

Found In Translation

Cristina Garcia's three critically acclaimed novels—her most recent success being 'Monkey Hunting'—have struck a chord among readers of all persuasions. Though a six-year resident of Los Angeles, Garcia's characters and sensibilities are far-flung, her meticulous, poetic prose evoking other eras. While Garcia finds many things about L.A. peculiar, the novelist is now 'perversely superstitious' about writing anywhere else, as she explains during a discussion of her striking past, present and her novel-in-progress, 'A Handbook To Luck.'

BY KATHERINE TURMAN

All photos by Carol Sheridan

Garcia reads the last sentence of any book first. “I always go to the end of the book; you never do?” she asks, surprised. “I read the first sentence and the last. And sometimes I won’t read a book because of that. The language and the quality of the beginning and the ending is everything.”

As such, the ending of her own, most recent novel, “Monkey Hunting”: “When Chen Pan drank his red wine, he smiled and became immortal.” And the beginning, set in 1857: “Temptations were plentiful in Amoy.”

And what’s between — a 246-page multi-voiced tale spanning five generations of a family headed by Chen Pan, a Chinese-born Cuban immigrant/slave turned successful shopkeeper and poignant patriarch — features, among other compelling characters, his granddaughter, Chen Fang, a possible bi-sexual born in 1899, raised as a boy and imprisoned during the Chinese cultural revolution; and Pan’s great-great grandson, Domingo Chen, who, “with his heavy accent and brown skin, how could he be American?”

Questions of heritage and belonging are more implied than stated, with Garcia’s writing at once lyrical, historical, intimate, immediate and intricate. And so multifaceted, at times, that the family tree at the beginning of “Monkey Hunting” is a helpful tool even for its author.

“The book went through so many permutations. At one point it was Domingo’s story, with flashbacks to Chen Pan,” Garcia explains. “And it completely shifted gear in the middle and became the great-grandfathers book. There were many understories that got cut. There were chapters and chapters on Domingo’s mother that never made it.”

She even spent a month in Vietnam when the story centered on Domingo, who, in “Monkey Hunting,” is born in 1950 and fights in Vietnam.

“I went with my daughter, who was not even 5 at the time,” she recalls. “That’s when I thought Domingo Chen was still the main character.” In addition to traveling to the places she writes about, Garcia reads much of a particular culture’s poetry. “That’s probably the most important thing I do. I think the poets will distill the culture. All the references, the preoccupations, the anxieties of the culture are embedded in the best poetry of the culture. I also find traveler’s accounts and old guidebooks very useful.”

Garcia is a careful and thorough writer, and though she might demur, her own life is as layered and fascinating as those of the fictional characters she's created in her three lauded novels, which began with 1992's National Book Award finalist "Dreaming In Cuban."

In the living room of her '30s-era, Spanish style Santa Monica home, Garcia, gracious, composed and friendly, reveals a razor-sharp mind and intellect that is belied by her easy laughter and a petite frame casually clad in jeans and an elegant, multi-colored embroidered jacket.

Born in Cuba and raised in New York, after she graduated Barnard and earned a Masters degree from Johns Hopkins International Relations school, Garcia began a decade-long odyssey as a journalist. Her work for UPI and Time found her covering technology in the Bay Area in the mid-'80s, in Haiti for the first democratic election, as well as a stint at the Knoxville Journal in Tennessee. Then there was her favorite assignment, following, by plane, writer Mario Vargas Llosa during his 1990 run for president of Peru. (He lost to Japanese-Peruvian Alberto Fujimori.)

Her fiction is no less engrossing and encompassing than her own history, and in Garcia's triumvirate of books to date, cultures are crossed and mixed, the historical, political and personal are distilled to their essences, with explorations ranging from Shanghai in 1970 to Havana in the late 1800s.

"It's so weird I write all this Cuban stuff, because I'm really a New Yorker," she says. "I didn't grow up with any other Cubans." She grew up in Brooklyn with her parents and sister, working in her family's succession of small businesses, which included a drugstore and a restaurant/bakery, which is referenced in "Dreaming In Cuban," notably in a tense mother-daughter scene where the daughter paints a "punk" Statue of Liberty mural on the family bakery and the normally disapproving mother supports her rebellious offspring.

