

Reading Group Guide

EACH OF US A DESERT

by **MARK OSHIRO**

About the book

From award-winning author Mark Oshiro comes a powerful coming-of-age fantasy novel about finding home and falling in love amidst the dangers of a desert where stories come to life.

Xochitl is destined to wander the desert alone, speaking her troubled village's stories into its arid winds. Her only companions are the blessed stars above and enigmatic lines of poetry magically strewn across dusty dunes.

Her one desire: to share her heart with a kindred spirit.

One night, Xo's wish is granted—in the form of Emilia, the cold and beautiful daughter of the town's murderous conqueror. But when the two set out on a magical journey across the desert, they find their hearts could be a match... if only they can survive the nightmare-like terrors that arise when the sun goes down.



TRADE PAPERBACK: 9781250169228

HARDCOVER: 9781250169211

EBOOK: 9781250169204

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Praise

Named a Best of 2020 Pick by NPR and *Buzzfeed*

★“A sincere journey through nuanced struggles: the weight of pain, how hope and complicity feed immigrant exploitation, and breaking flawed social cycles. This ambitious, organically Spanish-studded examination of trauma stays adventurous and accessible, resulting in a grace-filled, loving declaration of human value and worth.”

—*PUBLISHERS WEEKLY, STARRED REVIEW*

“Oshiro deftly weaves an intricate, allegorical, and often gory tale within a post-apocalyptic desert setting that readers will feel so viscerally they may very well need to reach for a glass of water.”

—*KIRKUS REVIEWS*

“The writing, akin to an atmospheric, novel-length poem, seamlessly weaving in Spanish and matter-of-fact queer representation, is beautiful to read. Contemplative teens will appreciate this meaningful story about human existence.”

—*BOOKLIST*

“A cross between Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* and Tehlor Kay Mejia’s *We Set the Dark on Fire*, this haunting story will stay with readers just like the stories Xochitl has kept.”

—*SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL*



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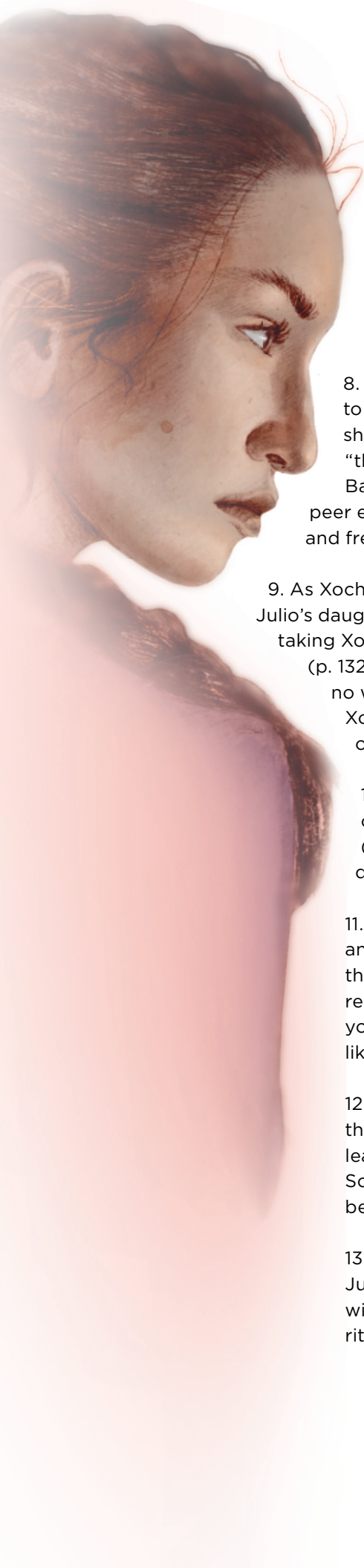
MARK OSHIRO is the Hugo-nominated writer of the online Mark Does Stuff universe (Mark Reads and Mark Watches), where they analyze book and TV series. Their debut novel, *Anger Is a Gift*, was a recipient of the Schneider Family Book Award for 2019. Their lifelong goal is to pet every dog in the world.

Discussion Questions

Page numbers listed below reflect the hardcover edition of the book.

