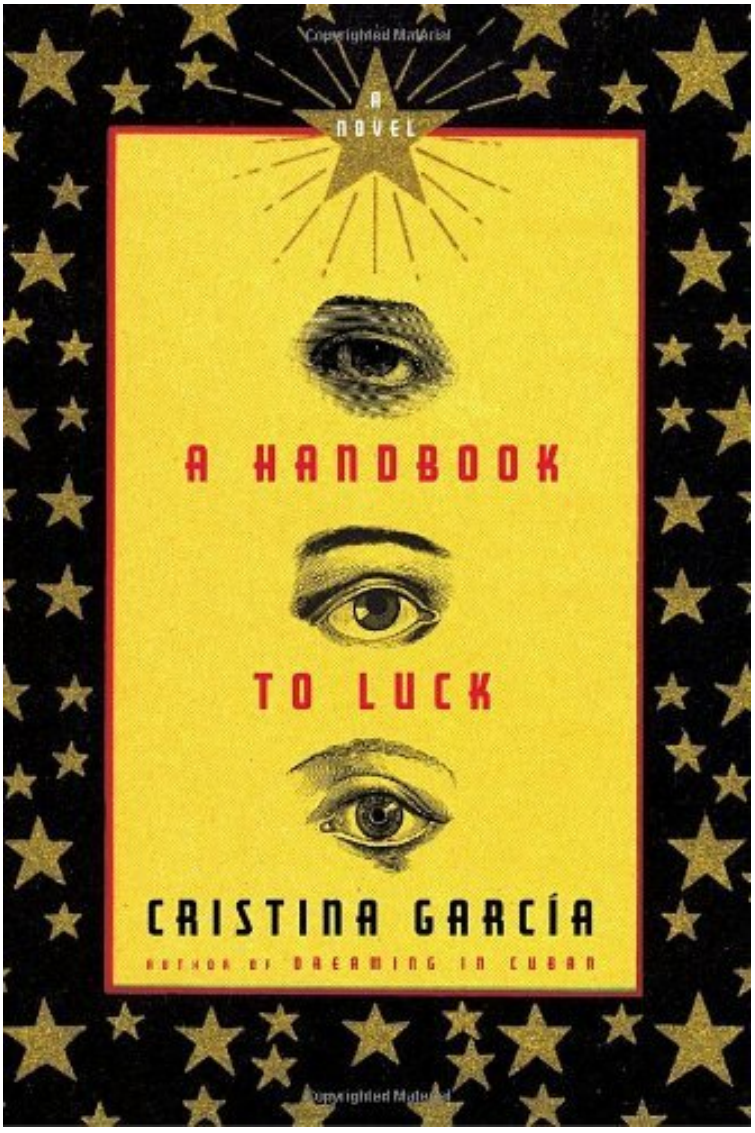
A Handbook to Luck



Par Cristina Garca
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Par Cristina Garca : A Handbook to Luck before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Handbook to Luck:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn the late 60s, three teenagers from around the globe are making their way in the world: Enrique Florit, from Cuba, living in southern California with his flamboyant magician father; Marta Claros, getting by in the slums of San Salvador; Leila Rezvani, a well-to-do surgeon's daughter in Tehran. We follow them through the years, surviving war, disillusionment, and love, as their lives and paths intersect. With its cast of vividly drawn characters, its graceful movement through time, and the psychological shifts between childhood and adulthood, A Handbook to Luck is a beautiful, elegiac, and deeply emotional novel by beloved storyteller Cristina Garca.From the Trade Paperback edition.ExtraitEnrique FloritEnrique Florit climbed the stairs to the roof of his apartment building, which was eye level with the top of the street's jacaranda trees. It had rained that afternoon and dark puddles

stained the cement and the peeling tar paper. When Enrique opened the doors of the wire-mesh cages, the doves fluttered to his shoulders and outstretched arms. Five months ago, he and his father had bought the doves and dyed their feathers a rainbow of pastels. Now Enrique poured their daily seed, freshened their water, listened to the low blue murmurings in their throats.His father had introduced the doves into his act on New Year's Eve. He performed every other weekend at a cocktail lounge in Marina del Rey and needed the doves to compete with the top-billed magician's unicycle-riding parrot. Papi tried to upstage the parrot by having his doves ride a battery-operated motorcycle across a tiny tightrope. Enrique attended the New Year's Eve show. The doves performed unpredictably, sometimes riding on cue, sometimes cooing indifferently from the rim of his father's top hat. A couple flew out of the room altogether.Yet each time Papi strode across the stage in his tuxedo and plum-colored velvet cape, Enrique's heart rose an inch in his chest. He overheard a woman with teased-up hair say to her table companions: Ooooh, he looks just like that Ricky Ricardo! In California, nobody heard much about Cuba except for Ricky Ricardo, the hijackings to Havana, and, of course, El Comandante himself.Enrique coaxed the doves back into their cages one by one. The sunset reddened the hovering dust. A propeller plane took off from the airport to the south. It puttered high over the ocean before turning toward land. During their first months in Los Angeles, Papi had kept a suitcase packed in case they needed to return to Cuba in a hurry. He listened to the Spanish-language radio stations and played boleros every night before bed. He read El Diario for any news of El Comandante's fall and kept their clocks three hours ahead, on Havana time. After a while they grew accustomed to waiting.Their apartment on Seventeenth Street looked out over an alley dominated by an unruly bougainvillea. They were only a mile from the beach, and the ocean air mildewed their walls and linoleum floors. Enrique liked to go to the Santa Monica pier on his skateboard and watch the Ferris wheel and the Mexicans with their fishing rods and empty, hopeful buckets. Papi slept in their one bedroom and Enrique curled up on the living room couch at night. Mam's coral rosary hung on a nail over the television, next to a circus poster from Varadero. In the poster, an elephant with a jeweled headdress stood on its hind legs warily eyeing the ringmaster. An orange tiger roared in the background.Enrique shared the bedroom's cramped closet with his father. Papi's frayed tuxedos were hung up neatly, massive and forlorn looking when emptied of his ample flesh. His shoes looked equally despondent, parked in a double row by Enrique's extra pair of sneakers. Only the white ruffled shirts, starched and at attention, gave off an optimistic air.Once