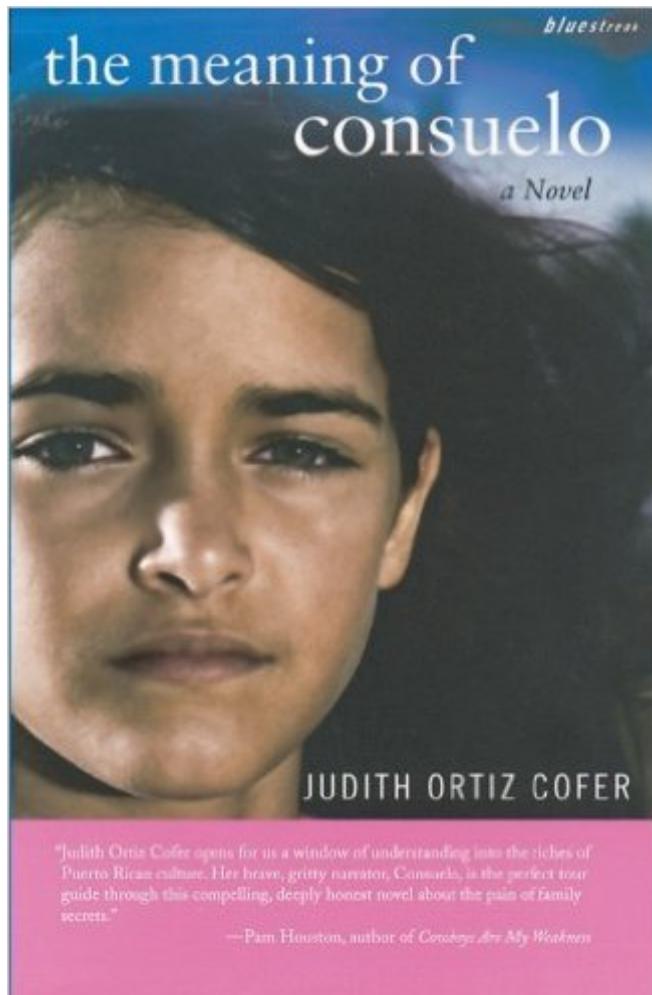


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The Meaning Of Consuelo: A Novel (Bluestreak)



Synopsis

The Signe family is blessed with two daughters. Consuelo, the elder, is thought of as pensive and book-loving, the serious child-*la niña* a *seria*-while Mili, her younger sister, is seen as vivacious, a ray of tropical sunshine. Two daughters: one dark, one light; one to offer comfort and consolation, the other to charm and delight. But, for all the joy both girls should bring, something is not right in this Puerto Rican family; a *tragedia* is developing, like a tumor, at its core. In this fierce, funny, and sometimes startling novel, we follow a young woman's quest to negotiate her own terms of survival within the confines of her culture and her family. *magazine* "Judith Ortiz Cofer has created a character who takes us by the hand on a journey of self-discovery. She reminds readers young and old never to forget our own responsibilities, and to enjoy life with all its joys and sorrows."--Bessy Reyna, *MultiCultural Review*

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In reflecting on *The Meaning of Consuelo*, Julia Alvarez expresses what one finds at the heart of the book that makes it both beautiful and sad at the same time: "A bittersweet tale of the price one pays to re-invent the story handed down by one's antepasados and familia. Consuelo is both herself and every mujer, and her story her own and that of her island, torn between self-discovery and safety." It's not a light read. How could it be? From the very first chapter, we realize that what follows is the unfolding of *la tragedia* that would forever change Consuelo and her family. The

novel tackles a number of difficult themes such as mental illness, sexuality, gender, rejection, poverty, independence, tradition, and progress. Like many other books we've featured, this is a coming-of-age story. Our protagonist, Consuelo, struggles for the right to define herself at the same time that she grapples with the mental illness of her sister, society's rejection of her gay cousin, and the growing tensions between the traditional Puerto Rican culture of *gente decente* and the increasing influence of progressive America. I think it's fairly safe to say that Consuelo's family is a dysfunctional one. Her family fails to successfully handle the homosexuality of her cousin Patricio, or the mental illness of her sister Mili. The family appears unable to accept either situation, as these are not issues of *gente decente*. In different ways, the family loses both Patricio and Mili as a result of the decisions they make. This isn't to say that the family is *all bad*. We all know that families are complex, and they come with both the good and the bad. Tempered by the expectations of what it means to be a *mujer decente*, Mami's family is one with a history of strong women.

The Meaning of Consuelo by Judith Ortiz Cofer is both a stunning tribute to the island of Puerto Rico (and something of an indictment of U.S. development and its negative impact on the island's culture and natural splendor) and a deeply affecting story of one family's heartbreak misfortune (the mental instability suffered by the family's beautiful younger daughter, Mili). The story is told by Mili's older sister, Consuelo, who is charged with keeping an eye on her sibling from the time they are toddlers. Against the subtle backdrop of Mili's mounting mental illness, Consuelo tries to forge her own identity within her fractured family and the confines of the larger Puerto Rican culture of the 1950's. She does this while trying to make sense of her budding womanhood, her puzzlement over Maria Sereno (the cross-dressing neighborhood outcast), and her attachment to her gay cousin, Patricio (who is something of a pariah in his own family). This is a deeply moving story about the suffering of women and the fragile bonds that hold families together. It is so authentically rendered you will feel as though you are in the kitchen with three generations of Puertoriqueños, drinking *cafecito con leche* served through a stained cloth colander as they share their collective bewilderment over the "tragedia" befalling their otherwise upstanding, middle-class family. I reeled from the pain experienced by the Signe family. They tried so hard to keep it together and hold on to their *façade* of being "gente decente"--decent people, trying to avert a scandal surrounding Mili's mental illness. The gut-wrenching ending was harsh, and I didn't see it coming.

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