

PRAISE for *Gringa in a Strange Land*

“Like the artisans who applied kaleidoscopic colors to the Mayan pyramids, Linda Dahl paints a vivid portrait of a young American artist who thrusts herself into the exotic maelstrom of México in the 70’s, on a drug-, booze- and sex-suffused odyssey—a struggle to create art, find herself and seek love—amid the hippies and the druggies, the ordinary folk, the grifters and the adventurers all crossing paths in Mérida and Oaxaca. You’ll think of Robert Stone’s work and Barbet Schroeder’s film “More” in that the novel so adeptly renders an era, a country and a state of mind.”

—Randolph Hogan, former editor of
The New York Times Book Review
and translator of Gabriel García Márquez’s
The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor

Review by Tyler R. Tichelaar for *Reader Views* (7/09)

Linda Dahl has recaptured a time and place she knew as a young woman. Her own travel to México in the 1970s inspired her to create her young American artist, Erica Mason, who travels to México to work on her art and to “find herself” in the process.

Gringa in a Strange Land is an episodic novel about a year in the life of Erica as she struggles to become an accomplished artist, living on her own, having various relationships with men, and trying to overcome her prescription drug addiction, particularly to Quaaludes. Erica meets several colorful people, including a doctor hooked on drugs who prescribes them for her; obnoxious, violent, or married men with whom she regrets having a relationship; immature housemates; lesbians who befriend her; and El Autor—a man who dreams of becoming a great author.

The novel focuses upon Erica and her friends, and more specifically her search to become an artist, learning to set her priorities, set aside her quest for a man in exchange for her self-respect, and overcome her drug addiction to focus on her art. She makes slow but steady progress in these goals throughout the novel. There is little plot or action—most of it being internalized in Erica as she undergoes change—but the book is realistic as a portrait of growth in one woman, traveling about México, looking for

subjects to paint, and ultimately looking for her own sense of self-worth.

Linda Dahl's use of character and atmosphere are commendable for how they appear so simple, yet they enrich and perfectly blend together to create an intoxicating world. Dahl sprinkles Spanish phrases throughout the book, which add to the atmosphere without ever distracting the non-Spanish speaker from the book's purpose or storyline, and Dahl is often at her best describing scenes of México through Erica's senses as in the following passage:

Erica sometimes spent hours watching the Mayans and the *mestizos* and the "pure" Spanish and the pale tourists. She told herself it was all good material and it was: arms open, the Yucatecans fielded the slightest puffs of breeze with expertly wielded fans and languid arabesques of hand movements. There was the sound of drawled Spanish and hushed Mayan, which Erica could never decode. Strips of tires lashed to their tree-hard feet, there were always *campesinos*, skilled like Africans to bear perpetual burdens of babies and baskets of produce, men and sometimes women carrying capacious bags full of limes.

When Erica was high, the soft, somewhat peevish Mayan voices sounded more like the twitter of tropical birds and she would close her eyes and could imagine she was part of this stream of life.

One might well call this book "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman." It is less pretentious than James Joyce's classic novel, yet uses multiple languages and explores the character in a *Bildungsroman* manner. And Erica is more human, far easier to empathize with, and easily more likeable than Joyce's Stephen Dedalus.

Ultimately, Linda Dahl has captured a time and place, making them come alive again with an effective atmosphere, believable yet eccentric characters, and an internal confusion that becomes an awakening for the main character. Just as a good painting can make a person feel he has stood in a foreign place, Linda Dahl allows the reader to escape through her seemingly effortless and graceful style. In this case, I find it hard to imagine a painting would be worth as many words as ***Gringa in a Strange Land*** when finishing the novel is like awakening from a dream of México that felt so vividly real.

GRINGA
IN A
STRANGE LAND

A Novel

Linda Dahl

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FOR KATRINA



In his tragic masterpiece about an alcoholic foreigner in México, *Under the Volcano*, Malcolm Lowry writes: *No se puede vivir sin amar. It is not possible to live without loving.* This book is a modest tribute to Lowry's magnificent and chilling book about an alcoholic foreigner in México who struggles against himself to love and be loved.



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OVERVIEW

Erica Mason, the main character of *Gringa in a Strange Land*, leaves America in 1973, to live and, as she hopes, develop as an artist in México. At twenty-three, like so many in the “baby-boomer” generation, she is a well-educated middle-class young woman comfortably raised in green, safe suburbs. On the other hand, Erica has been thoroughly exposed to the counter-culture of the 1960’s, rock festivals, Haight Ashbury, Timothy Leary’s rallying cry to *turn on, tune in, drop out*, protest rallies and demonstrations against the Vietnam War. To inner-city riots, the rise of Black Power, demands for equal rights for women, African Americans, Hispanics, gays. To communes and college towns where wild-haired “freaks” and “heads” congregate in crash pads, scrounge for “bread” to live on, sell “nickel” bags of pot, travel in VW vans painted in psychedelic swirls.

Abbie Hoffman, founder of the Yippies, Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters are among the folk heroes who inspire young people to do drugs and take off. A few women, then more and more, are driving the vans now too, planning adventures.

