



## How History Inspires Cristina García to Fill in the Gaps

The acclaimed novelist began her career in journalism before her first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*, cemented her place in the American literary canon. Now, as Cristina prepares to release her eighth novel, *Vanishing Maps*, she shares her process for world-building, and her affirmation for anyone who believes they too have a story to tell.

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**Alicia Menendez:** More than 30 years ago, Cristina García exploded onto the American literary scene with her debut novel, *Dreaming in Cuban*. Publicly, she was lauded as the next big thing. Privately, she was a new mom trying to get her bearings. We talk about that period, the deep historical dives that inform her works of fiction, including her newest novel, *Vanishing Maps*, and Cristina's insights on the importance of pursuing creative work even when nothing is guaranteed. Cristina, thank you so much for doing this.

**Cristina García:** Oh, such a pleasure.

**Menendez:** I remember reading *Dreaming in Cuban*, and there were lots of parts of it that were very resonant for me as a Cuban, but one of the things I remember was being like, oh, this is a Cuban from the New York, New Jersey, tri-State area, and that is not where the Cuban narrative is often centered. I'm curious for you, having been born in Cuba, coming to the United States when you're two years old, I often hear you talk about sort of being in Queens and moving to Brooklyn Heights. What was that internal migration that was happening and what was it that was motivating those moves?

**García:** We were really the outliers of the extended Garcia clan. Everyone, even if they tried New York or tried Texas, all ended up in Miami. And so we were just this isolated family. I grew up pretty much not knowing any other Cubans except some cousins in Staten Island, so it was a very self-referential life. I felt like it was very bifurcated. I'd go in the door through the basement door of our address at 37 1/2 Remsen Street in Brooklyn Heights, and it was, oh, 1953 Havana, and I'd go out the door and it was '70s, go-go '70s, Brooklyn, New York City, high school in Manhattan, and there was just no reconciling the two. And so I kind of learned every day to cross that border and knew that the rules were different, the expectations were different, and I think it actually has served me pretty well in terms of adaptability.

**Menendez:** It certainly is a big part of what drives your work, this idea of crossing borders, both physical and metaphysical. But this is not where you start your career. You start your career in journalism as a reporter, later as a bureau chief. What happens in 1990 that you decide to commit yourself full-time to writing fiction?

**García:** I would say that kind of began in around '87, '88 when I was the Miami Bureau chief for Time Magazine. Couple of things happened. I couldn't get to Cuba as a journalist, endlessly frustrating, even though I had already visited as a US citizen. Then I just was getting more and more frustrated with the amount of space I had to work with, which kept

shrinking in those days until it felt like I was writing descriptions for photographs or whatever. And so I just was restless and clamoring for more room. And then the third piece of that puzzle, '87, '88, was I started reading poetry, and that was the big game changer for me. And so I traveled a lot. I needed more room for the stories I wanted to tell, and I spent every spare minute running baths and reading, and that's when I started writing *Dreaming in Cuban*.

Menendez: I've spoken with many writers about their writing process and I've heard everything. Photos up on the wall, clearing the desk, busy working moms who have written entire novels in the car between soccer pickups and dance drop-offs. One of the things I find interesting about your process, Cristina, is that you really allow yourself this pre-novel immersion, poems in the bath, or doing a very deep dive into a subject area. If you would, give me a sense of what that looks like. Do you give yourself, at the outset sort of, you get two months to deep dive and then at the end of the two months you got to pull yourself out? Or do you allow the process to take you where it takes you?

García: Initially, I would say things are very front-loaded. I'm reading up a storm. That's when I know something else is afoot is when suddenly I'm reading about 1990s post Soviet Union era and the writers and articles and books and yeah, I mean, I get very obsessive about what I'm reading and I feel like I need to know as much as possible before I can release them and have a basis from which to spring into the imaginative realm of that terrain. I need to know the terrain very well so I can springboard off of it. And so as I'm writing a novel, as I was writing *Vanishing Maps*, I kept discovering more things I didn't know about, and so I kept hurrying to read, to research, to set the research aside and then see where that would lead me. And I often find opportunities, whether they're for characters or incidents or whatever, just from reading history. And I'm like, "Wow, really? They bombed the zoo, the Berlin Zoo several times during World War II, and the crocodiles escaped and frightened the housewives?" So I pull a detail like that and it becomes a scene, it becomes a memory. It becomes something that someone else needs to tell more fully. So it's almost like I look for little opportunities, and whether it's Cuban history or 20th century European history or anything else, I feel like they're little gills, breathing gills of opportunity throughout history that have been neglected and have been submitted and obfuscated by the capital H histories that we're used to navigating.

