



# Cellophane

*Marie Arana*

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Don Victor Sobrevilla, a lovable, eccentric engineer, always dreamed of founding a paper factory in the heart of the Peruvian rain forest, and at the opening of this miraculous novel his dream has come true—until he discovers the recipe for cellophane. In a life already filled with signs and portents, the family dog suddenly begins to cough strangely. A wild little boy turns azurite blue. All at once Don Victor is overwhelmed by memories of his erotic past; his prim wife, Doña Mariana, reveals the shocking truth about her origins; the three Sobrevilla children turn their love lives upside down; the family priest blurts out a long-held secret....

A hilarious plague of truth has descended on the once well-behaved Sobrevillas, only the beginning of this brilliantly realized, generous-hearted novel. Marie Arana's style, originality, and trenchant wit will establish her as one of the most audacious talents in fiction today and **Cellophane** as one of the most evocative and spirited novels of the year.

## **Cellophane Details**

Date : Published June 27th 2006 by The Dial Press (first published 2006)

ISBN : 9780385336642

Author : Marie Arana

Format : Hardcover 384 pages

Genre : Fiction, Magical Realism, Historical, Historical Fiction

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## From Reader Review Cellophane for online ebook

### Kayla greene says

Omg, I really liked this book. I am currently writing a book report on it for my Spanish class (so in Spanish. Help)

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### Kathy Kattenburg says

Oh my God, this book is good. And I'd never heard of it before another member of my book club suggested I read it. I'm so glad I did.

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### Eduardo Santiago says

Charming. Engaging. Thought-provoking. And, most importantly to me, honest.

Over the decades I've collected a set of neurotic and semicapricious rules about my reading; rules I've discovered, not really invented; patterns I've noticed about the books that work for me or don't. You doubtless have your own. I don't know if mine are accurate, and I don't really understand why my brain works the way it does; but one guideline that stands out to me in fiction is that a world must be consistent within itself, and without too much "cheating." Cheating can be hard to pin down, and I suspect that some days I'm more forgiving than others, but in general books that feel cheaty end up on my Abandoned pile. The Harry Potter books, much as I enjoyed parts of them, are cheaty. Sir Terry Pratchett's Discworld books, to my constant wonder, have never felt so.

I mention this because, throughout my entire reading of Cellophane, I kept wondering: where is she going with this? Am I going to feel cheated? (Within reason: this is magical realism after all). And, as much as she skirts the edge, I never felt cheated. Captivated and enthralled, certainly, and thinking back on it I can't really figure out why! On the surface, Cellophane deals with a somewhat megalomaniacal eccentric, a Fitzcarraldo type who relocated to the deep Amazon two decades ago to (successfully, unlike Fitz) pursue a dream of manufacturing paper; he is now obsessed with producing cellophane, and the instant he does, a curse starts to settle on his hacienda: a curse of truth-telling, of inappropriate transparency. (Get it? Get it?) More curses are to follow.

What makes Cellophane work, I think, is Arana's heart. Her characters are not always threedimensional, but certainly two and a half, painted with love and compassion. (Not always—there are cookiecutter villains—but the people we care about can be complex and do not always go where we expect them to). Arana understands the difficulty of human communication and weaves that as an underlying theme throughout. And throughout it all, Arana's voice is filled with tenderness, kindness, some wistfulness over our quirky human customs, and a distinct curiosity toward examining our assumptions and perspectives. I enjoyed this so much more than I had ever expected.

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## **Diana says**

a new magical realist text, and it is handled quite well. the invention and use of cellophane parallels the stories of this chaotic and quirky family.

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## **Alastair says**

Cellophane is a rather flamboyant book in the vein of Gabriel Garcia Marquez set it in an exotic setting with very strange characters, maybe too strange? The main character, Don Victor Sobrevilla Paniagua, is obsessed with his fantasy of converting his paper factory to create cellophane from the earthly components that are found the jungle of Peru. In the process, he has to endure three plagues that threatened his jungle kingdom. Add to this mix is the arrival of the army and a worker uprising all of which steadily begin to erode the families position and that ultimately results in the family being expelled from their home and fulfilling a prophecy that Don Sobrevilla would be born and die on the coast.

