



MISS DEL RÍO

A novel of Dolores del Río,
the first major Latina star in Hollywood

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *FRIDA*

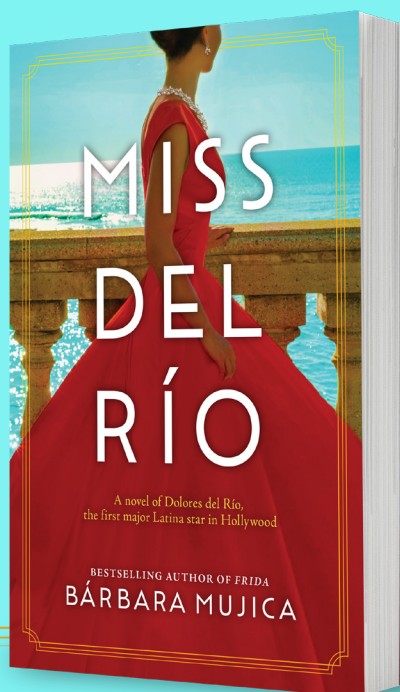
BÁRBARA MUJICA

MISS DEL RÍO

1910, Mexico. As the country's revolution spreads, Dolores, the daughter of a wealthy banker, must flee her comfortable life in Durango or risk death. Her family settles in Mexico City, where, at sixteen, she marries the worldly Jaime del Río. But in a twist of fate, at a party she meets an influential American director who recognizes in her a natural performer. He invites her to Hollywood and, practically overnight, the famous Miss del Río is born.

In California, Dolores's star quickly rises, and her days become a whirlwind of moviemaking and glamorous events. Swept up in Tinseltown's glitzy inner circle, she takes her place among film royalty such as Marlene Dietrich and Orson Welles. But as her career soars to new heights, her personal life becomes increasingly complicated, with family tragedy, painful divorce, and real heartache. And when she's labeled box office poison amid growing prejudice before WWII, Dolores must decide what price she's willing to pay to achieve her dreams and if her heart and future instead lie where it all began...in Mexico.

Spanning half a century and narrated by Dolores's fictional hairdresser and longtime friend, *Miss del Río* traces the life of a trailblazing woman whose legacy in Hollywood and in Mexico still shines bright today.



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Bárbara Mujica

Bárbara Mujica is the bestselling author of four novels, including *Frida*, which was translated into 17 languages. She is also an award-winning short story writer and essayist whose work has been published in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Miami Herald*, among others. A professor emerita of Spanish at Georgetown University, she grew up in Los Angeles and now lives in Bethesda, Maryland.



Photo credit: Mauro E. Mujica-Parodi

Praise for *Miss del Río*

“Bárbara Mujica resurrects the legendary Mexican star with style and verve; Dolores del Río bursts to life in this vivid, well-researched portrayal of her challenging life during Hollywood’s golden era. As seen through the eyes of her trusted hairdresser, del Río’s iconic feline elegance and brash spirit dominates every page, but it’s her defiance to live life on her own terms that sets her apart—and what an extraordinary life she led.”

—C.W. GORTNER,

New York Times bestselling author of *Marlene*

“Bárbara Mujica dazzles us once again, this time telling the story of another great Mexican woman, movie star Dolores del Río. She takes us on a journey through an era of wars and movies, and unforgettable characters that made Hollywood what it is today.”

—MARÍA AMPARO ESCANDÓN,

New York Times bestselling author of *L.A. Weather*

An Essay on Miss del Río

I have been fascinated by Mexican cinema for as long as I can remember. Growing up in Los Angeles, I would often take the bus downtown with my girlfriends to the Mexican movie theaters. By then, Dolores del Río was no longer a box office draw. My favorite stars were Rosita Quintana, Lola Beltrán, and Amalia Mendoza. I must have seen *¿Dónde estás, corazón?* at least twenty times.

My interest in Dolores del Río, known as Lola to her intimates, didn't blossom until decades later, when I wrote the novel *Frida*. As a friend of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, del Río came up repeatedly in my research, and she figured in my book as an elegant foil to Kahlo, who was a foul-mouthed, irreverent rebel. I began to watch the films del Río had made during her heyday in Mexico—those exquisite avatars of the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema directed by Emilio Fernández—and mentioning her in courses I taught at Georgetown University on Kahlo and the art of the Mexican Revolution.

