

A HAUNTING IN HIALEAH GARDENS



A NOVEL **RAUL PALMA**

BOOK CLUB KIT



DUTTON

DEAR READER,

A Haunting in Hialeah Gardens began in Nebraska. I remember that I was trying to nap, more from despair than exhaustion, but all I could think was: How did I get here—so far from Miami and in such debt?

I was a third-year PhD student, writing stories and studying abstract theories while my wife worked and did the bulk of looking after our young daughter. Back then, it seemed the only thing I could do well was accumulate debt. I lived under its weight, always bracing for the cliff of graduation. I remember that it was snowing. I got out of bed and, rather than studying or grading, I poured my despair onto the page, and Hugo, my protagonist, was born

Yet it wasn't until some years later—while visiting Miami during Christmastime—that I found a way to forge a path forward with Hugo's narrative. Someone in the debt collection industry told me a story about their job processing payments. While sorting mail and cutting open envelopes, they'd grown fond of a particular debtor who would attach handwritten notes to her payments. The notes were usually to the effect of "I hope you're well and Merry Christmas." One day, a check arrived lower than the required amount with a note that read "I'm sorry. This is all I can pay. I am not well." That was the last check, and rather than discussing profits, the storyteller mourned the debtor's absence. I was surprised: Could a debt collector and a debtor really be friendly under such terms? And who was this debtor, quietly paying their debts?

I had always thought of debt in a negative category—as a thing appropriated by

the wealthy to capitalize on investments and reify institutional control, but I began to wonder, was it possible to imagine a debt liberated from those forces, like what we owe to those that we love? Having identified this tension, I un-shelved my novel and got to work. With the theme of debt, naturally I turned to Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* as an inspiration, while broadening the scope of the carol by reading it through a postcolonial lens. In fact, I was drawn to the story of the Potosí silver mines, recognizing that much of Dickens's London owed a debt to the violence in Latin America.

At the same time, I wanted to write a story about Miami that decentered the conservative Cuban American enclave. *A Haunting in Hialeah Gardens* is narrated through a Bolivian American protagonist, a position that allows for this necessary broadening in who tells stories about South Florida. You will find a familiar touristic palette—the passionate, conservative Cuban American enclave, the extravagant display of wealth, the long sandy beaches—but Hugo has a way of puncturing the touristic and exceptional. His Miami is a vast county riddled with traffic and somehow, despite its vastness, closed off. Yet this is not a novel about enclosure; rather, it is about finding a way toward faith and life in a complex multiethnic city like Miami, amid all the tensions.

I'm grateful that you have picked up my novel. Thank you for embarking on this journey with Hugo.

— **RAUL PALMA**

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1.** Debt is a tangible idea in *A Haunting in Hialeah Gardens* with the money that Hugo owes, but the novel also examines the concept of debt and what we owe others more metaphorically. What debts do you think Hugo owes, beyond the monetary one? Who does he owe them to?
- 2.** How is Hugo's experience of Miami different from other depictions of the city that you've read or seen? Why do you think that is? Does Hugo's immigration, skin color, and socioeconomic status play into it?
- 3.** Discuss the ways in which guilt and regret affect Hugo throughout the novel. How does it impact his relationship with Meli? And with Santi?
- 4.** Discuss the many hauntings in this novel. Who, or what, is Hugo haunted by? How do these hauntings manifest? And how does Hugo make sense of them—at the beginning of the novel and then toward the end?
- 5.** Discuss the similarities and differences between Hugo and Alexi.
- 6.** On page 142, Hugo comes across Dulce's drawings, which hint toward a part of his past that he's never outwardly spoken about. Do you think it could be pure coincidence? Why or why not?
- 7.** On page 158, it is revealed that Meli was unaware of the medical bills that later lead to Hugo's debt. Should Hugo have hidden the bills from Meli? Do you think his actions were justified?
- 8.** What do you think of the progression of Hugo's character over the course of the book?
- 9.** On page 45, Palma writes that Hugo "needed to remind his clients that the world is a mystical place, even if he didn't believe it." Despite Hugo's protestations that he doesn't believe in spirits throughout much of the novel, mystical forces seem to find him anyways. Do you think Hugo wishes he believed the way his clients do at the beginning of the novel? And when the spirits do find him, how does it affect him? Do you think his world is richer for his entrance into the mystical?
- 10.** What do you think of the compromise Hugo makes with El Tío in the end? Why does he make this decision? What is at stake for him?