I think that the small elements of magical realism that give it that Marquez feel were a little bit off as the setting seemed magical enough as it was. Overall I found the novel quite interesting in parts but also I found it quite easy to put down with the various plots all taking place simultaneously, too many "players on the stage" that meant I found it hard to know where to look at any one time.

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## **Patrick says**

Cellophane reads like Gabriel Garcia Marquez story if he wrote in English instead of his native Spanish. Maria Arana brings the beauty of magical realism into the English language. The writing superbly surrounds believable life events in a fantastical aura. The genius in her story telling comes from the different points of view between the story book characters and the resulting comedic misunderstanding between them. The critics rightly say her comedy is well timed.

The book tells of a man who goes and follows his dream in making paper in the heart of the jungle. From a vague dream, Don Victor's ambition steadily grows to the point of him realizing it. He later learns to surrender to his fate instead of trying to force it into fruition. With this realization, he begins to understand that his family is the only real important think in his life.

In the book, his personal ambition is called the Demon of Want that Arana ties to progress that entrepreneurial spirit brings. This brings to question the tenuous alliance of Christianity and Capitalism philosophy that seems to be the cornerstone the United States. On the one hand, both Christianity and Capitalism focus on the potential of the individual and his personal salvation through his actions in this world. On the other hand, whereas entrepreneurial capitalism focuses on ones personal ambition and the buyers constant never-ending Want for More (ie: energy, consumer goods, luxury), Christianity focus is on God's will and living simply with ones needs not once wants.

Although it is clear that Don Victor ambition is haughty form of capitalism, I do not like the fact that the harbinger of justice is in the form of the military junta. It seems that book pits entrepreneurial ambition which is clearly bad in the book as it is tied with the "Demon of Want" with the power of the state in the form of the military junta that tries to excise tax and bring down entrepreneur venture.

It seems to me that once ambition combined with chance leads to a person's increase libido especially if that ambition leads to success. I think women pick up on a man's feeling of success via the men's libido and thus being forward. I think women are really turned on by it even though they might not consciously like what they are feeling they unconsciously crave it. For example, Mariana was grossed out but also turned on by Don Victor's advances toward her because of Don Victor was a successful man.

The book brings to light certain contentious issues in the Catholic church such as the role of celibacy in the priesthood. Although I understand the theological and idealistic underpinnings of celibacy in the priesthood, the reality is that priests are men and like other men I assume they like women. The real issue is should the Church assume that the priest should emulate saints in being so enraptured by God that they have only love for him and thus become asexual or should the Church assume that priests are more human than saints and thus have the same wants as us mere mortals and want to make love to a woman? Should the church condemn those priests who want to be with women just because it is their natural inclination to do so as a man? What should be done for children of priests, are they condemned for their father's sins in their human frailty?

Speaking of human frailty, why is masturbation a sin? In the book, Dona caught Marcella masturbating and immediately was disgusted by it. I can see the reason someone who caught someone else masturbating would be grossed out but, to consider it a sin? Catholic reasoning on masturbating is that since our body is a temple to God then anything lustful that you do with your body is a sin. But without that lustful impetus then one cannot procreate which the Church holds to be the reason for sexual intercourse, in the first place.

Also, it shocks the Dona that Marcella actually enjoyed the orgasm she was getting. It still surprises me that women used to not and should not want to have pleasure from sexual intercourse back in those days. I am glad we are in a more enlightened age in which women can in fact enjoy sex just as much as men can.

In the book, all the characters seem to be not fulfilled by their marriage. Be it, Belen who is not compatible with her husband Ignacio, to Graciela who had an abusive husband, to Jaime who has a demanding wife, to Don Victor who just yearns for something different from the familiarity of his wife, to a native girl, Suraya who was forced to marry a brute in an arranged marriage, the book places doubt on the value of long-term relationship in marriage for a couple's happiness.