1. Xochitl, our narrator and cuentista, tells us that the aldeanos “rarely saw me unless they needed me” (p.#12), which hints at why she ran away, “to be free” (p. 1). What can we infer about Xochitl’s life?
2. The failing aldea of Empalme is being overrun by a group of outsiders led by Julio. The aldeanos are worried they are “drifting too far from Solís” (p. 13) and fear that calamity is not far away. In your opinion, what is Solís and does Solís really exist? Justify your answer considering the power Solís holds over the people of Empalme.
3. The duty and responsibility of the cuentista is to expunge an individual’s story and prevent it from becoming a pesadilla (nightmare), harmful to the person and possibly to others. Compare and contrast this ritual of expunging stories to other forms of healing, such as the work of doctors, religious leaders, and social workers.
4. While hunting for water in the desert, Xochitl finds a little pouch containing two poems that move her deeply. “How had they known what I felt out here, all alone” (p. 34)? Xochitl was “satiated by the knowledge that someone out in the world understood” her (p. 35). Think of a poem, a work of prose, or other writing that you have read that had a powerful impact on you. Explain what specifically resonated with your experience and relate it to Xochitl’s experience with the poems.
5. Xochitl is filled with terror when, while taking Manolito’s story, she learns that Julio steals peoples’ stories for his advantage (pp. 44-49). Xochitl’s duty as a cuentista is to give the story back to Solís, erasing the story from her memory. However, forgetting Manolito’s story would mean destruction for the people of Empalme. How do you believe it would affect Xochitl to keep the story to herself instead of giving it back to Solís? Do you believe that people should keep painful memories to themselves in order to protect others? Defend your position.
6. Julio unmasks Xochitl in front of the people of Empalme, and the people learn that she has been keeping their stories. Xochitl decides to leave for Obregán as she has lost the respect of her people, and the guardians of Empalme are now gone. Do you believe that her departure will rid Empalme of her sins? Elaborate on your answer. What is the significance of the blood rain that falls on Xochitl the night before her departure?





7. As Xochitl tries to put distance between her old life and what lies ahead for her, she hears the guardians. They had not abandoned Empalme like everyone had believed. The guardians tell Xochitl they will take care of Empalme until she returns and “will change it all” (p. 109). What do the guardians know that Xochitl does not? What change can possibly “change it all”? Give your opinion on whether the “change” will be better for Empalme or better for Xochitl.

8. Manolito’s dismembered body appears to Xochitl in the desert, telling her to go back to Empalme (p.112), but Xochitl rejects Lito’s directive. Lito tells her she has been warned, and he will see her “one more time” before she admits “the truth”—that she has sacrificed her well-being for the well-being of others. Based on Xochitl’s dilemma, explain how well-intentioned community and peer expectations might hinder, or even harm, an individual’s right to be happy and free.

9. As Xochitl settles into her first night away from Empalme, she is surprised by Emilia, Julio’s daughter. Emilia is running from her dad and tells Xochitl that she can help by taking Xochitl to someone in Emilia’s aldea who “can take her (Xochitl’s) power away” (p. 132). This defies everything Xochitl has believed in her whole life. “There’s no way that’s true. You can’t give this up! No one can” (p. 132). Do you think Xochitl’s burden—a life as a cuentista—has been one rooted in her deep faith or a collective deceit by the community? Defend your answer.

10. Just like Xochitl, Emilia “had been trapped.” However, Xochitl now has the opportunity to use Emilia “as a means to an end” to “gain her own freedom” (p. 151). Is Xochitl wrong to use Emilia to find Simone? How is this any different from how Xochitl has been used?

11. Xochitl was raised to revere Solís yet struggles to understand how their god and protector can be so cruel, vindictive, and unforgiving. When Xochitl sees the people of Obregán thriving, “unafraid of and unconcerned with” Solís, she realizes there is another way to live. Describe a personal, cathartic experience you have had, similar to Xochitl’s experience. What made it so profound that, like Xochitl, you felt a sense of freedom?

12. After Xochitl takes Soledad’s story, Soledad is left dumbfounded, believing that las cuentistas “had died out” (p. 180). Soledad implored Xochitl to not leave, to teach her “how to be a cuentista” (p. 182). What distinctions does Soledad make between Xochitl and other cuentistas that cause Soledad to become so desperate as to pay Xochitl to stay?

13. With the simple gesture of grabbing Emilia’s hand to find safety from Julio, Emilia imparted on Xochitl a part of her story that had previously been withheld. Explain how it was possible for Emilia to lie to Xochitl during the first ritual.

14. As a symbol, an axe can be viewed not only as a weapon, but also as a tool that separates (as in logs or wood), a tool that eliminates (as in getting the “axe” from a job or from a team), or as a tool for clearing a path. How might you interpret the symbol of the axe that Emilia carries in each of these three ways?

15. Throughout the novel, Oshiro uses the word *speck* to provide insight to Xochitl’s belief that we are really a small impossibility, isolated, empty, and inconsequential. “Were we all *specks* to one another in this isolated, empty world?” (p. 160). “Obregán was merely another *speck* on the horizon, so small and inconsequential” (p. 215). Make an argument that opposes Xochitl’s view, illustrating how her character has had a significant impact on her community and on others.

16. On page 218, Emilia tells Xochitl, “Once you’ve been free, you can’t go back to it all. . . . I have to leave.” Initially, Xochitl felt the same, thinking, “Maybe this was meant to be a one-way trip. Maybe I wasn’t supposed to go back home.” Then, on page 222, Xochitl begins to question Emilia’s desire “to see the world,” asking her, “Don’t you want to settle down somewhere? Build a home?” What battle is Xochitl fighting internally?

17. The journey to Solado meant passing through the City of Truth where Xochitl, Emilia, and their companions will be tested by the dead. How were the approaches of each traveler similar when facing the tests in the City of Truth? How did each of their approaches differ from those of the other travelers?

18. At times, we all feel that we have been abandoned by others. Similarly, Xochitl believes Solís has abandoned her. At one point in the book Xochitl “stopped praying” to her. “You couldn’t help us anymore. No. You wouldn’t help us anymore” (p. 293). Talk about a time in your life when you experienced a crisis of faith or belief in others and how this feeling of abandonment changed your outlook or your beliefs.

19. Xochitl feels that the “world ended” (p. 370) when she learns that Simone, the curandera whose assistance she was seeking to remove her power, is now dead. Once Xochitl goes home, do you believe she can break the cycle on her own or keep it alive in a different form? Explain your reasoning.

20. Why do you believe Oshiro included the story of *el coyote* Eduardo and *Los Pálidos* in this book? Would it have changed Xochitl’s own story if it had been omitted? What social commentary, if any, is Oshiro making with the inclusion of Eduardo’s story?

21. Xochitl has taken in too many stories, and they are consuming her, making her delusional, delirious, weak. She now has to give the stories back to the earth for her own survival, and that includes her own story. The sacrifice for Xochitl is that she will forget her soulmate, Emilia. In the end, does Xochitl make the right decision?



Activities

A. Create a chart with three columns, with the first one labeled “Character,” the second labeled “Gender Identity,” and the third labeled “Rationale.” In the “Character” column, list 5 characters from the book. For each character listed, note your interpretation of the character’s gender identity in the second column. In the third column, note the gender identity terms the author employs for the character.

B. Pick three characters from the chart in Activity A and imagine that they live in our time. For each of the three, write a brief email of apology in their voice, writing to another character in the book. Using the chart above, make sure you include an email signature from the character, taking special care to indicate gender pronouns appropriate to the character. Discuss your choice of gender pronouns for each character.

C. Imagine yourself as Xochitl, hours before giving her story back to the earth. Create a journal with seven journal entries that, though impossible, could serve as a time capsule to help Xochitl remember her story with Emilia.

D. Write a 1-page letter to the author, providing an alternate ending to the story, one in which Xochitl takes a different path and makes a different decision. Decide whether your alternate story will be a happy or a tragic ending for Xochitl. Defend why readers might enjoy your alternate ending.

E. Playing the part of a weather reporter, create a weather forecast for climate change for our world based on weather and natural resource issues that occur in *Each of Us a Desert*. Draw parallels between events in the book, such as blood rain, lack of water, la quema, the fragile and arid environments in the book, and the impact of these events on individuals and communities. Use the name of communities in the book to describe the weather in contemporary terms.

Pronunciation Guide

Aldeanos is pronounced **ahl-day-AH-nos**, with the emphasis on the AH syllable.

Cuentista is pronounced **kwen-TEE-stah**, with the emphasis on the TEE syllable.

Curandera is pronounced **coo-rahn-DARE-ah**, with the emphasis on the third syllable. This is a little trickier in Spanish for non-native speakers. The final two syllables should blend in.

el coyote is pronounced **el ki-YOH-teh**, with emphasis on the YOH syllable. The first syllable of the second word should rhyme with “guy” or “high.”

Emilia is pronounced **eh-MEE-lee-uh**. Avoid the pronunciation “uh-MEEL-yuh,” as that is for the name Amelia.

Empalme is pronounced **em-PALL-meh**, with the emphasis on the PALL syllable. “Me” in Spanish has a pronunciation somewhere between the sound “Meh” that one makes when they’re disinterested, and the word “may.”

Julio is pronounced **HOO-lee-oh**, with the emphasis on the first syllable.

la quema is pronounced **lah KEH-mah**, with the emphasis on the first syllable of the second word.

Los Pálidos is pronounced **los** (rhyming with the word “close,” meaning a short distance away) **PAH-lee-dohs**, with the emphasis on the first syllable of the second word and the final syllable should also rhyme with “close.”

Manolito is pronounced **man-oh-LEE-toh**, with the emphasis on the LEE syllable.

Obregán is pronounced **oh-breh-GAHN**, with the emphasis on the final syllable. If you can, there is a slight roll to the “r.”

Oshiro is pronounced **oh-SHEER-oh**.

Pronunciation Guide Continued

Pesadilla is pronounced **peh-sah-DEE-yah**, with the emphasis on the DEE syllable.

Solado is pronounced **soh-LAH-doh**, with an emphasis on the second syllable.

Soledad is pronounced **soh-leh-DAHD**, with the emphasis on the final syllable. Do not pronounce with a hard “a.” The word should not rhyme with Dad, but rather more with “rod” or “bod.”

Solís is pronounced **soh-LEES**, with the emphasis on the EES syllable and the first syllable with the same “o” sound as the word “soul.” It is also important to roll the “L” sound and the “EES” together as much as possible.

Xochitl is pronounced **soh-CHEEL**. The “X” is basically somewhere between an S and a Z. So just pronounce it a little harder than a soft S.



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