I was impressed with del Río's talent, her enduring beauty, and the way she flirted with the camera, positioning herself just so to highlight her colossal brown eyes and sculpted cheekbones. But after I began reading about her, I realized that Dolores del Río was more than just a pretty face. She was an extraordinarily resilient woman who learned early in life to cope with adversity. In spite of her professional success, she was painfully aware of the vapidness of Hollywood life and yearned to make socially relevant films. Although she was born into a wealthy family, she never lost sight of those less fortunate than herself. Once she returned to Mexico, she was able to star in films that exalted Mexico's rich cultural heritage and Indigenous peoples. Over the years, she became a symbol of Mexican womanhood, an icon of female Mexican beauty, but her project to establish daycare centers for working women reflected her commitment to serve the needs of her people. Once I had learned about her fascinating life, I realized that I had to novelize her story.

Bárbara Mujica

Dolores del Río fun facts

- ✦ Dolores del Río was the first Mexican actress and Latina woman to achieve major success in Hollywood and among the first Latino stars (along with Ramón Novarro, Lupe Vélez, César Romero, Gilbert Roland, and Raquel Torres) to contribute to the growth of the film industry.
- ✦ She was a trailblazer, who contended with misogyny and racism in her career. She was often cast to play the foreign character in a film (French, Russian, Brazilian), and was even investigated for “un-American” activities in the 1930s simply because she was Mexican. Still, when she was billed as a Spanish actress for her first film appearance, she fought to change it to Mexican.
- ✦ She was one of the few actors to transition from Silents to Talkies by using her accent to her advantage.
- ✦ She cultivated the image of the “perfect lady” off-screen and appeared in fashion magazines. On-screen, she often played rebellious women—flirts, courtesans, prostitutes. She swam naked in *Bird of Paradise*, creating a scandal.
- ✦ She was married to Jaime del Río, Cedric Gibbons (designer of the Oscar statue and Oscar-winning set-designer), and film entrepreneur Lewis Riley.
- ✦ In the 1930s, along with Marlene Dietrich, Mae West, Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, Katharine Hepburn, and many others, she became known as Box Office Poison and couldn't get good roles.
- ✦ Due to the xenophobia of the 1930s, she returned to Mexico and became a key figure in the revitalization of Mexican cinema, known as the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema.
- ✦ She starred in the 1943 film *María Candelaria*, the first Mexican film to be screened at the Cannes Film Festival, where it won the Grand Prix (now known as the Golden Palm).
- ✦ At her estate outside Mexico City, called La Escondida, she received such luminaries as Diego Rivera, who painted her, Frida Kahlo, Nelson Rockefeller, John Wayne, the Duke of Windsor and Wallis Simpson, and many others.

- ✦ She was in a romantic relationship with Orson Welles while he was filming *Citizen Kane* and during the controversy over the film.
- ✦ She had an affair with groundbreaking film director Emilio Fernández.
- ✦ She had a close friendship with actress Marlene Dietrich.
- ✦ She had a close friendship with artist Frida Kahlo.
- ✦ Her cousin was actor Ramón Novarro, an international celebrity who starred in *Ben-Hur* and was known as the new Valentino.
- ✦ She had a rivalry with Mexican actress María Félix.
- ✦ She starred in *Flying Down to Río*, the first pairing of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.
- ✦ Her beauty was praised by Elsa Schiaparelli, George Bernard Shaw, Joan Crawford, Diego Rivera, and Marlene Dietrich, to name a few.
- ✦ She established the first system of daycare centers in Mexico for mothers working in the film and theater industries.
- ✦ She was the first woman selected to sit on the Cannes Film Festival jury.
- ✦ Notable films and roles:

What Price Glory, with Victor McLaglen and Edmund Lowe

Resurrection, with Rod La Rocque

Ramona, with Warner Baxter

Evangeline, with Roland Drew

Bird of Paradise, with Joel McCrea

Flying Down to Río, with Gene Raymond, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers

Wonder Bar, with Al Jolson

Journey into Fear, with Orson Welles

María Candelaria, with Pedro Armendáriz

The Fugitive, with Henry Fonda and Pedro Armendáriz

Doña Perfecta, with Esther Fernández

La Cucaracha, with María Félix

Flaming Star, with Elvis Presley

An excerpt from *Miss del Río*

Years later, Lola would remember March 29, 1928, with a certain uneasiness. I know all about it because she told me many times.

