Velvet Was the Night

Silvia Moreno-Garcia
DEAR READER,

*Velvet Was the Night* is a noir set in Mexico City in 1971, which is to say, it’s set at a historical crossroads. The event that initiates the story, the attack against protesters orchestrated by the Mexican government, marks the beginning of the period known as La Guerra Sucia (The Dirty War), a decade of fierce political repression.

It was around this time, in 1969, when Rafael Bernal published what is considered the first Mexican noir: *El Complot Mongol*.

It was this strange confluence of political strife and the emergence of a new genre that inspired *Velvet Was the Night*, which juxtaposes the bleakness of the noir against two popular forms of entertainment from this era: the romantic comic book and the burgeoning rock music scene in Mexico.

I hope you enjoy this trip back in time,

Silvia Moreno-Garcia
1. Why do you think Maite likes to steal things?

2. Maite is obsessed with romance magazines and comic books. How does she view fantasy versus reality? What do you think that says about her world?

3. While at first, Leonora’s disappearance irks her, Maite eventually becomes intrigued by it. Why do you think that is?

4. How do the lives of Maite and Elvis parallel each other?

5. Are you a fan of literary noir? In what ways does *Velvet Was the Night* stay true to the genre? Are there ways the genre is taken to new, different levels?

6. Was there a character or situation that you identified with?

7. Are there lingering questions from the book that you’re still pondering?

8. What do you think of Leonora? How is she seen through the eyes and in the mind of Maite?

9. In what ways are Maite and Elvis transformed over the course of the book? What do you think their lives might look like going forward?

10. Were you familiar with the historical incidents that inspired the story? What more would you like to learn? Can you draw any parallels to current events?

11. What other books by Silvia Moreno-Garcia have you read? What storytelling similarities do you see? How does this book differ?
AFTER WORLD WAR II, Mexico embarked on an era of economic and infrastructure growth nicknamed The Mexican Miracle. Local products were favored, with high protective tariffs to discourage imports. This, along with large investments in infrastructure, helped bolster the economy. Although there were still deep class divisions in the country, Mexico’s middle class was growing in size and power.

By the end of the 1960s, cracks were showing in the facade of this supposed glorious national development. A long era of political stability had taken place in Mexico, but it had been at the hands of the PRI, the single ruling party. Mexico was only a democracy in theory.

Differences between rural and urban populations had become stark, with financial power concentrated in cities. Increasing levels of unemployment and income inequalities rippled across the nation.

Mexico City was to host the Olympics in 1968. It was supposedly to be a show of the nation’s might. However, president Gustavo Díaz Ordaz felt threatened by growing student political activism. Just like in other parts of the world, young people were voicing their discontent with societal structures.

The Mexican government often framed youth action as a case of invasive foreign powers versus national values. The counterculture and hippie movements from the USA were declared pernicious, dangerous, and anti-Mexican. The Mexican youth counterculture movement (nicknamed La Onda) drew from several influences, not only the hippies in the USA, but the USA was nevertheless an overwhelming source of inspiration. It was, however, not the easy dichotomy of foreign versus national values which the Mexican government insisted was at play.

For example, the Mexican government had used Indigenous imagery as an element of nation building. American hippies adopted certain Indigenous elements, such as the use of clothing in the form of huaraches, for themselves, and in turn Mexican hippies, or “jipitecas,” began adorning themselves in quasi-Indigenous garb inspired by American youth, in effect mirroring a mirror. But this was not the state-sanctioned form of consumption of Indigenous culture and therefore perceived as dangerous.

Mexican youth were also becoming interested in rock music. Most of the local music production of the 1960s consisted of Spanish language covers of American or British songs. Wealthy Mexico City youth attended government-approved “singing cafes” which played the music the government did not consider threatening, but by the end of the decade, most of these venues had closed down. The government claimed they fomented rebellion and anti-nationalist values.

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Even though the bulk of music productions were merely covers of American songs, some local bands were beginning to develop their own identities. Los Dug Dug’s wrote original songs in English and created a distinctive sound; Toncho Pilatos took inspiration from Indigenous elements to produce their first album; and the band Three Souls in My Mind eventually became El Tri and composed songs in Spanish, mixing rock and blues.