Papi had been famous throughout the Caribbean. He'd performed regularly in the Dominican Republic and Panama and as far south as coastal Colombia. El Mago Gallego. That was his stage name then. Of course, this was long before Enrique's mother died, long before the Cuban Revolution soured, long before they left their house in Crdenas with its marble floors and its ceiling-to-floor shutters and the speckled goose named Pato who guarded their yard.When Mam was still alive, Enrique, in embroidered Chinese pajamas and pretending to water a slowly growing sunflower, sometimes joined his parents on stage. For a year after she died, Enrique barely spoke. He stayed in his Ta Adela's bedroom, where the fierce light shone through the curtains and the bedspread was embroidered with hummingbirds. Outside her window, bunches of bananas ripened before his eyes.His aunt put a little bell by his bed so that Enrique could summon her whenever he wanted. She brought him horchata and miniature cakes with pineapple jam. She fussed over him, too, layering on extra sweaters and a woolen scarf to keep him warm. Ta Adela believed that everything wrong with the body could be treated with heat. In the mornings Enrique woke up breathless and sputtering, convinced that he was drowning. His aunt took him to see Dr. Ignacio Sebrango, a pulmonary specialist with carbuncled arms, who said that Enrique's condition was psychological and had nothing to do with the excellent health of his lungs.Enrique's biggest fear was that he might forget his mother altogether. She'd died when he was six and that was three whole years ago. He replayed memories of her over and over again until they seemed more like an old movie than anything real. Everyone had told him that he was the spitting image of Mam. They both had small frames and fine black hair and skin the color of cinnamon. Only his eyes, a hazel bordering on blue, were like his father's.Sometimes Enrique played with his mother's engraved silver bracelet, which he'd snuck out of Cuba in his travel satchel, or tossed it on one of her empty perfume bottles like a carnival game. Or he unfolded her fan from Panama, meticulously painted with an image of the Indian goddess of love. There were a few photographs, too. In his most treasured one, Mam sat on their veranda in the shade of an acacia reading A Passage to India, her favorite book. Most of all Enrique missed her scent, a gentle mixture of jasmine and sweat.There was leftover Chinese food and four heads of wilted lettuce in the refrigerator, remnants of Papi's brief attempt to improve their diet. Enrique grabbed the carton of milk and poured himself a glass. Then he sat at the kitchen table and tried to make sense of his social studies homework. He was confused by the

variety of North American Indian tribes. The history of Cuba's Indians was simple in contrast: once there were Tanos; now there were none. Enrique suspected that his fourth-grade teacher, Mr. Wonder, deliberately mispronounced his name. He made "Florit" sound like some kind of tropical fungus.After a year and a half in Los Angeles, Enrique spoke English perfectly. His mother, who'd grown up in Panama and was the daughter of the country's water commissioner, had taught Enrique the little English she knew. This gave him an advantage over his father but it didn't account for Papi's terrible trouble with the language. His father tortured each sentence, forcing English into the rapid staccato of Cuban Spanish. He called things he and she, instead of it, and pronounced his j's like y's. His vocabulary was good but his speed and pronunciation made it impossible for anyone to understand him.Papi blamed his accent for stalling his career. A magician's sleight of hand, he told Enrique, was entirely dependent on his ability to focus an audience's attention. If people couldn't understand what he was saying--"Speak English!" some drunk invariably shouted during his performances--how could they be manipulated? Papi said that magic was largely a matter of making ordinary things appear extraordinary with a touch of smoke and illusion.Enrique wished