Menendez: I think part of the reason I was so taken by that piece of your process is, you'll tell me if this is the same for you, which is, I come from a family of doers, and I come from a legacy of doers, and so there's something that feels very indulgent about being able to sit in a chair with a beam of sunshine coming through the window and just reading history and not getting to what feels to me like the doing which is, butt in the chair, fingers on the computer, going. How do you give yourself that permission to see that work as part of the doing?

García: Yeah, that's such an excellent question because I too come from a family of doers. In fact, it's quite the mercantile clan. And just what you described, if I would just be sitting looking out the window, literally my father would walk into the room and say, "You're burning daylight." That was his famous phrase, you're burning daylight. I'm burning daylight? I'm like 11 years old. Give me a effing break, right? And since they were immigrant trying to make it, establish themselves, we were part of that and we absorbed that. So I feel like I've been working since I was eight years old in one way or another. I was on a little still behind

the cash register with all the old ladies in Brooklyn Heights triple counting their change because they couldn't believe that someone under four feet was ringing them up. But there is nothing less economical than writing a novel. There is nothing that you're guaranteed, embarking on a novel. You're only really entitled to the time and the work, not the outcome, essentially. So the way I figure that out for myself is that no matter what I'm doing, it's all pouring in to this sort of larger watery terrain of what I'm dealing with. If I started accounting for my time the way my parents accounted for my time as a child, "You're burning daylight, Cristina." "¿Que estás haciendo?", right? I don't know what I would be doing. I would probably be maniacally ironing my shirts. I have no idea what I would be doing .

Menendez: When you'd release *Dreaming in Cuban* in my perception, so you'll tell me if the experience of it was different, which is you become a literary it girl, right? All of the quotes from the time are like, "Cristina Garcia's remaking American literature." But did it feel that way to you? And was that as fun as one imagines it to be? Or did that feel like a responsibility and a burden being an it girl?

García: All of the above and then some because when *Dreaming in Cuban* was published, I was several months pregnant with my daughter, and so when those accolades started coming in, I was the mother of a newborn. Exhausted, sleepless, not the most with it. I was like stained and disheveled for the next two years. I remember my mother talking me into this weird hairdo by her Russian hairdresser before I went off to an award ceremony, and I confirmed this with my ex-husband not too long ago, and my daughter who was infant, that it was something out of Sputnik. I had this weird Marge Simpson hairdo, and that goes to show you how far gone I was at that point. I see pictures, it was like, who is that woman? So I didn't really have much of a clue about anything until *The Agüero Sisters* came out five years later, and I kind of crawled to the finish line of that book because I had another book I couldn't finish before then, and so much happened, but in '97, I had come out of that derangement, that new mom derangement, and was able to put on lipstick for all these things.

Menendez: Yeah, my youngest one is going on four in August. I'm still waiting to crawl out of the derangement.

García: Okay, so you know what I'm talking about, right?

Menendez: I mean, look at me, Cristina. It looked like I haven't had a shower in three days. I know. I know.

García: Exactly. Exactly. And so it was then that I retroactively, I realized the impact that it had had. And I was so again, retroactively pleased, but I was in the moment when it happened happened, I didn't feel like the it girl, I felt like the has been girl.

Menendez: One of the surprising things to hear you reflect upon on *Dreaming in Cuban* is you were surprised by how Cuban you were. That it really came pouring out of you in ways that you had not previously self-acknowledged or self-identified.