Erica Mason hits the road in January of 1973, moving to Mexico City as the Paris Peace Accords are signed, “ending” the American war in Vietnam. Mexico City is in shock, still, five years after the massacre called Tlatelolco. Even though hundreds of people had been gunned down, the massacre has been completely suppressed officially. The early 1970’s is the dawn of the era of *los desaparecidos*, “the disappeared ones,”

a vicious nightmare of death that will infect a swathe of Latin America, along with civil wars and other, CIA-sponsored repression. In Southeast Asia, Pol Pot's ghastly holocaust in Cambodia is stirring, in Chile, President Allende commits suicide when the U.S.-backed ultra rightwing General Pinochet stages a coup. In nearby Guatemala, the *Mano Blanca* or "White Hand" death squads are killing Indians in a brutal civil war that will last for decades.

Fear is in the air. Hunter S. Thompson writes a new book, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*. It is also a nutty time. Another bestseller is called *Fear of Flying*, about having a lot of sex without guilt. The kidnapped heiress Patty Hearst, gun in hand, helps her captors rob a bank. The puppet master of the era, President Richard "Tricky Dick" Nixon, enacts his own tale of fear and loathing that culminates in the Watergate scandal and in 1974, his resignation from the Presidency of the United States.

During 1973 and 1974, Erica lives far from the madding crowd. There are few credit cards except for the rich. Money moves languidly as cash, traveler's checks or cables. Cell phones, computers, cable television, do not exist. Cutting-edge means a tape player or a short-wave radio. People still communicate by writing letters in thin blue airmail envelopes, telegrams and expensive long-distance calls.

In the serious heat of Mérida, the capital of the Yucatan Peninsula where Erica eventually settles, there is no air-conditioning except in five-star hotels. People use ceiling fans and take siestas. There are no English-speaking libraries or movie theaters. Recreation is the radio, and drugs. *Mota*, or marijuana, and magic mushrooms, peyote buttons, coke, various narcotics. And of course, alcohol.

It is easy to get lost.

chapter

I

A MAYAN MORALITY TALE

Sitting on the floor of the thatched hut of the Mayan village deep in the state of Yucatán, and understanding imperfectly the translation into Spanish that Alonso is whispering into her ear, Erica Mason thinks: *I'm the only American woman in the entire world doing this right now. The only non-Maya person.*

“She pulled the shawl from around her shoulders to cover her head. Not because it was cold; it was not; it was hardly cool. But the sun was sinking now. It would be dark soon. She shifted her heavy string bag from one arm to the other and walked faster. It was because of her old aunt that she was out at this time. Her aunt was sick, so she had spread her with oil and put on the bean pot and sweep out her *na*. After that, she had picked heaps of *limones* and *aguacates*, sour limes and avocados, to take home with her. So she was going home later than she ever had.

“And when the dark came on, it was dangerous. As everybody knows. She walked along the road and her heart beat faster. This was her flat Yucatán, not the jungle of jaguars and other beasts. But in these parts, awake in the night was, they said, the *ishtabai*.”

They have gathered around the wrinkled old lady, Cata Chuc, to hear the story again. Now they lean forward, sighing in unison and recognition at what was to come. Cata Chuc blinks and puffs on her home-rolled cigar. Her listeners do the same. The old men, at the far edge

of the circle, drink absentmindedly from gourds. “Then, as soon as she thought of this,” the old lady continues, “the woman, who was young and plump and of the exact fitness for such a one, pulled her shawl closer and pictured her own *na* with longing. She was a good Mayan woman; she swept it out regularly for scorpions, tended her plot, raised her children in the knowledge of the old ones. But she had lingered too long at the house of her aunt, had lingered too often at the gourds.” Everyone nods. This young woman kept to herself, only went out alone in emergencies, helped her man in the *henequen* plantation, cooked tamales stuffed with *chiles* and *frijoles*, peppers and beans, offered maize and flowers to the old gods. But she was human. She had indulged herself.

“Even as she walked steadily toward her home, a strange feeling was sneaking upon her. She thought it could be the moon’s rays—pale blue light arched in the sky. Drowsiness pressed upon her and her stomach was churning. The birds had gone to sleep. Her eyes searched the road for other signs; her ears strained, but she saw and heard nothing. Nothing moved or sighed. It was then, remembering the most important thing, that she reached inside her *huipil* for the holy medal. But—it was not there!”

The smoking, drinking listeners sigh together. Now she had no protection! They know how the tale must end. These things are ordained; no one can stop them. Cata Chuc clasps her hands together, sighed as if mourning a real friend, resumes puffing on her cigar. “So she tried to run away, along the road there from Xcoch to Nochacab, because without the protection of the holy medal she was like a naked babe. Sleepiness was consuming her now; it made her forgetful of shadows and rustlings, and as she was coming to where the road turns toward Nochacab, only a short distance to her *na*, it met her! Someone found her in the morning, lifeless, her hands across her breasts but not meeting, as if she had meant to pray but was prevented from doing so!”

“The *ishtabai!*” breathe the listeners as one.

“That is why,” Cata Chuc concludes, nodding, “you must always take care that you are protected and keep your wits about you. Otherwise the *ishtabai* may get you.”