Though disconnected from her own family in Cuba, Garcia recalls her lineage not as a taboo subject, "but it wasn't terribly discussed in my family. It was beneath the surface, and once in a while there would be a nostalgic tear. My parents arrived and they were pretty traumatized, because they were expecting to return after six months and so they got busy working, and they didn't look up for 25 years."

Still, she returned to Cuba as an adult in the mid-'80s and was surprised by what she found. "It was extremely moving. I went with my sister and all my mother's family was still there—this whole tribe I'd heard about but never met. They were not terribly similar to what my mother had described. I think they had terrible problems; she was the only one of the family who left. They were politically at odds. My parents are very conservative politically and my grandmother is a member of the Communist party still, and that is very much addressed in 'Dreaming in Cuban.' I wasn't sure what to expect, but I had the most amazing time."

Growing up, Garcia wanted to go into the Foreign Service, but the timing was off. "When I graduated in 1981, it was the Reagan era, and I thought, 'excuse me, I'm going to go around the world and spout this?'"

And with her car sporting “Kerry” and “Heal the Bay” bumper stickers, it’s clear where Garcia’s own sympathies still lie. Yet her years as a journalist imbued her with fairness, research skills, attention to detail and an accuracy and curiosity that serve her novels well. Stacked neatly on the floor and in baskets around the desk in her bright second floor home office are piles of books — ranging from Persian myths to Lonely Planet Guides to “Persepolis — the Story of a Childhood” to a poker reference book. And, fittingly, her computer monitor is planted firmly atop a massive dictionary.

Though “Monkey Hunting” is finding a new audience every day, as a recent reading at Skylight Books proved, she’s in the midst of a new novel, tentatively titled “A Handbook to Luck” that ranges from the late ‘60s to late ‘80s. “It’s a sort of triptych; one part is an L.A.-Las Vegas thing.” Hence the poker book. Of the three main characters, “one of them is Cuban and male. He’s the one in L.A. and Las Vegas, that part of the book is a father-son story. The father is a magician trying to make it Vegas. The other two characters and settings are in Iran and El Salvador. They are all characters who come from revolutions and end up in L.A. for various reasons. I’m still sorting it out.”

As for her own L.A. story, she came to the city six years ago so her now-nearly 12-year-old daughter Pilar could spend time with her father, Garcia’s ex-husband, Scott Shibuya Brown, a writer and professor at Cal State Northridge. The former couple remains close, Brown still one of her first reader/editors, and, she notes, also a great resource: “Before there was Google, there was [Pilar’s] dad! He will know everything I can possibly need.”

As for being part of an L.A. writer’s community, she’s close friends with Mona Simpson (“Anywhere But Here”), and in fact currently resides in her former home, but calls any kinship among the city’s literati “fairly modest. Part of it is the peculiar way L.A. is laid out. People don’t really go to readings here the way they do in the Bay Area or New York.

“There’s something kinda splendidly anonymous about being a fiction writer out here,” she observes. “Nobody really gives a shit.” As many of her characters search for home and identity, Garcia has several of her own. “I guess Cuban-American, or Latina more generally or a New Yorker,” she muses. As a former New York dweller, she’s still finding out odd things about Los Angeles and the attitudes of some of its denizens.

“I remember the girl across the street — we lived in Westwood at the time — and she came over and said to my daughter, ‘you know, only maids speak Spanish.’ And there’s a lot of that here. It’s astonishing to me; it’s something I didn’t feel growing up in New York. There’s a feeling of an underclass here.”

At one point, living on Wilshire Boulevard, Garcia made use of the city’s public transportation, much to the horror of her L.A. friends. “Everyone was like, ‘you’re taking the bus?!’ And they say, ‘you’re sending your daughter to public school?!’”

Also, she says, “more than any other place I’ve ever been, they say, ‘oh, you speak English so well.’” Though she’s amazed by many peculiarities of the city, “perversely, I’m now

superstitious about writing anywhere but L.A.! Part of the new book is set in L.A. I felt that since I never really belonged here, it was a good place to contemplate other places — it leaves me free to think of Cuba or China or ‘live’ in other places.”

