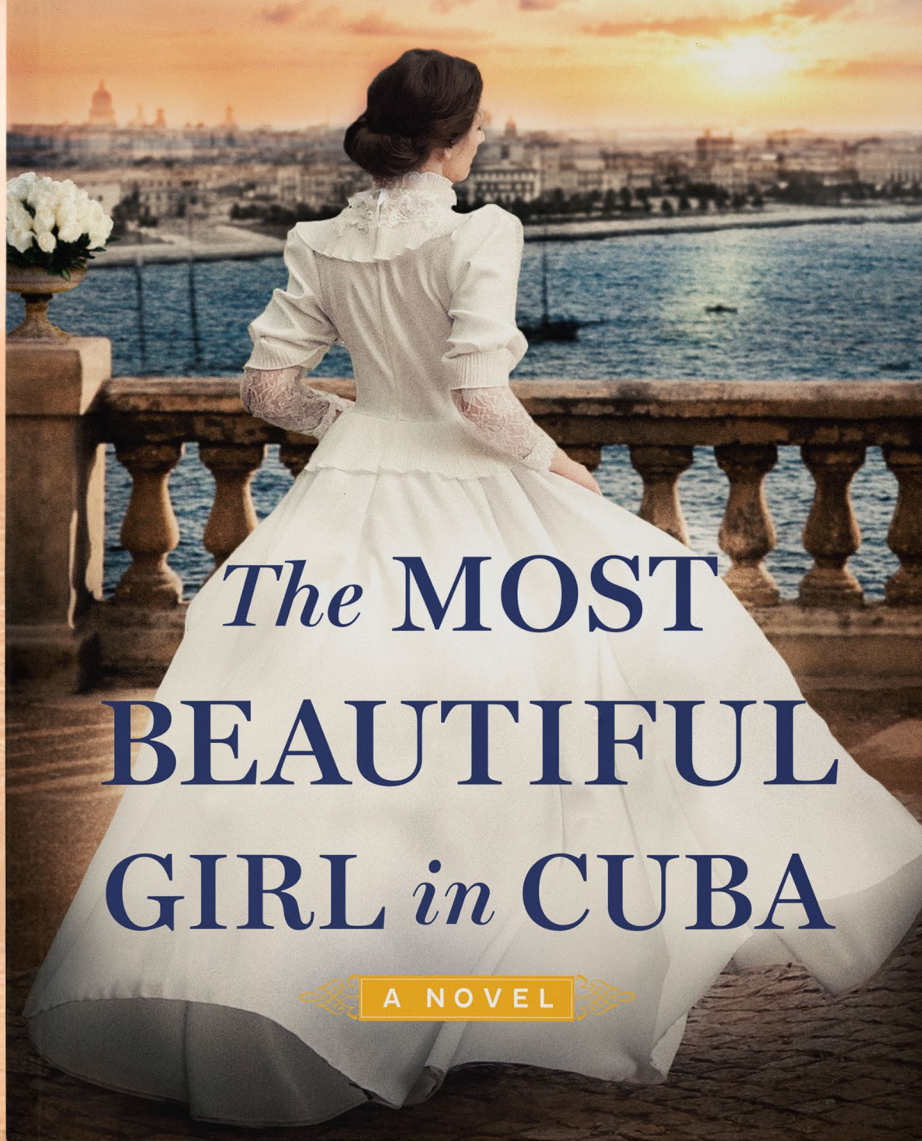


CHANEL CLEETON

New York Times Bestselling Author of *NEXT YEAR IN HAVANA*,

A REESE WITHERSPOON BOOK CLUB PICK



Book Club Kit



Cuba Libre

One of our most famous cocktails is a Cuba Libre—a mixture of rum and Coke with a splash of lime. The Cuba Libre—which translates to “Free Cuba”—was reportedly created during Cuba’s struggle for independence from Spain during the nineteenth century. The term “Cuba Libre” gained popularity during later years when it was used to rally the troops during the Spanish-American War and was an expression Evangelina Cisneros used frequently when she invoked the call of “Viva Cuba Libre” during her time advocating for a free Cuba. It has now taken on a special meaning for Cuban exiles.

INGREDIENTS

1 part Bacardí Gold Rum
2 parts cola (bottled)
2 lime wedges

DIRECTIONS

Fill a highball glass with ice. Squeeze 2 lime wedges over the ice.
Pour in Bacardí Gold, followed by chilled cola, and stir gently.
Garnish with lime.

For a virgin Cuba Libre, follow the directions above, but omit the rum.

(Recipe from Bacardi.com)

A Conversation with **CHANEL CLEETON**

Tell us about *The Most Beautiful Girl in Cuba*. What inspired you to write this story?

In the summer of 2018, I was down in the Florida Keys on a research trip for *The Last Train to Key West* and I visited the USS *Maine* Memorial and the San Carlos Institute, a Cuban heritage center and museum honoring the fight for Cuban independence. While I was there, I became intrigued with the idea of writing a book set at the end of the nineteenth century during the Cuban fight for independence from Spain and the Spanish-American War. It was a period of history I was less familiar with, one my great-grandparents lived through but my family didn't speak of. I wanted to learn more about my heritage and what my ancestors experienced.

