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Behar, Ruth. *Across So Many Seas*. New York: Nancy Paulsen Books, 2024.

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Ruth Behar's historical novel "Across So Many Seas" tackles themes of identity, displacement, belonging, migration, and memory, and all that is thoughtfully crafted for a teenage audience. Structured in four parts, the story spans distinct times and locations, following the lives of four twelve-year-old Jewish girls—Benvenida, Reina, Alegra, and Paloma—each connected through a shared Sephardic family lineage. Behar, an anthropologist and ethnographer, draws deeply from her own family experiences to shape the narrative, creating a rich backdrop for the characters' journeys.

The story of Benvenida takes place in 1492 Spain. Her family, steadfast in their refusal to convert to Catholicism, is forced to flee the country under the threat of death for being Jewish. Their journey, spanning both land and sea, ultimately leads them to refuge in Turkey. Centuries later, in 1923, following the end of the Turkish War of Independence, Reina's father decides to cast her out after she takes her mother's oud to the seaport at night and sings songs to the neighborhood boys. Believing her actions bring shame to the family, he sends her to live with an aunt in Cuba, where an arranged marriage awaits her upon turning fifteen. Fast forward to 1961, Reina's daughter Alegra proudly embraces her role as a *brigadista*, teaching literacy in rural Cuba under Fidel Castro's regime.[1] However, the mounting political and economic challenges force her family to make a difficult decision: to send Alegra to Miami, leaving her loved ones behind. By 2003, Alegra's daughter, Paloma, becomes deeply fascinated by the stories of her ancestors' migrations. Known within the family as "the keeper of memories," she is passionate about preserving their history. Determined to connect with her roots, Paloma embarks on a journey to Toledo. There, accompanied by her parents and grandmother, she unearths surprising and meaningful pieces of her family's past.

These stories delve into the tension between rootedness and rootlessness, capturing lives shaped by perpetual motion and the heartache of sudden ruptures. This duality reflects broader themes in Jewish history, where migration, on the one hand, has offered a path to survival and new opportunities; on the other, it has entailed profound uncertainty and loss.

[1] In 1960s Cuba, a *brigadista* was a volunteer, often a young person, who participated in the Cuban Literacy Campaign (*Campaña Nacional de Alfabetización en Cuba)* after the Cuban Revolution by teaching reading and writing skills to the rural population.

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Displacement, as depicted in these narratives, transcends the physical act of relocation. It encompasses an emotional journey marked by the desire to establish a sense of belonging and the imperative to preserve the memory of one's origins.

Behar was born in Cuba with both Sephardic and Ashkenazi roots, and she emigrated to the United States as a young child. She frequently draws on her birthplace as a wellspring of inspiration in her writing.[2] Particularly compelling is Behar's exploration of Cuba as a transient homeland in the chapter about Alegra. She creates multilayered characters set in a time and space (1960s Cuba) not widely explored in Jewish history. Through Alegra's story, Behar portrays her native island as a liminal space for Jews, where dreams of permanence and the promises of Castro's revolution converge with intricate realities. She also integrates the history of "Operation Pedro Pan," which facilitated the migration of 14,000 unaccompanied minors to the United States between 1960 and 1962. Although only a small number of Jewish children participated, Behar underscores the personal significance of this history, noting at the book's conclusion that her own cousin was among them (pp. 250-251).

The title "Across So Many Seas*"* is particularly evocative, as the "sea" functions both as a metaphor and a literal presence throughout Behar's book. The sea represents loss, transition, and connection across generations. First, in a tragic moment, Benvenida loses her father during their journey across the Mediterranean Sea. His body is released to the waters, and she reflects, "he will rest until the end of time in the watery grave that lies between the land we have left and the land we will soon know" (p. 50). Later, Reina, unable to say goodbye to her father, begins her journey by ferry from Silivri to Istanbul, then travels to Marseille and eventually boards a transatlantic ship to Cuba. In her new home, she settles in a small flat with a balcony overlooking the port. She describes the sea breezes as "soothing," reminding her of her mother's and sisters' comforting hugs (p. 109). For Alegra, the sea holds a different meaning. She learns to swim and comes to realize that the sea can be a place of joy rather than fear and sorrow, challenging the somber stories her mother once told her (pp. 157–158). Paloma, meanwhile, connects to her heritage through an old Ladino song taught by her grandmother. The song begins with the line, "In the sea, there is a tower," weaving the sea into their cultural and emotional legacy (p. 208).