As a Hodder Fellow, she spent a year in Princeton, where she began a now-shelved novel, recalling the painful time in New Jersey, “I couldn’t write there; it was a mess. So now I’ve gotten weirdly mystical about writing in L.A. It’s the only place I can write. So partly to break that spell, this new book is set in a number of different places, but partly in L.A. and I’m wondering what that will do.”

Garcia’s daughter and a friend, fresh from a ballet class, come bounding into the living room, proudly presenting bunny-shaped sugar cookies warm from the oven. Garcia, clearly a doting mother, has a hip character named Pilar in “Dreaming in Cuban,” though in the book, she was originally named Natalia until the last draft. Pilar, in fact, was a named picked out by Brown for a future daughter before Garcia was even pregnant, and the real Pilar was born six months after “Dreaming in Cuban” was published.

Her daughter’s own heritage, in some part, informed “Monkey Hunting.” “The mix and the dialogue with Asia... My daughter is part Japanese, part everything; her grandmother is from Yokohama.”

Despite being published by Knopf (the hardcover of “Monkey Hunting”) and in paperback by Ballantine Reader’s Circle, nearly four novels into her career, Garcia still does not think, “now I’m a novelist.”

She pauses. “It was kinda paralyzing to have a first book come out and have it somewhat well received. This sounds so churlish and ridiculous because we should all have this problem, right?! But it created enormous anxiety for me for doing something else. It sets up expectations, and it took a long time to distance myself from it and write again for the pleasure of the sentences and that I was able to find my ground again, and really, that’s what motivates me every day. More than anything else. Anything else I get this static, crazy feel, and it’s not good. If I sit at a doctor’s office and pick up a ‘People’ magazine, it takes me like three days to get that out of my system. You have to kinda protect yourself from all the crap out there. All the stuff barging in and altering your purpose. Compromising how you write.”

Which is why a TV is conspicuously absent from the house’s main rooms. And why, though, her books have been optioned for Hollywood movies, she swears she’s never even considered who might play any of her literary creations.

“I can’t tell you how aggravated I was every time I saw that billboard for ‘Maid in Manhattan,’ or whatever what was. It just irritated the hell of me. Or ‘A Day Without a Mexican,” she says, her voice rising. “It just... ask my daughter. Every time I saw Jennifer Lopez up there with the toilet rolls — not so much her — but how incredibly limited the roles are for people of color.” The non-fiction Pilar is a bit young for her mother’s work, though the matriarch tries to guide her daughter’s reading sensibilities to some extent. “Those ‘Harry Potter’ books have ruined everybody,” Garcia laughs. “When she was in fourth grade, she read the four ‘Harry Potter’

books straight through 10 times in this weird obsessive-compulsive way, and nothing seemed as good to her and she got restless. It took an effort to derail her.”

An avid reader of Chekov, biographies and with bookshelves filled with Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid, John Irving and Sanford Ungar, Garcia credits poetry with helping her make a literary leap of faith. Poetry is also read by her characters and sprinkled throughout her novels, within the text and as chapter prefaces.

“I didn’t really read poetry until my late twenties. And part of that intoxication I gave to the Celia character in ‘Dreaming in Cuban;’ the whole Garcia Lorca fixation became sort of my fixation. If it weren’t for poetry, I probably wouldn’t be writing. I thought about [fiction] for five years before I even started writing anything, but it was the poetry that goaded me. I published one poem in my whole life, it was the first thing I ever published, and it was in the *Jacaranda Review*, out of UCLA.”

So she never went through dozens of rejection slips for poems and first novels? “No, I just sent the one poem to them, weirdly enough; I had a premonition.”

That poem was the beginning of “Dreaming in Cuban,” or as Garcia calls it, a “mini-blueprint for the novel. I was almost auditioning things in poems because they seemed manageable to me. I felt I could do it and finish, as opposed to a longer work that seemed way too intimidating. In my tentative way, I would build on the poem.”

