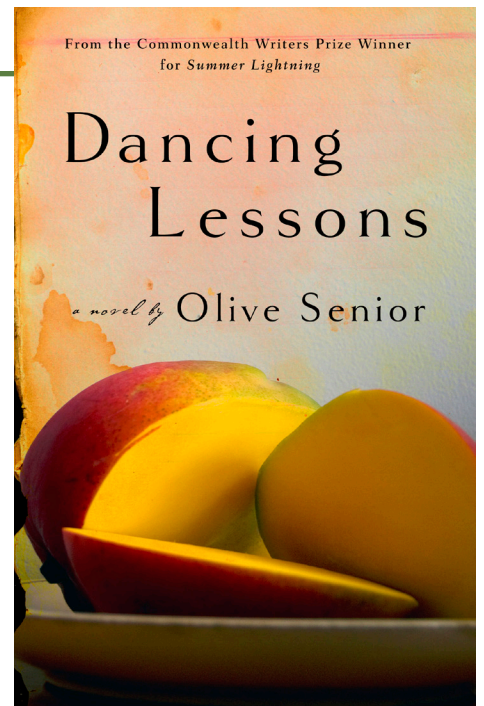


# READER'S GUIDE

## *Dancing Lessons* by Olive Senior

### INTRODUCING *Dancing Lessons*

After her Jamaican home is destroyed by a hurricane, Gertrude Samphire is sent by her eldest daughter, Celia, to live at Ellesmere Lodge. Gertrude cannot relate to anyone at Ellesmere Lodge, a problem that seems to have persisted for most of her life. From uncaring relatives, to a husband who didn't care about her, to children who she feels have deserted her, Gertrude seems incapable of being close with anyone. Yet, as she discovers her love of writing and begins to record the story of her life, Gertrude begins to learn more about herself, her family, and her relationships both past and present.



### IMPORTANT THEMES

#### Trust

Many of the characters in *Dancing Lessons* have problems with trust. Gertrude finds that she cannot talk to anyone, and that those she winds up trusting always seem to let her down. Gertrude's children find that they cannot trust their mother to look after them and gradually learn to rely more on their father and each other. Two of Gertrude's children find their lives made much more complicated and dangerous by initially putting their trust in the wrong people.

#### Knowledge

Most of the characters in *Dancing Lessons* suffer from a lack of knowledge. Gertrude has no idea what is going on in the lives of her children and grandchildren, so much so she does not know one of her daughters has been killed until well after the fact. At the beginning of her stay in Ellesmere Lodge, she takes an immediate dislike to the other residents, only learning who is truly a friend to her and who is not as time goes on and she bothers to take an interest in other people's lives. Celia wants to know why Gertrude gave her up when she was little and why her mother was always so distant with them. Celia's daughter is revealed to be very much the opposite of Gertrude, as she has no problem asking uncomfortable questions to get the answers she desires.

#### Aging and dying

Gertrude recounts the story of her life, from her time as a little girl living with relatives who do not love her and a mad father who barely acknowledges her, to living with a husband who does not respect her, to her time at Ellesmere Lodge. Along with the obvious aging going on in this, there is also the matter of the mental age of the characters. Gertrude at times feels like her children or those younger than her are educating her, as she learns how to be happier with life. Gertrude also observes the differences from her childhood to that of her grandchildren, who are growing up very differently. Death is also a significant part of Gertrude's life, as many of the inhabitants of Ellesmere Lodge pass away over the course of *Dancing Lessons*, and Gertrude must also struggle to death with the death of estranged family members and the fact that she doesn't know, and at times doesn't always care, about what has happened to them.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How much of an impact did Gertrude's lack of motherly affection have on her own mothering skills?
2. What is the significance of the specific lyrics Gertrude constantly looks back on?
3. How important was it for Gertrude to pay attention to style and fashion at Ellesmere Lodge, and why?
4. Are the main generational differences between Gertrude's grandmother, Gertrude, her children, and her grandchildren products of different upbringings or the times they live in?
5. What do you think Gertrude would have done had she learned the truth about Mister Bridge while he was still alive?
6. Compare the relationship between Cookie and her son to the relationship between Gertrude and her children.
7. Could any of the changes in Gertrude's life have occurred had she not taken up the habit of keeping a journal? What really began those changes?



### ABOUT OLIVE

Olive Senior is the prize-winning author of a dozen books of fiction, poetry and non-fiction. Her short story collection *Summer Lightning* (Longman, 1986) won the inaugural Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book, and her poetry collection *Over the Roofs of the World* (Insomniac, 2005) was a finalist for the 2005 Governor General's Literary Award for poetry. Born in Jamaica, she has travelled widely and now spends most of her time in Jamaica and Toronto.