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Why is the word madre, "mother," so complicated in Spanish_especially in Mexico? Leaping off the page with energy, insight, and attitude, Liza Bakewell's exploration of language is anything but "just semantics." Why does me vale madre mean worthless, while ¡qué padre! means fabulous, she asks? And why do one hundred madres disappear when one padre enters the room, converting the group from madres to padres? Thus begins a journey through Mexican culture in all its color: weddings, dinner parties, an artist's studio, heart-stopping taxi rides, angry journalists, corrupt politicians, Blessed Virgins, and mothers both sacred and profane.

Along the way, a reader discovers not only an invaluable lexicon of Mexican slang (to be used with caution or not at all) but also thought-provoking reflections on the evolution of language; its winding path through culture, religion, and politics; and, not least, what it means_and what it threatens_to be a creative female, a madre.