they had stayed in Miami with the other Cubans. At least his father could have performed for them in Spanish, not that the exiles were in any mood for magic these days. Their idea of entertainment would be seeing El Comandante hanging from a Havana lamppost. But everybody had told them that California was the place to go for a career in show business. Papi had begged him to join his magic act again but Enrique had refused. He comforted himself by imagining Mam watching over his life from the sidelines, urging him to say no.Lately, his father talked about moving to Las Vegas. He knew Cubans from the casinos back home who were working on the Strip as pit bosses, blackjack dealers, nightclub managers. Papi was also acquainted with a few mobsters who'd moved their gambling operations there after the Cubans kicked them out of Havana. Las Vegas was growing fast, he said, and soon would become the world capital of magic. Where else could a man start the day with fifty dollars in his pocket and end up a millionaire by nightfall?Enrique turned on the television, forcing the thick knob from one station to the next. There were Abbott and Costello reruns on Channel 9, but he wasn't interested. They only made him laugh when he was sick. He had a slight cough and his neck ached. If he was lucky, he might catch the flu and get to stay home from school for a week. His ribs hurt after a scuffle in the playground. No big deal, just the usual uneven swap of punches with the bully from Ocean Park. It wasn't easy being the new kid (almost everybody else had known each other since kindergarten), and dark-skinned, and the second-shortest boy in the class.The six o'clock news didn't change much. Whenever Enrique saw President Johnson on television, he remembered the American tourists who used to go to Varadero Beach before the revolution and rudely called everyone "boy." Every day more U.S. soldiers were being killed in Vietnam, fighting the Communists. Enrique lost track of how many thousands so far. Why weren't the Americans fighting the Communists in Cuba? What was the difference? And whatever had happened to the men who'd fought in the Bay of Pigs? Why didn't he hear about them? Enrique was suspicious of facts. As far as he could tell, nobody could be sure of anything except numbers, or something you could hold in your own two hands.His paternal grandparents and his aunt had remained in Cuba by choice. Abuelo Arturo still strolled down Avenida Echeverra in his waistcoat and long-chained pocket watch and Abuela Carmen rode around town in a horse-drawn carriage, joining her friends for guayaba pastries on the tiled terrace of La Dominica Hotel. His Ta Adela managed to scrape by knitting baby blankets from old wool. They stayed in Cuba despite the shortages, despite the threat of another yanqui invasion, despite the hurricanes and the blackouts and the clashes with intolerant neighbors because for them, Communism or not, it was still home.At school Enrique's best friend was a Japanese boy named Shuntaro, taller than him by an inch and with the same lanky hair. They spent Saturday afternoons at his grandparents' nursery on Sawtelle Boulevard, with its damp earth smells and its sleeping, lovestruck lily bulbs. The nursery specialized in bonsaithe rear greenhouse was devoted to themand people came from all over California to buy their minuscule junipers and elms. This year they were growing a perfect dwarf pomegranate tree with golf ball-sized fruit.Shuntaro's grandparents listened politely to Papi's stories about magic. Enrique suspected they didn't understand a word he said. His father told themlooking around to include any customers within earshotthat magic was a noble, perilous profession. In the past magicians had been condemned as witches, sorcerers, and devil worshipers and frequently put to death. Only in the last hundred years had professional magicians been able to work without fear of persecution.Papi's hero was Robert-Houdin, the French magician who'd inspired Houdini to adapt his name for the stage. In the 1850s, Robert-Houdin was sent by his government to calm the natives of Algeria with his wondrous feats. He did many things to impress the Arabs, including devising a chest too heavy for the strongest of them to lift and