Fashion and music may seem like frivolous pursuits, but these were symptoms of a changing country. Besides, youth were also giving serious consideration to topics such as women’s reproductive issues and political repression.

In response to growing unrest and protests demanding greater civil rights, the Mexican government increased action against activists, which culminated with the shooting of hundreds of unarmed protesters on October 2, 1968. This event was known as the Tlatelolco Massacre.

The Olympics opened on October 12 without a hitch.

By 1971, Ordaz had been succeeded by Luis Echeverría, who had made conciliatory gestures towards student activists and was regarded as a more tractable figure than the previous president.

However, behind the scenes, nothing had changed. The government had secretly organized groups of thugs for hire, called Hawks, to quash political dissent. It was these paramilitary enforcers who attacked protests marching on June 10, 1971, the day of the Corpus Christi festival. This event was nicknamed the Corpus Christi Massacre.

In 1971, a few months after the Massacre, three hundred thousand music fans attended the Festival de Rock y Ruedas de Avándaro, which showcased burgeoning local bands. Subsequently, President Echeverría outlawed rock concerts, and the government demanded that records played on the radio be free of content that offended morality. In response, young people of the lower classes organized clandestine reunions called “funky pits.”

Around this time the government disbanded the Hawks and organized a new group: the Brigada Blanca. Torture, murder, and kidnapping were their tactics. Thus began a period of Mexican history known as La Guerra Sucia (The Dirty War).
A THEMED COCKTAIL TO ENJOY WITH VELVET WAS THE NIGHT

_Velvet Was the Night_ is true noir fiction—the darkest of crime stories. But Silvia Moreno-Garcia’s tale of revolution, romance, and intrigue is only black in terms of its themes. The story is illuminated by neon-bright Mexico City of the 1970s and characters who spark and crackle with energy.

For some of us, reading is thirsty work, and there’s nothing better than an evocative cocktail to go with provocative prose. And so here is _La Víspera_, a tequila-based riff on the Vesper with a bracing vodka hit perfect for reading about Russian spies in Mexico City.

The Vesper is a cocktail with a literary origin. It’s the invention of James Bond himself in Ian Fleming’s _Casino Royale_. (Only later did 007 switch to martinis.) The original Vesper is gin, vodka, Kina Lillet, and a lemon twist, served ice cold. The palest of pale golds in color, it is a drink that packs such a punch it may remind the reader of another famous cocktail, the Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster—the original has three ounces of gin and one of vodka. While that’s certainly drinkable for some of us, the drink is easily cut in half to be shared with a friend.

Kina Lillet is no longer commercially available, but its less quinine-y cousin, Lillet Blanc, is the best substitute. (Cocchi Americano Bianco has the quinine punch, but is sweeter, and the resulting drink loses its crispness.) As with most all-booze cocktails, the better your ingredients, the better your results. Use a nice reposado tequila and you may want the whole drink to yourself as you page through the latest edition of _Secret Romance_ . . .

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**RECIPE**

3 oz reposado tequila
1 oz vodka
½ oz Lillet Blanc
Lemon twist

**INSTRUCTIONS**

Combine all ingredients (except for the twist) in a shaker or pitcher with lots and lots of ice. Stir vigorously until very cold and strain into a generous martini glass or coupe. Run your lemon twist over the edge of the glass before using as a garnish. Drink prudently, but finish before it gets warm.
The Playlist

No need to pull out your vinyl records: sit back and let these tunes transport you to 1970s Mexico City.