Aside from the initial wonder of falling in love, it seems that the happiest relationship in the book is the priests' relationship with Dona Mariana's mother. If this is the case, why do gay people want to get married if they do not want children? It seems to me the only reason to get married is if you want children. I think it is better to just cohabit if you want to keep the romance alive because one always knows that the other person is free to leave if the partnership is not satisfactory for both parties involved. So, it is the doubt of lasting forever that I think keeps the romance alive.

From everyone in the book, I tend to identify with the romantic notions of Graciela the best in creating a world with your beloved, a kind of sanctuary from the real world. Graciela finally finds love in an American man, Louis. Her mother is against this match because she is still married to her husband but her husband is abusive and not present. The question that needs answering is should a spouse remain faithful to an abusive husband who has left her? Absolutely not!!! In my mind, marriage codifies before God and man the love between two people. If the spouse becomes abusive and leaves the marriage, he forfeits the union even though they are technically still married. So, in my mind, the woman can fall in love again.

Later on, Jaime and Suraya fall in love and the beauty of loving someone solely on non-verbal cues is a beautiful description of love. Even Belen and Ignacio rekindling their love is gorgeous because here are two people who have nothing in common but because one does something nice for the other it sparkles their lost

love.

Having said that, I do not think divorce should come easily. I really only believe divorce has validity if physical violence occurs that is if either one of the spouses fears for his or her life and/or the life of their children.

Another issue that comes up is the role in spousal compatibility in marriage. In the book, Belen finds out that she was so blinded by her husbands pursuit of her and wanting to experience romantic love that she read in books that she overlooked her gut instincts that she and her husband really had nothing in common. Again, I think it is only through experience in matters of love that one can separate mere infatuation for someone and being in love with someone. I think being in love with someone really happens when the more you get to know them the more you love them. For me, this includes having pre-marital sex because lust can blind ones vision from true love ( a la Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn).

The book tells of drugs as a way to bridge to spirituality. Although I think it is okay for drugs to be used in a spiritual context not to be mistaken with its recreational use, I also think that the use of drugs should conform with the rules of the place where it is being used. Meaning to say if it is illegal, you can use it but understand the consequences of your actions.

Having said that, I do think spiritual use of drugs is completely different from its recreational use. For one thing, spiritual use of drugs was not abused that is, by it being done only for holy purposes means that it cannot be used in day-to-day life. One has to be aware, that drug abuse and consequently its ban from modern-day life only occurred in the 20th century. I am sure people used drugs before, some point to the founding fathers and their use of cannabis, but it was not abused. The question is, why was it not abused back then when it was just addictive at it is today? I think the answer lies in modern day transportation and the economies of scale and thus more readily available. There is real danger of abusing drugs now because one can produce it and ship it in such large quantities that it can cause whole populations to succumb to drug-induced stupor. I think that this is the real reason for its being illegal in today's society.

Speaking of spirituality, is it wrong that Don Victor finds religion in a gypsy's prediction of the future? No, because I think providence works in mysterious ways so it does not matter what manner one finds religion. The problem is that Don Victor still subscribes to the witchman's spells while professing his devotion to the Virgin of Copacabana. In a way Don Victor is really practicing Haitian Catholic voodooism although in the book it is still different because it is separate.

The book also questions enforced Capitalism in a country unfamiliar with it. It seems to me that even though Capitalism definitely has value for the progress of a country as a whole, people who are not familiar with the system (ie: developing country) can and frequently do get taken advantage of. In the book, Pedro worked for a company with slave labor in order to make accessory to weapons but after the war the company disbanded leaving the people out of work. I think in todays environment the focus of these companies should be to stress that they are giving the people transferable skills to other industries instead of promising a job for them forever which they cannot deliver.

