

Book club discussion questions for *Bird of Paradise: How I Became Latina*

1. Raquel Cepeda's book is divided into two parts. The first is a traditional memoir of her childhood split between the United States and the Dominican Republic. In the second half, she breaks down the results of her genetic adventure while exploring what it means to be Latina and American today through reportage. How does Cepeda's coming of age story provide context for her research into ancestral DNA?
2. Cepeda's parents, Eduardo and Rocío, have their individual dreams and definitions of what it means to live in paradise, or paraíso. Rocío's dream is to become an academic and scholar while Eduardo longs to be an international musical sensation. What resources and circumstances do they lack in order to realize their dreams as young immigrants? When Rocío and/or Eduardo don't realize paradise, how do they respond?
3. Early on, Cepeda shows how the women in her family fall into destructive patterns with men resulting in the loss of their independence. What choices does Cepeda make in her own life that help her establish an identity independent, and at times in spite of, the men in her life?
4. What universal themes are present in Rocío and Eduardo's experience in the United States that immigrant and native readers alike can discern in their own lives?
5. How is Cepeda's narrative similar to other first- and second-generation American memoirs?
6. In Part 1, the reader bears witness to both the parochial and public school systems, respectively, failing Cepeda. For example, Cepeda believes she was encouraged to accept a revisionist version of American history through the use of code words like "primitive" and "savage." In what other ways does Cepeda illustrate how these paradigms condition communities of color to see themselves as subordinate to those of European descent?

7. Hip-hop becomes a character that defines Cepeda's 1980s New York City through rap music, breaker-boys or b-boys, and the bright graffiti art she sees on subway trains. What aspects of hip-hop culture pique Cepeda's interest? How do the emotion and energy of hip-hop provide Cepeda with an outlet for her unpredictable life with Eduardo and his second wife, Alice?
8. What does Cepeda think about the ideal of the American Dream as it relates to her own community? Why?
9. Cepeda believes that many Latinos buy into the idea that total assimilation is the key to success in the United States. What contradictions does she observe in the process of achieving the American dream? What sacrifices do immigrants have to make when choosing to assimilate to the mainstream?
10. Cepeda rejects her father Eduardo's views on race and ethnicity, which ultimately compel her to explore these concepts in her own work. What does the reader learn about racial politics through the characters we meet in the book?
11. Eduardo becomes physically abusive toward Cepeda almost immediately after she moves in with him and her stepmother as a child. As an adult, the author discovers that her father was also abused as a child. When Cepeda writes about breaking cycles in her own relationship with her daughter, how does she arrive to that place?
12. Maria becomes a central figure in Cepeda's life. What does the author learn about friendship and about herself through her complex relationship with Maria?
13. What role does Cepeda's edgy humor play when writing about difficult subject matter? How does this approach alter the reader's response to her relationships with Eduardo and Rocío?

14. Cepeda addresses New York City's long history with the Dominican population. What does she point out that challenges the reader's own perceptions?
15. Why does Cepeda believe that history has been rewritten to overlook the Indigenous/Taíno influence across Latin America and, more specifically, the Caribbean?
16. Cepeda's ancestral DNA revelations confirm what she believes her spiritual self has conveyed to her about her heritage in the form of dreams and guides. How do these insights link her to Eduardo and/or Rocío?
17. Cepeda has an affinity for traveling, whether it's for leisure or for her work as a journalist and documentary filmmaker. What does she learn from traveling that teaches her about humanity?
18. Cepeda believes in the possibility of logos (science) and mythos (mysticism) existing in tandem. How does she weave spirituality with science in the book?
19. While Cepeda has been estranged from Rocío for most of her life, she is often empathetic in her descriptions of her. How does age and experience affect Cepeda's understanding of her mother? Why do you think she chooses to distance herself from her mother in adulthood, while making amends with her father?
20. Spirituality, more so than religion, is a major theme in Cepeda's journey, primarily when linked to her African and Indigenous forebearers. How does meeting with a rabbi reaffirm her belief system?
21. To Cepeda, what does becoming Latina mean? How does she reconcile what she refers to as a hyphenated identity?