



YOUNG ADULT FICTION

# A FIERCE AND SUBTLE POISON

by **SAMANTHA MABRY**

Seventeen-year-old Lucas lives in Puerto Rico, where he's grown up hearing stories about the cursed girl, Isabel. When letters from Isabel begin appearing in his room the same day his new girlfriend disappears, Lucas turns to Isabel for answers—and finds himself lured into her strange and enchanted world. But the more entangled Lucas becomes, the less certain he is of escaping with his own life.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**SAMANTHA MABRY** grew up in Texas playing bass guitar along to vinyl records, writing fan letters to rock stars, and reading big, big books, and credits her tendency toward magical thinking to her Grandmother Garcia, who would wash money in the kitchen sink to rinse off any bad spirits. She teaches writing and Latino literature at a community college in Dallas, Texas, where she lives with her historian husband and her pets, including a cat named Mouse. *A Fierce and Subtle Poison* is her first novel.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did you think the title meant before you started reading the book? How about after you finished it? Discuss the similarities and differences. What was the biggest change in your interpretation? How big an effect did the title have on your choice to pick up and read this book?
2. How does the weather contribute to the overall tone of the story? What was the most vivid or memorable description of the weather? What effect did it have on the story and the characters? On your reading?
3. Lucas's friends refer to his father as el patrón "or, when they were feeling particularly brutal, el conquistador" (page 16). What do el patrón and el conquistador mean? Why do his friends choose these words?
4. On page 47, Lucas says, "What my dad didn't get was that Mara Lopez hated me not because I was white but because I was spoiled. I sometimes hated myself for the same reason." What does it mean to be spoiled? In your opinion, is Lucas spoiled? If so, does he exploit it throughout the story? How? Does he use his privileged position for good, evil, or a little bit of both?
5. The author often describes sounds in her writing. For example, "I stayed there, sweating, through the duration of many candles, listening to the hiss of the paper fan Ruben's abuela used to keep the mosquitoes at bay and to the clacks of her dentures shifting in her mouth as her lips moved in silent prayer" (page 80). How do the auditory details affect the story? What are some other examples of uses of sound in this story?
6. Isabel says to Lucas, "Looks can be deceiving, you know. In many ways, these plants seem harmless, but they're good at hiding their true nature" (page 119). Does this apply to the humans in this story, too? Discuss in regard to Lucas, his father, Dr. Ford, and Isabel.
7. Both Lucas and Isabel had mothers who abandoned them at early ages. How does this affect their lives now? What do you think are other ramifications? Put yourself in the shoes of each mother and discuss possible motivations for their actions. Are there parallels between the absent mothers and the disappeared girls in the story? Why or why not?
8. In the beginning of the story, the cursed girl in the house at the end of the street is merely a legend—a myth with many different and complicated origins. Once Lucas gets to know her, he finds out that "Isabel wasn't a myth. A myth is simple. Isabel was a muddled mess" (page 193). Have you ever had a similar experience with someone you'd previously only known through stories or reputation? Was this person different once you actually got to know them?
9. On page 234, Lucas says, "To me, stories were stronger than the truth." How does this statement apply to the stories the islanders share? What parallels are there between the truth and the stories? Do the myths ultimately reflect the truth? If so, how?
10. On page 251, Lucas feels like a hero as he lets out "a yelp of victory. I couldn't help it. I'd done it. I'd beaten the police and a mad scientist and a curse and a storm and a goddess who makes storms." On page 268, Lucas says, "Isabel didn't need a hero. She was saving herself." And on page 269, he says, "She had the soul of a giant, and no one would ever know." Is Luke a hero in this story? Why or why not? What about Isabel—is she a heroine and "a giant"? Why or why not?

Reader's Guide by Diane Cain



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