Therefore, it is understandable that Capitalism would be synonymous with Imperialism. People tend to reject ideas no matter how good they are if they see it is foreign to their way of life especially because the head of Capitalistic corporations are all white. In exporting Capitalism, it is smart for the people exporting it because they get a leg up in terms of the competition. But, I believe the leg up cannot last forever especially if they do not have a monopoly on the business. It is up to the host country especially if it is democratic to enact

laws that foster competition. That is, if the host country is truly democratic.

The problem with the Cold War era is that most "democracies" that the US supported were actually dictatorships that received a cut from the corporations with monopolies so they had a vested interest in keeping competition from local growers out of the game. Thus, in these instances, the common people rightly equated a capitalism with imperialism.

So, the question is was the US-sponsored democracy/capitalism responsible for the hoarding richness to the upper echelons of society. The answer of course is up to the government of the host countries to decide. If those countries decided to be communist/socialist, it would mean the state owned the resources not the big corporations either way most people in developing countries were screwed except in communist/socialist system, they can pretend that it is theirs.

Speaking of indentured servitude when Capitalism first encounters a developing country, the other is always made to serve the dominant culture. From Black people to the Chinese of Peru, the dominant culture subjugates the other for their own purposes. But at least in Peru, the Chinese were indentured servants akin to the early Irish and Native Americans in the US. I wonder why African-Americans got the brunt of prejudice that the other ethnic group did not get. I wonder if America started in the West coast if the Chinese would have been the ones enslaved instead of Black people.

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### **Shari Mellin says**

This book defies description, but I will never forget the Paniagua family and all their South American adventures. Like a lot of South American literature, there is some magical realism in this story; the whole thing vibrates like a tuning fork. Excellent read I can recommend if you like the quirky.

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### **Mai Ling says**

Parts of this book are kind of a slog, but it's all worth it in the end, besides the fact that all the characters are so rich and colorful. I think the book makes me want as much as not want to go to the rainforest, though. Sounds like there's some scary but beautiful stuff there.

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### **Melissa Giambelluca says**

Well written, great adventure, developed characters. The story is set in the Amazon jungle where a family-run paper factory has sustained the community. The patriarch seeks guidance from the local priest as well as the medicine man to help him develop clear paper. Sounds dry so far, but love stories, magic, and government intervention make it a great read.

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## **Chris says**

Unique book, really liked it

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## **Tracy Towley says**

As other reviewers have noted, this book feels heavily influenced by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. If that's a good sign for you then I highly recommend this book. Unfortunately, it wasn't a good thing for this non-fan. While I could see plenty of brilliance shimmering here, in the end it was a slog for me.

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## **Book Concierge says**

Wow! When Don Juan decides to make cellophane in his remote jungle paper factory he is unprepared for the result of success. The product's transparency infects the Don and all those who live on the hacienda; there are plagues of truth and desire as a result. No one has secrets anymore. Passions are revealed. Lies cannot be told. The characters rush to action based on their perceived truths, but no one sees all clearly.

This is a very Latin book with curanderos, tribal wars, jungles, and military juntas. Arana's magical realism includes visually stunning imagery.

UPDATE, July 2009 - Our book club found much to discuss in this charming, vividly written, humorous fable. I like it just as well (if not more) on this second reading as I did when I first picked it up 3 years ago.

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## **Ilona Acs says**

Origineel familieverhaal, goed geschreven. Mooie boodschap over verlangen en liefde, vanuit verschillende perspectieven.

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## **Matt Howard says**

Cellophane is a novel, set in Peru, with interwoven themes of love, Christianity, magic and the evil people can do to each other. The book is in the mode of "Love in the Time of Cholera." Reading it, I appreciated the author's inventiveness, admired her use of language, and in the end felt dissatisfied and let down. That's probably as much my fault as hers because I tend to reject books that rely on magic and the supernatural as agents of change unless I'm warned ahead of time that I'm going to be reading fantasy.

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## **Nicole says**

I just didn't get this book. It was Boring, with a capital B.