García: So true. And I think part of it was first to what I was talking about earlier, which was I was very compartmentalized. So my Cuban self was quite compartmentalized, and I didn't, frankly, as a kid, have much use for it except for domestic survival. And so when I started to write, no one was more surprised than me at everything that came out. Everything that I had been absorbed and storing up and taking note of, or as my mother would say, "You were looking at me with a magnifying glass." She wouldn't talk like this, but I'll do it with

her accent anyway, "Who can serve such scrutiny?" And it's true. And because I didn't, as I was growing up, have others to really bounce this off of or look at the larger culture and say, "Okay, I'm not alone. This is part of a larger cultural dysfunction." It was just, I had interjected it all, and I don't know what the opposite of interject is, but it got expressed fully, especially in the case of the Lourdes character who's based on my mother.

Menendez: Your name comes up very, very often in interviews with Latina writers because as you can imagine, those of us who grew up in the '80s and '90s, your book was among the first, if not the first book, by a fellow Latina writer who was put in our hands. And one of the things that I've referenced on the podcast before is reading *Dreaming in Cuban* and being like, "She wrote about sex, and her parents are going to read this, and they're going to know." I think it's hard to capture the element of liberation or rebelliousness. So it's funny to me because I see in all of your work, not only the Cuban diaspora at home, but I see the swing of 1970s Brooklyn right outside your window.

García: Oh, yeah. Yeah. They clashed a lot more on the page than they did in real life. I mean, I knew what I could and couldn't bring home. I knew what I could and couldn't say. I couldn't wear bell-bottoms that was considered hippie communist play wear. So the divide was extremely clear to me growing up, but when it came time to writing about it and writing across the border, back and forth, back and forth, it generated, I think for me and maybe for others who had similar experiences of bridging two cultures, generations. It's not just one generation. It's not just I'm one generation younger than my mother. It's more like three generations in terms of the culture.

Menendez: I was reading an interview of yours, and this quote popped out to me, and I want to read it to you and you could tell me what in your own life this has been true. You said, "What's most interesting to me are these slow, internal, often largely unconscious processes that move people in unexpected directions that reframe and refine their own notions of who they are." We talked about motherhood. Imagine motherhood was a major reframing and refining. Which other periods of your life have created that type of slow but seismic internal shift?

García: Well, there's nothing like motherhood to shift the paradigm completely. But I would say even before then, moving out from the fairly controlled environments of my childhood, I mean, I would say my home environment, but also I was a cautious person. Unlike the Pilar character, I was really more cautious. I was always sort of sticking my head out and seeing if it was safe kind of feeling.

And I think when I became a journalist, I was thrust into unknown situations continually, and I had to get my bearings very quickly, and I had to figure out, especially when I was covering the Caribbean and when I was covering the Caribbean as part of being the Miami Bureau chief, I was in Haiti all the time, and Haiti was blowing up, and their first democratic elections were utterly derailed and became violent, and I had to become this other person. I had to perform a kind of fearlessness that I didn't feel. And eventually over time, I grew more confidence in that performance and that some of it seeped into me as an individual. And so for me to be able to trust my own observational capacities, translate that into language that is then informing an informed public was huge. And as soon as I felt that I kind of got that down, I went back to the fairytales. I went back to making shit up.

Menendez: Cristina, many of our listeners have things they want to do that seem relegated to daydream, right? I got a lot of doctor lawyer engineers with big creative dreams that they're just not sure are meant for them. As someone who's made your life and your career

in the arts, what is the pep talk you give another Latina who is not sure that she is worthy or destined to have the same?

García: I don't know if it's a pep talk, but it's certainly something I believe fervently, which is that whether you choose to write or not ultimately is up to you, your circumstances, what else is competing for your time, how desperately you want it, so many things. But what I don't question is that each individual has exquisitely crenelated specific stories to tell that only you can tell. So if you're not going to tell those specific crenelated stories, then they're not going to exist in the world. That's your choice. We won't miss them because we won't know what we have missed. But if you feel a burning desire to share that, I'll be your first reader.

Menendez: Cristina García, this was such a delight. Thank you so much for doing this.

García: Oh, this is so fun. So thank you. Thank you.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com), slide into our DMs on Instagram, or Tweet us @latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise at [latinatolatina.com/shop](http://latinatolatina.com/shop), and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

**CITATION:**

Menendez, Alicia, host. "How History Inspires Cristina García to Fill in the Gaps." *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios. July 17, 2023. [LatinaToLatina.com](http://LatinaToLatina.com).

Produced by:

