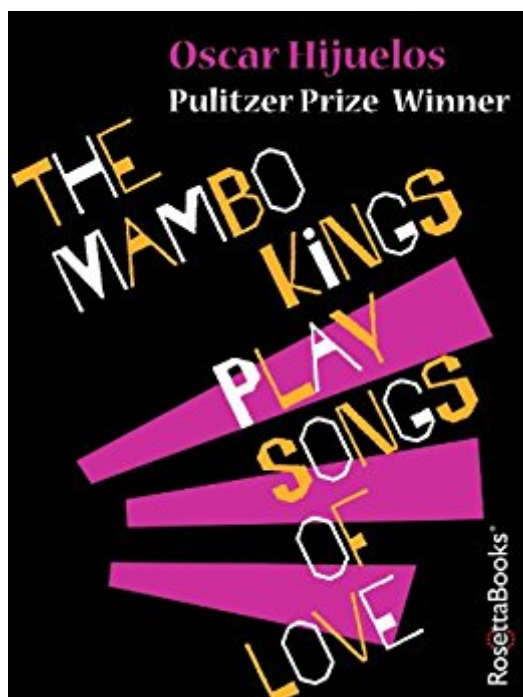


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# The Mambo Kings Play Songs Of Love



## Synopsis

Cuban brothers Nestor and Cesar Camillo come to New York City in 1949 with dreams of becoming famous Mambo musicians. This memorable novel traces the arc of the two brothers' lives—one charismatic and macho, the other soulful and sensitive—from Havana to New York, from East Coast clubs and dance halls to the heights of musical fame. An international bestseller and the 1990 Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* was made into a popular movie in 1992 starring Antonio Banderas and Armand Assante. With a new afterword by Oscar Hijuelos, this book has stood the test of time as a groundbreaking work of American literature.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** The child of Cuban immigrants, Oscar Hijuelos (1951–2013) was an American-born novelist and the first Hispanic writer to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. A native New Yorker, he earned a Master of Arts in Creative Writing from the City College of New York, where he studied under Susan Sontag, Donald Barthelme, and William S. Burroughs. In addition to the Pulitzer, Hijuelos won the Rome Prize, an Ingram Merrill Foundation Award, the Hispanic Heritage Award for Literature as well as several grants from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. He wrote seven novels which have been translated into more than 25 languages.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I read this book, for the first time, for a college American Literature course about seven years ago. The teacher warned everyone in advance that it "may appear to be a bit too descriptive, too sexual but to please keep an open mind" because this was an integral part of the book. He was right. I found this book to be fascinating, sensual and written clearly enough that I felt as though I was a character on the sidelines, watching these two brothers go through their lives. To the readers who found this degrading to women, try to realize that these were lovers in the true definition. They were Cuban men who absolutely adored women; they appreciated the beauty of all women and showed it in the most physical sense possible. As a woman, I found the book to be truly sensual and enjoyable. Since reading this book I have made a point to read all of Hijuelos' books and, every year or two, I pick up "Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love" to go back to that time of raw sensuality that Hijuelos describes so well. My teacher was right. Keep an open mind while reading this, or any, book. But, don't deny yourself the luxury of reading such a wonderful book!

I had already read Simple Havana Melody and Mr. Ives Christmas and was developing a deep admiration for Oscar Hijuelos' talent as a writer. Since this is his best known work I knew I had to check it out. It is a very engaging book about Cuban brothers trying to make it in the US during the 50's Mambo craze. The story is very entertaining as many memorable characters both fictional and real Cuban musicians from the period are introduced. The story while full of colorful episodes is ultimately tragic as the brothers age and life takes its toll on each of them in very different ways. Hijuelos uses sexual imagery and descriptions of food to create a steamy intensity to the story with great effect. That said the lurid sexual descriptions cited by many other reviewers may turn off some readers. While I was enjoying the book enough to overlook this, there are times when he does rely too much on this device and the novel starts to feel like a guilty pleasure. If you are OK with that type of writing then there are rewards to be had in the characterizations and plot. If you cannot stomach the hard-core sexual references that are integral to this book then stay away and try one of his other novels.

This was an excellent read, if not sold simply because of the vivid colourful Latino descriptions of the people, the persuasive sense of the fire of Latin America, and of course, the constant, often coarse, sex scenes. It was such a bittersweet book, such an undercurrent of sadness and loss. It

was essentially, a lament to old age and wasted youth. The detail is incredible, the emotions very real. It effectively captures the horrible sinking inevitability of death. Hijelo's characters are wild, if not dislikable. This is perhaps the finest point of the piece; the characters are utterly human and terribly flawed. Cesar's incredible libido is at the forefront of the work, and there is a sense of humidity, sweat and the smells of sex that pervade the work. Hijelo should be admired for being able to conjure up such senses. I found it a sensual read, however I disagree with many who describe the sex as sensual. It seemed very coarse, but this is not a criticism, it served its coarse purposes. The only criticism I have is the distracting nature of many of the sex scenes. The sheer amount of them seemed somewhat unnecessary, however, they began to fade once Cesar aged. Over all, innovative and superb.

I can see why some people gave up on this Pulitzer Prize winning novel. The best writing is contained in the final 100 pages. All in all I didn't find the book much fun to read. Caesar Castillo, ex-Mambo King band leader, is holed up in the Hotel Splendor, dying from the ravages of alcoholism. The book represents his memories on the last day of his life. Using an omniscient viewpoint, Hijelos moves back and forth in time, creating flashbacks inside of flashbacks, but always converging on the final moment. That is the real genius of this work. Hijelos style, unfortunately, is generally repetitive and boring, with only a couple of examples of the kind of original prose he is capable of. One is a page long description of all sorts of drum sounds and beats; another is a description of the fate of a Cuban boy sent to Vietnam, something like, "On his first jump he landed on a mine and they sent him back in a box the size of a Kleenex dispenser." The overall tone of the book is morose, in spite of the settings in Cuba, New York, California, and in many night clubs. Hijelos uses a clinical, pornographic style in describing the countless sexual encounters of the stallion-hung Mambo King. After the death of his brother, the Mambo King becomes depressed and survives the next 20 to 25 years of his life only by numbing himself with alcohol, also taking comfort in his prodigious sexuality. But in the end, he has only the memories.

The lives of Cuban immigrant musicians explored. Two brothers, Nestor & Cesar, part of "The Mambo Kings", playing their music, making records, finding fame, until a traffic accident kills the music. This book shows how the brothers' personalities were formed by their abusive father. Nestor: Sorrowful, prone to anxiety attacks, who, even after many years of marriage, is still pining for Maria, who left him for another. He lacks self-esteem and needs sorrow to create his music. Cesar: Made powerless by his father, finds his own power in his sexuality. He beds many women without forming

true intimate relationships. He is vibrant, handsome and charismatic and needs happiness to create his music. Be forewarned - there are many graphic sexual situations.

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