disappearing a young Moor from under a large cloth cone. By the time he'd completed his tricks, the Arab chiefs had surrendered, pledging their loyalty to France.According to Papi, El Comandante had similarly fooled the Cuban people. After his victory march across the island, thousands of supporters gathered in the capital to celebrate. During El Comandante's speecha deceptive concoction of propaganda and hope, Papi scoffedtop magicians were paid to send trained doves to fly over the crowd. When one of the doves landed dramatically on El Comandante's shoulder during the climax of his speech, the santeros and their followers took this as a sign that he was destined to rule Cuba.To Fernando Florit, everything was connected to magic. When Enrique showed him his history report on Benjamin Franklin, Papi suggested adding a little-known fact to the biography of the inventor. In Franklin's day, he said, the famous illusionist Baron Wolfgang von Kempelen had devised an automated chess player that took on all challengers. "In 1783," Papi crowed, "Benjamin Franklin played against the machine and lost!"Enrique opened the kitchen window and let in a woolly moth bumping up against the pane. A neighbor, cigarette dangling, was testing the engine of his big-finned '57 Cadillac, filling the alley with exhaust fumes. This was a nightly ritual, annoying to everyone in the building except Enrique, who found it oddly soothing. He set the table, heated the kung pao chicken, and put rice to boil, welcoming the familiar starchy smell. Then he finished studying for his vocabulary test and waited for his father to come home.Fernando Florit burst through the front door just after nine o'clock with a box of chocolate clairs and a pink silk scarf around his neck. He entered every room in the same way, swept in like a run of heat, overwhelming everything. Their cups and dishes, bought on sale at the five-and-dime, trembled in the cupboard. He scooped up Enrique and planted a rubbery kiss on his forehead. Then he took his place at the kitchen table. Enrique heaped the steaming Chinese food onto his father's plate alongside the fresh rice.Their ritual never changed. They ate first, talked later. No matter how hungry he was, Enrique waited to eat until his father came home. It was two hours past their usual dinnertime and Papi was starving. He took pride in sharing a meal, no matter how modest, with his son every night. Some days it was the only time they saw each other. Papi was very busy: auditioning, rehearsing, recruiting talent agents, battling the competition, and, occasionally, performing.Enrique studied his father across the table as if he were a natural phenomenon, a geyser, perhaps, or an erupting volcano. At school, Mr. Wonder was teaching science segments on geology and meteorology and Enrique couldn't help comparing Papi to one of the many violent assaults on the earth's crust. He imagined his father causing earthquakes, tsunamis, category 5 hurricanes. Enrique was more like his mother, quiet and thoughtful, preferring to read or work on an interesting math problem. He did advanced algebra and trigonometry for fun. It pleased him to think that mathematicians everywhere spoke the same language.From the Hardcover edition.Revue de presseGraceful. . . . Beautiful. . . . Provocative.USA Today Garcia writes with humor, tenderness and an intuitive sense of how ordinary people weather fortune's turns. If you long for a 'handbook' that reveals how ordinary people become extraordinary, you are in luck.New York Daily News A magically lyrical meditation on life and human dreams . . . Garca [is] a poet of imagery and metaphor. EllePitch-perfect . . .. Garca is still drawn to describe the richness and variety of the immigrant experience. . . . [But] she also fixes her attention on the fundamentally human desire to make sense of the world, to impose order on the chaos of nature and to rationalize one's mysterious place within it. Chicago Tribune