Listen now on Spotify: randomhousebooks.com/VelvetWasTheNightPlaylist

1. “Todo Negro” by Los Salvejes
2. “Jailhouse Rock” by Elvis Presley
3. “Dream Lover” by Bobby Darin
4. “Can’t Take My Eyes off You” by Frankie Valli
5. “Eleanor Rigby” by The Beatles
6. “Abuso de autoridad” by Three Souls In My Mind
7. “Run For Your Life” by Nancy Sinatra
8. “Quiero Estrechar Tu Mano” by Los Ángeles Azules
9. “El Día Que Me Quieras” by Carlos Gardel
10. “Smoke Gets In Your Eyes” by The Platters
11. “Love Me Tender” by Elvis Presley
12. “Satisfacción” by Los Apson
13. “Sin Ti” by Los Belmonts
14. “Lost In My World (Perdido en Mi Mundo)” by Los Dug Dug’s
15. “Blue Velvet” by Arthur Prysock
16. “Shain’s a Go Go” by Los Shain’s
17. “Bésame Mucho” by Antonio Prieto
18. “El Cigarrito” by Victor Jara
20. “Cuatro Palabras” by Juan D’Arienzo
21. “White Room” by Cream
22. “Agujetas de Color de Rosa (Pink Shoe Laces)” by Los Hooligans
23. “Somos Novios” by Armando Manzanero
24. “Kukulkan” by Toncho Pilatos
25. “Solamente Una Vez” by Lucho Gatica, Agustín Lara
26. “No Me Platiques Mas” by Vicente Garrido
27. “Piel Canela” by Eydie Gormé, Los Panchos
28. “Dream A Little Dream Of Me” by The Mamas & The Papas
29. “Volver a los Dieciséis” by Violeta Parra
30. “Will You Love Me Tomorrow” by The Shirelles
31. “Are You Lonesome Tonight” by Elvis Presley
32. “Surfin’ Bird” by The Trashmen
33. “At Last” by Etta James
34. “Can’t Help Falling in Love” by Elvis Presley
35. “House Of The Rising Sun” by The Animals
37. “Strangers In The Night” by Frank Sinatra
38. “Pobre soñador” by El Tri
COMIC BOOKS ONCE spanned more genres than we are used to, before becoming the domain of superheroes. One popular type of comic was the romance story.

Romance comic books appeared after World War II in the USA. They popped up in 1947 when Jack Kirby and Joe Simon published Young Romance, which proved to be hugely popular. Within a couple years, almost every American comic book publisher was producing romance titles. By 1950, there was an astonishing 150 romance comic book titles in circulation.

The rapid proliferation of comic books created a bubble which quickly burst. However, the most popular titles survived, and there were even new Gothic romance comic books as late as the 1970s.

In tandem, Mexico had also been developing its own comic books.

There were variations between American and Mexican comic books. Popular English languages titles such as Young Romance tended to focus on short stories, while the most popular Mexican comic books followed longer storylines. They were effectively print soap operas.

Lágrimas, Risas y Amor was the most popular of the comic books of the time, published by Editorial Argumentos, whose flagship titles included Rarotonga, Rubí, Yesenia and many others. Some of these went on to be adapted as soap operas or movies. At its height in the 1970s, Lágrimas, Risas y Amor itself sold more than a million copies a week.

The author of most of these romances was Yolanda Vargas Dulché. Of the twenty stories that appeared in Lágrimas, Risas y Amor beginning in 1962, she penned fourteen. Her husband, Guillermo de la Parra, wrote the rest. Dulché started writing romantic stories in periodicals and had circled through several comic book publishers before joining forces with her husband and publishing their own work.

Antonio Gutierrez Salazar illustrated their stories, creating distinctive, sepia-toned drawings—you could tell when a comic book was a Lágrimas, Risas y Amor production.

Consumers of these issues were mostly women, from middle or lower-class backgrounds, between the ages of 16 and 35. The aim of Lágrimas, Risas y Amor was to provide escapism, and its tales took place in either exotic locations or upper-class spheres. If you read a comic book from this time period in Mexico, you would not

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have been able to see any of the social turmoil happening in the streets reflected in the stories. There was no reference to women’s rights, student activism, or contemporary events, something which set them apart from their American counterparts which might include some of these elements, albeit in modest ways.

The result is an oddly deformed world—a world in which heroines will always be saved by the appearance of Mr. Right, in which women are abnegated and pure, and marriage solves all problems.

I’ve always been interested in doppelgangers and in opposites. Characters who mirror each other in strange ways. What better way to mirror a noir than with a romance?