Fixed in her mind were the tepid spring sunshine, the bright pink hibiscus in front of the Fairbanks-Pickford bungalow at the United Artists studio, the scent of jasmine in the air, the black open-throat dress with white lace trim that she wore, Charlie's sulking, and the soft lilt of Norma's chatter. Most of all, she remembered the sense of solidarity and friendship that brought them all together. And what came afterward.

The very name "United Artists" gave Lola a thrill. Artists who worked together. Artists who were united in their determination to control their projects rather than depend on the powerful commercial studios. D. W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks were all veteran movie people with plenty of contacts and money, but that wasn't enough. They wanted a voice. They wanted their films to express their artistic vision. In 1919, they did something revolutionary: they formed United Artists. The plan was to produce five films a year, but it turned out to be harder than they'd thought. Feature films were growing more expensive, and artists are not necessarily shrewd entrepreneurs. It wasn't until they brought in producer Joseph Schenck, whose wife, Norma Talmadge, and brother-in-law Buster Keaton were box office sensations, that the experiment bore fruit.

Now the old friends had gathered on the lot to face together this terrible new monster that imperiled them all: talkies. Almost all of them were there except for Pickford, who had withdrawn at the last minute because her mother had died. There were a couple of new faces, too. John Barrymore for one, and, of course, Lola. Folks were anxious to know if the idols who enthralled them on the screen would lose their allure when they opened their mouths and produced sound. If it turned out that a dazzling vamp cackled like an irate hen, no one would want to spend a whole quarter to see her. And for actors like Lola and Ramón—foreigners with accents—the stakes were especially high. But Schenck had come up with an idea. It occurred to him that if UA's silent screen greats were to appear on the popular *Dodge Brothers Radio Hour*, fans would see they had no cause for alarm. The Dodge Brothers show aired on the new National

Miss del Río Reader's Guide

1. Compare Lola's upbringing with Mara's. What do their upbringings tell us about the social structure of pre-Revolutionary Mexico? How does the Mexican Revolution influence the trajectory of each woman's life?
2. How does Lola and Mara's friendship blossom and sustain them throughout their lives, despite the obstacles they encounter? Have you had a similar lifelong friendship?
3. Discuss Lola's romantic relationships in the novel. Why do you think she often makes poor choices when it comes to men? Did you understand her decision to marry Jaime del Río? Is Mara right to judge Lola harshly for her relationship with Carewe? How is Lew Riley ultimately different from the other men who came before him?
4. What does Mara expect from marriage? How are these expectations similar or different from Lola's?
5. What do Lola's early experiences in Hollywood tell us about the exploitation of women in the movie industry? How have things changed or not changed today?
6. What is the role of the press (as represented in the novel by Carla Myer and *Star World*) in the creation of a celebrity?
7. How do attitudes and laws concerning race affect Lola's career?
8. What is the role of education in the lives of Lola and Mara?
9. Is Tía Emi a positive or a negative influence in Mara's life? Did your perception of her change over the course of the story?
10. Discuss Ramón and Mara's friendship. Why do you think they have such a strong connection?

11. Doña Antonia and Lola are both described as cats with strong survival instincts who are able to adapt to different circumstances. Where do we see them act this way in the novel?
12. How does World War II radically alter the lives of both Lola and Mara?
13. Discuss Lola's relationship with Frida Kahlo.
14. Why does Lola decide to return to Mexico? How does she rebuild her life there?
15. How do Lola's efforts to establish day care centers in Mexico alter our perception of her?
16. Would you have liked to live in the Hollywood of the twenties and thirties? In the Mexico of the thirties and forties? Why or why not?

Miss del Río

She was known as the most beautiful woman in the world, but Dolores del Río was more than a pretty face.

Available October 4!

