effective than artists of Feliu's era?

About the Author

ANDROMEDA ROMANO-LAX has been a journalist, a travel writer, and a serious amateur cellist. *The Spanish Bow* is her first novel. She lives in Anchorage, Alaska, with her family.

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