



# The Sad Passions

*Veronica Gonzalez Peña*

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**The lyrical story of a Mexican family torn apart by the fragility and madness of one of its members.** Told by six women in one family, Veronica Gonzalez Pena's *The Sad Passions* captures the alertness, beauty, and terror of childhood lived in proximity to madness. Set against the backdrop of a colonial past, spanning three generations, and shuttling from Mexico City to Oaxaca to the North Fork of Long Island to Veracruz, *The Sad Passions* is the lyrical story of a middle-class Mexican family torn apart by the undiagnosed mental illness of Claudia, a lost child of the 1960s and the mother of four little girls.

It is 1960, and the wild and impulsive sixteen-year-old Claudia elopes from her comfortable family home in Mexico City with Miguel, a seductive drifter who will remain her wandering husband for the next twenty years. Hitchhiking across the United States with Miguel, sometimes spending the night in jails, Claudia stops sleeping and begins seeing visions. Abandoned at a small clinic in Texas, she receives electroshock treatment while seven months pregnant with her first daughter. Afterward, Miguel leaves her, dumb and drooling, at her mother's doorstep.

Living more often at her mother's home than with Miguel, Claudia will give birth to four girls. But when Julia, her second daughter, is inexplicably given away to a distant relation in Los Angeles, Claudia's fragile, uncertain state comes to affect everyone around her. Julia's disappearance--which could symbolize the destabilizing effect of manic depression--will become the organizing myth in all of the daughters' unsettled lives; for if one can disappear, why not all of them?

## The Sad Passions Details

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# **From Reader Review The Sad Passions for online ebook**

## **Lolly K Dandeneau says**

review tomorrow

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## **Lana C. Marilyn says**

It's lyrical. Very poetic. But it doesn't drag. This is a story about mothers and sisters, so you see over time how it all unfolds, how the things that one says are built upon later, by another. You get to hear the same story told from five sides, and other lavish details while others bring it up in the context of a larger point. I really loved these stories, these voices. And they're all so sad. It's a very visual novel. A very meticulous, carefully painted story.

It's never going to feel "clear", to be honest. I feel close to these girls, and I like them, but it's unclear if things will ever be better for them. And it's unclear if there is any chance that they may grown up to be happy. But it's a really good story. It's a nice change of pace to read about women of color and their homes and their struggles and families. It is all heartbreaking, and excellent at that.

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## **Sara says**

A bit of a slow start and no particularly memorable passages for me but still an enjoyable read that depicts the complications of family life when mental illness is involved.

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## **Christine says**

narrative of loss and madness realized in all of its fractured complexity.

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## **The Great Dan Marino says**

Liked mixing voices, swirling motion of the novel, the recollective-with-limited-scene aspect of it; Claudia stood out, Julia's art stuff interesting; don't think there's a structure to solve--was one of the premises--but lack of design or movement or formal conceit or arc, something to really latch onto, meant it failed to lift off a bit, ended up feeling < sum of its parts. Some punctuation stuff bothered me and I wish the publisher had copyedited a bit better. Real good novel, though, might check out more from her.

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## **Jorge Arreola says**

Lyrical beautiful exploration of how Madness dismembers a family. I found every voice to be unique and to play off each other well in the telling and retelling of important events in their lives. The chapters that ruminate on the meanings of art are particularly thought provoking and intelligently written. The author does a good job of showing us a Mexico City we don't normally see. This book deserves more recognition than it's getting in my humble opinion. Check it out.

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### **Sarah says**

Written like a jigsaw puzzle, this is an incredibly astute portrait of a family twisted in the grip of bipolar disorder.

It's a story where characterization overwhelms plot, and the multiple perspectives only serve to add depth to a history where truth and objectivity is often impossible.

"..these are actual girls who, though they may seem untethered at times, are fully living too, searching, investigating, playing out the game of their lives in something which resembles the early childhood theater of taunts in gardens.

And is this not the space which art too inhabits?"

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### **Cindy says**

Read about 1/2 of this. The voices of a woman and her four adult daughters give a narrative of their lives as each struggles to realize who she is, and makes sense of it all in the midst of the mother's mental illness.

Interesting enough, but I kept wanting to stop because this book just wasn't quite speaking to me. I thought I'd skip ahead and read the last chapter, but where to find it? With each chapter being written by a different one of 5 persons, do I read the last 5 chapters? Oh hell, I may as well finish it all! She has intriguing photos scattered throughout which also lures me in, yet they often don't make sense. Hmmm.

If I take the time to finish it, there won't be any resolution. I just know it. There's not so much of a plot, as to try and understand their lives.

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### **Full Stop says**

<http://www.full-stop.net/2013/08/01/r...>

Review by Jesse Miller

It's not long after she marries the flighty and seductive Miguel, as they are hitchhiking back to Mexico from Kansas City, pregnant with her first child, that Claudia begins to hear voices. If we are to take her at her word, it's Miguel's fault; his drawing her away from the strict but comfortable home of her childhood, flirting with other women, going off mysteriously for long stretches of time, all of it leads to her breakdown. She feels her mind starting to slip, finds herself panicking for unknown reasons, ceases to sleep, begins talking back to those voices, screaming at them.

It's at this point that Miguel takes her to a hospital where she is treated with electroconvulsive therapy, which leaves her drooling, shocked, and temporarily pacified. At this key moment of Veronica Gonzalez Peña's *The Sad Passions*, the reader encounters the themes of force and psychiatric power that are so common in literature about madness, which often presents the medical profession in a critical light, as part of a larger process of rationality straitjacketing creativity, civilization suppressing the primitive — one might look to Septimus Smith's suicide at the end of *Mrs. Dalloway* for an example. She describes the procedure: "They tied me up liquid and held me down solid and shoved something cold and hard into my mouth and then they gave me those shocks in my head." The scene, with its barely suppressed resonances of sexual violence, the physical restraint, the mouthpiece shoved into her mouth, the husband who "watched while they did it," would fit nicely as an example in *Heroines*, Kate Zambreno's recent, innovative account of how transgressive women have been systematically repressed by psychological discourses and practices throughout our modern and contemporary (literary) history.