[2] Ruth Behar's works inspired by Cuban themes include titles such as *Adio Kerida: Goodbye My Dear Love* (2002), *An Island Called Home: Returning to Jewish Cuba* (2007), *Traveling Heavy: A Memoir in Between Journeys* (2013), *Lucky Broken Girl* (2017), and *Letters from Cuba* (2021).

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Behar skillfully uses sensory elements to illustrate how the intangible—smells, tastes, and sounds—can serve as a repository of memory and connection across generations. Food, in particular, becomes a powerful medium for evoking a sense of home and comfort. For instance, as Benvenida reflects on the upheaval of leaving Spain, she describes how she and her family "eat eggplant with honey and are glad for a taste of sweetness as life grows bitter" (p. 15). The stories invite readers to savor other flavors as well, such as potato and cheese borekas, fresh mangoes, keftes, baklava, or marzipan. Alegra, in a poignant moment, observes, "I have tasted Mama's tears in the food I eat" (p. 119). Sounds are equally integral to Behar's storytelling. Benvenida's tambourine becomes a symbol of resilience, while Reina, Alegra, and Paloma are all linked by the story of an oud, a lute-type, pear-shaped, stringed instrument, brought from Turkey to Cuba. Familiar Ladino songs, such as '*Adio Kerida*,' '*Tres Hermanikas*,' and especially '*En la mar hay una torre*,' a song that recurs throughout the book, weave a musical thread that ties the characters to their cultural heritage. Language, too, plays a crucial role. Behar incorporates words from Ladino, Spanish, Arabic, and Turkish, enriching the text with linguistic texture. Parents affectionately address their daughters as '*hija'* or '*hijica*,' and expressions like '*Mashallah'* or '*Selam'* echo the multicultural layers of the characters' identities. Even the name '*Benvenida*,' reminiscent of the Spanish word for "welcome," carries symbolic weight, and its significance takes on an intriguing twist at the book's end.[3]

Although the book is primarily written for a teenage audience, I believe it holds significant value for adult readers as well. In fact, it can be seen as a unique way of disseminating research. At the end of the book, Behar includes a section explaining the sources she used, offering readers a glimpse into the scholarly foundation behind the story. Her interdisciplinary approach, blending historical analysis with personal memoir, provides a model for scholars seeking to integrate academic depth with narrative intimacy.

While I initially wondered whether the story would resonate with readers unfamiliar with this specific historical background, it is precisely this particularity that makes the book powerful. A compelling aspect of the narrative is its focus on the transformative age of 12—a pivotal time in many cultures, not just within Jewish tradition, when a child begins transitioning into a more independent young adult. Behar's storytelling captures the emotional intensity of this period, particularly through her portrayal of relationships between daughters and their parents. These dynamics transcend cultural boundaries, resonating with the universal

[3] Ladino often involves alterations in sounds or letters compared to standard Spanish, with metathesis being one such example, where syllables or sounds are rearranged.

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experiences of adolescence and family connections. Behar not only imparts knowledge but, in doing so, fosters empathy. Notably, this is not Behar's first foray into exploring the lives of young girls—her previous book, "Lucky Broken Girl," demonstrates her continued interest in capturing the challenges of coming of age.

I found myself curious about Behar's decision to skip centuries in her narrative, as there is nearly a 500-year gap between Benvenida's story and Reina's. At the end of the book, Behar acknowledges that she considered including this period but ultimately chose not to, citing the limited historical knowledge available (pp. 239 - 240). However, I think it would have been fascinating to explore the story of another 12-year-old girl set in this missing timeframe. For instance, she could have depicted a family navigating the complexities of living as crypto-Jews in Spanish colonies or 17th-century Amsterdam. Alternatively, the narrative could have shifted to entirely different contexts, such as the Balkans or North Africa. Including such stories would not only add depth to the overarching narrative but also bridge the historical gap, enriching the reader's understanding of (dis)continuity of Jewish diasporic experiences.

Overall, Ruth Behar's "Across So Many Seas" is a beautifully layered exploration of identity, migration, and memory, tailored for a teenage audience yet rich enough to captivate adult readers. Through her storytelling and character development, Behar illuminates various Jewish experiences, offering both historical insight and emotional resonance. This novel not only educates but also inspires reflection, leaving readers with a deeper appreciation for the complexity and resilience of cultural heritage.

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