As I began researching Cuba's third and final war for independence, I kept coming back to the often less highlighted perspectives in the fight for independence: that of the women who sacrificed everything for Cuba's future. I found the voice in history I was looking for when I came across the true story of a Cuban revolutionary named Evangelina Cisneros.

The novel follows three women whose lives come together in the late 1800s in New York and Cuba. Tell us about these women.

Grace Harrington is an American woman determined to make it as a journalist in New York City. Evangelina Cisneros is an eighteen-year-old Cuban revolutionary who is exiled with her father and sister on the Isle of Pines in Cuba. Marina Perez is the wife of a Cuban revolutionary fighting for independence. Marina is sent to one of the Spanish reconcentration camps with her mother-in-law and young daughter and becomes a courier for the revolutionaries in Havana. Through their eyes, I was able to immerse myself in the fight for independence from each perspective, and in researching what it was like for women who fought for Cuba, I was moved by their courage and love for their homeland.

***The Most Beautiful Girl in Cuba* is set both in a Gilded Age New York City and on Cuban soil during its fight for independence. What was it like to bring such contrasting settings to life within the same story?**

One of the things that struck me most was the stark contrast between the excess of high society in Gilded Age New York City and the events in Cuba. While the Gilded Age represents one of the most decadent moments in a strata of American society, the fight for independence from Spain is one of the darkest moments in Cuba's history. The disparity between those affected by the war and some of the economic and social excess of the Gilded Age was enormous, and it was important to me to highlight that dichotomy.

As an author, you also bring to life untold stories. What does storytelling, and sharing new and underrepresented perspectives, mean to you?

I think our understanding of history and the individuals who came before us is so important to charting our present and future. I learn so much from the past, and it often gives me a sense

of perspective on how far we've come and how far we have to go. As a Cuban-American writer, having the opportunity to explore my heritage and learn more about my family's history in Cuba is so important to me. It really helps me feel connected to my roots, particularly as the older generations who really kept Cuba alive for those of us who didn't experience it firsthand pass on, and I have a renewed appreciation for where I come from and what my family has experienced. It means a great deal when readers tell me that they see themselves or their families in my books, and I'm so grateful to be able to tell these stories and for the support readers have given me and my characters.

What kind of research was required to write this novel?

This was definitely my most ambitious novel to date in terms of the research. I read, listened to, and watched about one hundred different primary and secondary sources to create *The Most Beautiful Girl in Cuba*. Marrying the Gilded Age, the newspaper battle between Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, the true story of Evangelina Cisneros, the fight for independence in Cuba, and the Spanish-American War took a LOT of research and led me in many fascinating directions.

What have you learned about the resiliency and strength of the female spirit through researching and writing historical fiction?

Women have been doing extraordinary things throughout history, and there are so many examples that should be celebrated and shared. Particularly, with this novel and Cuba's fight for independence, there are many examples of revolutionary women who fought for freedom, and I wanted to honor their courage and sacrifice through this novel.

About CHANEL CLEETON



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CHANEL CLEETON is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of the Reese Witherspoon Book Club pick *Next Year in Havana*. She received a bachelor's degree in international relations from Richmond, the American International University in London, and a master's degree in global politics from the London School of Economics and Political Science. Chanel also received her Juris Doctor from the University of South Carolina School of Law. She loves to travel and has lived in the Caribbean, Europe, and Asia.

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Discussion Questions

1. The novel alternates between the three main heroines: Grace Harrington, Evangelina Cisneros, and Marina Perez. What heroine did you identify with the most? What similarities did you discover between them? What differences?
2. Both Evangelina and Marina are involved in the fight for Cuban independence. How do they set out to achieve this aim? How are their roles similar? How are they different?
3. The three heroines in the novel struggle to find their place in society and often rebel against the limitations placed on them. What examples of this did you see throughout the book? How do the women react and adapt to these circumstances?
4. While Evangelina was an international celebrity at the time, much of her story has been forgotten. What other lesser-known women can you think of who lived extraordinary lives?
5. Grace greatly admires the writing of legendary journalist Nellie Bly, who set an important path for women in the field, and at times, Grace attempts to emulate her throughout the novel. Are there women in your career field who you admire and who have greatly influenced you?
6. As a stunt reporter, Grace often finds herself in precarious positions in an attempt to advance her career. Did you see comparisons between the professional struggles of women during the Gilded Age and the challenges women face today? How do you think things have changed?
7. What parallels did you see about the discussion of the role of journalism in society in the 1890s and that of the role of journalism in modern times? What differences?
8. One of the major story lines in the book is the real-life rivalry between Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. What similarities did you find between the two men and their attitudes and strategies toward running a newspaper? What differences?
9. Grace begins her New York journalism career with a deep suspicion of William Randolph Hearst's motives and tactics. How does her attitude toward him, his newspaper, and her own journalism career evolve throughout the novel? Do you agree with her perspective or do you disagree?
10. Do you see any similarities between some of the themes and events in this novel and contemporary events? How much do you think our understanding of history informs the present?
11. Grace and Rafael are both outsiders of sorts in society. How do they relate to each other? How does this bring them closer?
12. How does war affect the characters in the book?