

Reader's Guide Questions for *Café Colima* by Leticia Del Toro

1. The narrator, Arcelia, switches between recounting memories, commenting on her present situation and telling about "what could have been." How do these changes in the chronology of the story reflect Arcelia's struggle with grief? Does she comment as much on the future? How does this characterize her?
2. As the granddaughter of a Mexican immigrant, Arcelia's life is deeply affected by the Spanish and Spanglish she uses to converse with her grandmother, her sister and even as she addresses the reader. How do these expressions contribute to the authenticity of the story? If you speak another language at home or have relatives that do, how are multiple languages handled in your household? Are there opinions about one language being valued more than another?
3. At one point Mamá Luz tells Arcelia that she and her sister are born with different *naguales* or animal spirits, the deer and the panther. How do Arcelia and Selene's traits or behaviors match the animal figures that their grandmother attributes to them?
4. Of the two sisters, it could be argued that Arcelia was the one who was closest to her grandparents and that she understood their worldview better than her sister, Selene. What evidence is there in the text to support this idea?
5. What role does food play in the story? How does it convey culture or bond people together? What foods beyond the pastries and deli items in the café symbolize community?
6. When Arcelia focuses on what she has missed in growing up without her biological parents she often focuses on longing for her father. Why do you think she has more questions about her father than her mother?
7. In many stories reflecting Latino culture, a grandmother figure is present as a wise and benevolent person who is respected and honored in the narrative. How is Mamá Luz honored in this story? How is she also presented as a flawed character?
8. Secrecy is a theme that works on many levels in *Café Colima*. How does secrecy contribute to some of the negative outcomes in the story? How does secrecy or discretion serve certain characters?
9. What are the factors that ultimately help Arcelia heal? Do you think her "progress" is temporary? What do you imagine would happen to Arcelia if you had to project five years into her future?

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10. Café Colima is also a story about who we are in relationship to our siblings and relatives. How did Arcelia define herself in contrast to her sister? How did she define herself once her sister was gone? Do you have a relative or sibling whose influence has shaped your identity?
11. Sometimes when a person makes it through extremely hard times, such as losing a loved one, or dealing with a situation of poverty, that person is labeled as “resilient” simply because he or she has endured. What contributed to Arcelia’s resilience? How do Arcelia’s actions emphasize a concern for the family unit as opposed to a preoccupation with one’s individual progress? Do you ever have to make decisions in which you weigh whether something will benefit your family versus whether it is personally beneficial?
12. At the heart of the story is the theme that Arcelia, Selene and their mother, Elvira, were victims of domestic violence. How does Arcelia remain strong and healthy after having endured such a tragedy in her childhood? What could she do differently as a young adult to ensure she has positive options in her life?
13. Danny Tavarez enters Café Colima as a physically attractive male character, although his involvement as a friend of Selene’s taints him as a romantic possibility for Arcelia. What is his purpose in the story? Does he have heroic or villainous qualities? How does this character differ from Latino male characters you may have encountered in literature?
14. California settings have appeared in literature throughout time, from the works of John Steinbeck, Jack London, Mark Twain, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joan Didion to Gary Soto and countless others. How do the multiple settings of Café Colima add to depictions of California in the literary canon? What might readers learn about the specific area in Northern California that includes several towns around the San Pablo Bay?
15. Parents and grandparents often transmit their own values regarding life choices and career paths to their children and grandchildren by way of example. Why do you think Arcelia struggled so deeply with pursuing her true interests in life? What factors can cause conflict for young people when deciding on a career path? What else can affect a young person’s choice to follow or ignore their calling in life?