However, what makes *The Sad Passions* so fascinating as an example of fiction that deals with mental illness is that Claudia's confrontation with a disciplinary psychiatry occurs only in this one brief encounter towards the beginning of the novel. Instead of limiting itself to uncovering the insidiousness of seemingly peaceful medicine and the violence of psychiatric labels, *The Sad Passions* records its own slippery diagnosis; a novel of effects, it measures Claudia's undiagnosed or undiagnosable condition in the ways it becomes etched into the lives of her four daughters.

Read more here: <http://www.full-stop.net/2013/08/01/r...>

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### **Jessica says**

Beautiful, full of sorrow, and a book I can see myself returning to read again. There was so much in these pages. The novel is told from the perspective of six women in the same Mexican family. The prose is lyrical and the pieces of the story come together slowly (both these are reasons I can see myself re-reading; I know there is much I probably missed in this first read). Her command of language reminds me of Didion. I hope to find more writing by Pena, she's wonderful.

(Side note: while I was reading I felt that this book might appeal to people who enjoyed the Amazon tv series *I LOVE DICK* due to how there are photos of art and commentary by one of the characters, as well as the female-centric POVs. I just went to Pena's official website and realized her book has the same publisher as *I Love Dick*, and that author Chris Krause and her ex-husband Sylvere are featured in a couple of Pena's films.)

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### **Janet says**

I ate this book up. I picked this up just after *My Brilliant Friend* and it seemed, if not a continuation of the book, oddly resonant, though here the prism of a family story told in discrete first person voices. Four sisters, Rocia, the sweet eldest sister, Julia, the girl who is sent away at age 6 to live in the States, scrappy Marta, and Sandra, the youngest, brilliant and clear-sighted, look at their relationships to one another, to their mad mother, Claudia, and their mysterious, unpredictable father M. We also move up a generation to see the mother's relationship to her siblings, her parents, a story which is directly contradicted by her sister Sofia.

Yet unlike *The Poisonwood Bible*, whose prismatic structure *The Sad Passions* might at times suggest, the story is far more insular--the sisters' relationships obsessive and mutually referential. I love each of these voices, and especially the way they triangulate one another. The story itself begins before Sandra's birth, really the mystery around the 'disappearance' of Julia, the girl whom Sandra perfectly resembles--the missing sister, of whom Sandra even wonders if she is the next incarnation. The mystery of the father, the madness of the mother, their awful conjunction.

Julia's sections are particularly vivid--as she has become a writer/art historian on Long Island, and discusses her familial troubles in terms of contemporary photographs which are a part of the book (it's published by the small art press *Semiotexte*) but Sandra has the lyrical parts--it is the youngest who is the flaneur, whose 11 year old wanderings in Mexico City allow us to see it as part of herself and she is part of it.

One never really recovers from a damaged family, from madness in the bloodlines, one merely avoids or reacts or acts it out, and each sister confronts the scarcity of love and care in her own way.

Gonzalez Pena is so insightful as to the ongoing damage of a bitter childhood. Here's Julia, years after the formative events, in a present-day unhappy live-in relationship, hanging out with a mutual friend:

"Joaquin would get serious, as the two of us joked, and I'd stare over at him, trying to underline it for him with my gaze, that intimacy, the warm wash of closeness that he and I had never had. I wanted him to note it between me and Olivier, that ease, the image of something I craved and which I was beginning to suspect he and I would never really achieve."

Claudia, the mad mother, has many of the most lyric passages. Here she describes a house fire which may or may not have taken the lives of three girls, her father's playmates--full of the ambience of seduction and danger that clings to her:

"The curtains had been white and muslin, thin as light, and the flame on the candle which had been left near the open window had danced and swayed, openly flirted, until the moment that wayward breeze stirred on the wicked conjoining. Romantic, billowing, a tease, the curtains sailing out, flitting mid-air for one moment, and then a partial retreat, though the slow surrounding corners bowed down into the flame. Darlingly, the very tip of the thin muslin caught the fire, and that small errant corner then ruined with it the rest of the white cloth--that wicked dip, a too far motion, an irretrievably loose moment--and the whole thing fell into slippery sin; at once those nimble flames hungrily devoured the curtains before jumping greedily to the canopy that lay atop that bed onto the yielding canopy, which like all those canopies, like all those whoring canopies on the old wooden beds, hung down low and languid so as to filter light, encouraging the easy idle loll of morning, enabling prolonged comfort in the laze. The indolently shielding canopy, the loose succumbing canopy, caught the thrusting flame and took it on as it spread itself giving and complaint, supplicant and yielding, like a sinful Christian, to the fire and the flames...."

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## **Megan says**

Easily one of the most achingly beautiful books I've ever read. It's as though Pedro Almodóvar made a film about Sylvia Plath and it was cooed out so lovingly and with so much sorrow.

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## **Rita says**

This book . . . It touched me in many ways: it made me remember the times I went to Jalisco by myself, when I was young, because of all the boys the author and her sisters and I met, and reminded me of the way I always felt all alone, like nobody cared for me and I could just disappear in that country and no one would ever care, or know, of always wondering why I felt like my mother didn't like me or want me, always trying to find my way. And then the mental illness, running through me and my family, back before there was diagnosis and antidepressants.

I was sad when I finished this book; I wanted it to go on. This book is lovely.

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