

New York times review

In Angie Cruz's New Novel, There's No Such Thing as T.M.I.

How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water takes place in a career counselor's office in Upper Manhattan, where a Dominican immigrant bares all.

By Zakiya Dalila Harris

Sept. 7, 2022

HOW NOT TO DROWN IN A GLASS OF WATER, by Angie Cruz

"My name is Cara Romero, and I came to this country because my husband wanted to kill me."

So begins Angie Cruz's "How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water," a taut and poignant novel centered around a 56-year-old Dominican woman grappling with motherhood, acceptance and loss in the midst of the Great Recession, in New York City. It's 2009, and "things are bad. More bad than bad," our protagonist asserts. "I never thought the banks in the United States would rob people. But now I see that this country is like that fisherman with fast hands on the beach who shows you the big fat fish, but when he cooks, he says it shrink."

For Cara, this fish is the factory job she got after emigrating to the United States in the 1980s. After she had worked there for 25 years, the factory relocated to Costa Rica, and she's been unemployed ever since. Thanks to "El Obama checks," she's been able to stay afloat, but these checks won't last forever. Gentrification is raising prices all over her Washington Heights neighborhood. And besides, Cara muses, "What is a person without an occupation?" That's why she's here, at the Senior Workforce Program, where she will receive career services and unemployment benefits. She'll also attend 12 sessions with a program employee who, after getting to know Cara, will decide if she is "job ready."

These sessions could be routine interviews. But luckily for us, Cara is an oversharer. Far from sticking to her professional qualifications, she opens up to her interviewer — and us — about her current life in Little Dominican Republic, her early life in the actual Dominican Republic and everywhere in between, drawing us in with her magnetic storytelling and breezy self-confidence. "I know I was born with sugar in my pockets," she boasts, citing a friend's envy of her good looks as evidence.

We've just met Cara, but we believe it — and why wouldn't we, when she shamelessly spills so many personal details just in Session 1? There's her son, Fernando, who's been gone for 10 years. ("Why do you say sorry? Ay, no. My son is not dead. He abandoned me.") There's her sister Ángela, who is 15 years her junior and has different views on child-rearing from Cara's. "Was I wrong to say that we should relax Yadiresela's hair?" Cara asks her interviewer. "That's

my niece. It looks like a broom when I brush it. Ángela gave me a lecture about chemicals and the damage it will make. She told me not to brush the children's hair. But how do I get out the knots?"

Unsurprisingly, the biggest revelation of all is the reason her husband, Ricardo, wanted to kill her: Cara slept with another man. When he found out, Ricardo sneaked into this man's house in the middle of the night and cut off his leg with a machete.

Rather than point at Ricardo's own countless infidelities, however, Cara directs attention to herself. "Yes, I was lonely," she admits, "but I knew then and I know now: I did it because I wanted to change my life. That's what we have to do."

What makes Cara such an appealing character is her willingness not just to step in muck — "on purpose," she says, "so we're forced to buy new shoes" — but to admit as much to a perfect stranger. Cara's initial openness might be partly attributed to her interviewer, who also happens to be Dominican. We see glimpses of this addressee when Cara intermittently pauses her spirited monologues to ask or answer a question: "What age do you have? Thirty-five? Forty? Wait, I didn't mean to offend. Of course, you look like a teenager." Otherwise, each session is dominated by our protagonist.

The only true narrative interruptions come from the miscellaneous documents that appear between sessions — and even in those instances, Cara's personality still finds a way to poke through. An eviction notice is sent to Cara from "The Management That Has No Feelings, on Behalf of the Landlord." Another form offers her the option to select the security question "What band poster did you have on a wall when you were in high school?" To which she wistfully responds: "It's true that the Americans don't have any idea of what life is for us."

Through Cara, Cruz forces her reader to understand that life a little bit better. To see how Cara is forced to inhabit two worlds simultaneously, shifting seamlessly between English and Spanish. That we can still hear her above the deafening racket of gentrification, still feel her through the sterilizing wall of bureaucracy, is significant. In projecting Cara's voice, Cruz prioritizes the importance of seeing an individual's humanity even within the most impersonal of systems. The novel makes clear that the round-the-clock work Cara has done to better her Washington Heights community — often without compensation — is just as valuable as more "traditional" forms of paid labor.

But while she exhibits selflessness with her building neighbors, like la Vieja Caridad, an old woman who lives alone, Cara is no saint; and the more comfortable she feels talking in these sessions, the more complicated she becomes. That son who "abandoned" her? He left because of how Cara reacted when he came out as gay. Before he left, she explains, he'd wanted to go out with his friends wearing a pair of tight pants. "People will get the wrong idea," she told him, under the guise of wanting to protect him from the streets. But it's clear Cara once felt embarrassed by him, and when she shares how their argument escalated toward violence,

suddenly all the pieces (Cara's endless attempts to contact Fernando; his temporary order of protection against her) begin to form a new image.

It would be reductive to write Cara off as "homophobic" or "abusive," though — particularly given another important revelation: Cara's own trauma. Just as her early life in the Dominican Republic influences her close ties with her American community, the abuse she suffered from her own mother informs the relationship she develops with her child. Cara chafes against this theory early on, proclaiming that therapists "make you spit on your mother," and rejecting Ángela's insistence that the apple didn't fall far from the tree. "She always wants to remind me of what happened when we were children," Cara complains. "Mamá did this, Mamá did that. Ay! Why talk that now? We can't change it. Déjalo."

But that's the thing about generational trauma: When left alone, it risks growing like a weed, poisoning our fruit and all that follows.

Somewhat predictably, these sessions become a sneaky form of therapy on their own, and Cara benefits from having a place to process some of the good and bad stuff she's stepped in throughout her lifetime. A cynical reader might say things turn out a little too nicely for Cara in the end, or dismiss Cara's past as unforgivable, generational trauma be damned. But like the novel itself, Cara resists classification. More than a job, or a cure, she requires a patient audience with whom she can share her most intimate secrets.