She worked on crafting the poems into her first novel with UCLA writing teacher and author Kate Braverman, and found a supporter in novelist Russell Banks, with whom she shares an agent. Lines from the original poem are in the novel, and, as she picks up a copy of “Dreaming in Cuban,” oddly, it opens right to page 36 and the very poem. “How bizarre,” she says. I’m sorry, that is so unbelievable!”

She looks over her work before reading aloud: “The spring rains made her edgy. The greenery hurt her eyes. She saw mourning doves peck at carrion on her doorstep and visited the botanicas for untried potions.”

Her writing features words and sentences in Spanish, and more than once, when asked about specific passages, she’ll mumble quickly to herself in Spanish, finding the phrase and repeating it in English.

For “Monkey Hunting,” she tended to think in Spanish a fair amount. “Because a lot of this takes place in Spanish, I’m approximating in English what’s happening in Spanish and I try to be a little sensitive to the rhythm. And sometimes, not always, but dialogue especially will go through my head in Spanish. Not the descriptive passages, but dialogue often will. Then I make it kind of feel like Spanish in English.”

The language shifts were intuitive. “Maybe it was a problem, but I didn’t have any rules for using it, just when it seemed intuitively right to use Spanish, and would seem awkward to use the English.”

Garcia thinks of her writing simply as literary fiction, though it has been taught in Latino literature courses, American lit courses and Women's Studies courses, so there's an overlap which pleases her. She guesstimates her books have been translated into a dozen languages, and she recalls that by not participating in the Spanish translation of "Dreaming In Cuban," "it came out a little weird, like Spanish from Spain. It sounds like a bunch of people from Madrid on the beach. It didn't work. 'The Aguero Sisters' was translated by a Cuban poet who grew up in Puerto Rico, and it has a really nice feel. I made such a fuss with those translations that they did 'Monkey Hunting' without my knowledge!"

But not much gets by Garcia. Though she laments that she doesn't have enough discipline, working when her daughter is in school, for Garcia, an ideal day is six hours, though she clocks four to five hours most days. "I'm reading a lot of that time. The actual writing, I don't know. Today, I just got to the end of a draft of this book, so I'm editing part two that I just finished. So I very carefully, carefully went through a chapter a couple of times and started a new one, just once. I completely tore apart [one chapter]. It was a 12-page chapter that is now about two pages. The other one was fine, I built on it, I built an extra page and reworked. And that was my day."

Her literary life is not something she takes for granted, and she also teaches and is an in-demand public speaker on a number of subjects. "People are very interested lately in this notion of multi-cultural identity and what's happening and how is that reflected in the literature that is being produced." She'll also speak on Latino literature, issues of exile or identity, and of course, readings of her own work are often requested.

Garcia earns raves for her lyrical and poetic style, which pleases her. "To me, the sentences are everything. How they sound and look. The details. That's everything. More than plot, more than other conventions of writing fiction. That's why I think I get a little restless sometimes reading contemporary fiction, because I have to be really interested on a language level."

Her own novels, with their many layers, forms (including epistolary) and points of view, are written in what she terms and "obsession-based" manner. "Whatever really interests me that day. Even if it doesn't follow in any linear fashion. I need to be writing what's interesting me NOW. It's very 2-year-old tantrum. That goes on for a good year until I get this big mess of a thing. And then I figure out where the story is and what I want to do. And it changes."

Countless drafts later, she has even cut scenes and characters she loves. And rarely do they reappear in other works. "It becomes the detritus. But," she observes, "having written it informs what still remains. There's no shortcut and it's not efficient and, by conventional standards, you have to be willing to waste a lot of time."

She appears remarkably un-neurotic for a novelist, and, having been a journalist, understands the subjectivity of reviews, even when they're the rare negative. "I would feel bad if I had any way let a book go before it was ready. What happens out there I have no control over and I'm OK. That's not to say I don't feel a twinge. Once in awhile you get a review where someone gets it. That happened in the 'L.A. Times' with 'Monkey Hunting' in terms of the whole notion of compression, and that's really satisfying," she concludes. "It's just one person at a time here."

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