1. Though Esmeralda Santiago’s story takes place in several locations, she specifically contrasts two kinds of community: the rural one, represented by Macún, and the urban culture of Santurce and Brooklyn. What role does tradition exert in each place? Could Macún be classified as a “traditional” society? How cohesive is the family and social unit in Macún? How does the family unit fare when it is transplanted elsewhere?

2. How do Negi’s homes in Macún, Santurce, and Brooklyn differ? Which one(s) offer her the most in terms on safety, freedom, education, and quality of life? What does Negi like about her home in Macún? In what ways is her home there different from a “typical” American home?

3. Much of the book’s text and subtext concern the different roles men and women are expected to play in Puerto Rican society. Though the men work hard, they are allowed time for recreation; the women work hard with no time off. Women serve men, but they also scorn them. How do the demands made on men and women differ in this culture? How similar or different are attitudes in the United States? How does hostility between men and women affect the Santiago family’s lives?

4. Like all young people, Negi gropes to understand the concept of love by observing the examples she sees around her. What idea of romantic love does she receive from the radio programs and romantic novels she devours? In what way does her principal model of a love relationship — that of her parents — contrast with this model? Is there any way of reconciling these two visions of love? What role does sex play in her romantic imaginings?

5. Why does Negi, in her early years, seem to prefer Papi to her mother? In what sense is Papi a sinvergüenza (a term that literally means “without shame”)? What does each of her parents provide for Negi and her siblings?

6. What is a jíbaro? What are the positive and negative connotations of the word? While jíbaros are celebrated in the music Negi hears, her mother tells her not to be one. Why?

7. How does the Puerto Rican concept of dignidad contrast with contemporary American manners and mores? Is there an equivalent concept in our culture? In the Puerto Rico described by Santiago, how effective is dignidad as a social code? Does it contribute to the well-being of the community? Does it contribute to the oppression of women? What is the difference between dignidad for men, women, and children?

8. What does it mean in Negi’s world to be a señorita? Why is her position as casi señorita such a difficult one? What is a jamona? What are Negi’s feelings about women who are jamona? What is her father’s opinion of them, and what does she think of his comments?

9. Certain contradictions in Puerto Rican culture are symbolized by the juxtaposition in Santurce of the Evangelical church and the botanica. How does each one minister to the spiritual needs of the people? How do the different belief systems of Puerto Ricans — Christian, African, Native American — manifest themselves in the Santiago family and their acquaintances?

10. What effect does the past tense of the title have on the reader? At the end of the book, Santiago calls herself a hybrid. Does she view this in negative or positive terms? What has she lost and gained because of her move to New York City?

11. In writing When I Was Puerto Rican, Santiago decided to leave some concepts in Spanish, providing a glossary at the end of the book. Why might she have had difficulty finding exact English equivalents for concepts like dignidad, jíbaro, or toda una señorita?
12. Why do some Puerto Ricans in the book believe America is guilty of imperialism? How does Papi define imperialism? Does Negi come to share his opinion? In giving his opinions, is Santiago telling the reader something about America or is she using the conversation to reveal her father’s character?

13. The scenes in which Negi translates for her mother and other Hispanic women in the welfare office in New York are suggestive of tensions within the city culture. How does Santiago’s description portray Mami’s feelings on these occasions? How does Negi feel about the women who pretend to be Puerto Rican so they can collect welfare? Why does she agree to translate their false stories?

14. In what way does Negi respond to the challenge of the more socially fluid society she encounters in New York? How is her encounter with Mr. Grant, the school principal, representative of her changed circumstances? Does Negi’s victory in convincing him not to enroll her in a lower grade cause her to change her ideas of dignidad and of respect for her elders? Does it cause her to change her ideas of correct feminine behavior?

15. How does Santiago use her audition at the High School for the Performing Arts as a symbolic dramatization of the many barriers that she has had to cross in order to escape Brooklyn, Hispanic cultural ghettoization, and her life of poverty?

16. How does the Latino experience of assimilation in the U.S. compare to those of other immigrant groups, such as Chinese, Jewish, or Haitian? How might the cultural barriers between these groups and mainstream America differ? What roles do race and language play in the process?

17. What might the guava, mentioned in the prologue, represent in this story? What other objects, actions, and customs symbolize aspects of Puerto Rican culture?

18. When I Was Puerto Rican is nonfiction, but Santiago relies on many techniques important to fiction writing. What sort of narrative voice has she chosen to use? What ideas of Negi’s character and culture can be gleaned from her narrative style? How does her portrayal of her parents and relatives as adults seen from a child’s point of view enhance or detract from the book’s impact?

About the author
Esmeralda Santiago was born in 1948 in Villa Palmeras, Santurce, Puerto Rico and is the eldest of 11 siblings. During her early life her family moved back and forth from the city to the countryside in Puerto Rico. In 1961, she moved to Brooklyn, New York. Santiago attended New York City’s High School for the Performing Arts and graduated from Harvard University and Sarah Lawrence College, where she earned a Master of Fine Arts in fiction writing.

She began her career writing documentary and educational films. Her books include the memoirs When I Was Puerto Rican (1993), Almost a Woman (1998), and The Turkish Lover (2004); the novels América’s Dream (1996) and Conquistadora (2011); and the children’s book A Doll For Navidades (2005). With Joie Davidow, she co-edited the collections Las Christmas: Favorite Latino Authors Share Their Holiday Memories (1998) and Las Mamis: Favorite Latino Authors Remember their Mothers (2000). Her essays and opinion pieces have appeared in the New York Times, the Boston Globe, House & Garden, Metropolitan Home, and Good Housekeeping, and she has contributed to the National Public Radio shows All Things Considered and Morning Edition. Almost a Woman received an Alex Award from the American Library Association; Santiago adapted it into a Peabody Award-winning television film in 2002.

Santiago had a small role in the 1967 film adaptation of Bel Kaufman’s novel Up the Down Staircase. She holds Honorary Doctor of Letters degrees from Trinity College, Pace University, and the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez. She and her husband, Frank Cantor, founded CANTOMEDIA, a film and media production company, which has won awards for its documentaries. They currently live in Westchester County in New York state.