

Ana Menéndez on Crafting a Connected Cast of Characters

Jane Ciabattari Talks to the Author of *The Apartment*

By Jane Ciabattari

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Ana Menéndez’s dazzling new novel-in-stories expands upon her revelatory chronicles of Cubans and Cuban-Americans that started with her first story collection, *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd* (with its unforgettable opening line, “Here in America, I may be a short, insignificant mutt, but in Cuba I was a German shepherd.”). *The Apartment* is an evocative, haunting narrative weaving in multiple voices over a span of decades (even centuries, including the opening pages) and including immigrants from points around the globe. All are connected through an art deco building in South Miami Beach.

Our conversation tilted toward influences (John Cheever, Virginia Woolf, Georges Perec, Alejo Carpentier, Juan Rulfo) and subtleties of process, creating a master class on the page. Menéndez’s career as a fiction writer, as well as her wide ranging journalistic and academic careers, have shaped the global perspective and deep understanding of the craft of writing that shine through *The Apartment*.

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Jane Ciabattari: How have your life and work been during these times of tumult and uncertainty? Where have you been living during the pandemic? At what stage was this new novel when it began? How was the progression, the launch, affected?

Ana Menéndez: I’ve been much luckier than most during these times of pandemic and tumult. We lost neither loved ones nor employment—in fact I began a new faculty position in the middle of lockdown, August 2020. When the pandemic began, I was in—I don’t know—revision number 1,000 or something. I had started the book in 2011, but the writing was slow going: first because of a new baby, then a new job (creating a writing program from scratch at Maastricht University), then another new job and a move back to the States, and finally an administrative position at FIU which was wonderful and creative, but which left me with little time for writing. After the pandemic, we were all in a kind of numb limbo, even those of us who were lucky.

And then there was the terrible political situation, the attack on the capital. But, thanks to the new faculty position, and lots of professional and personal support, I was able to find time and mental space to keep writing. I met the wonderful Dan Smetanka at Counterpoint and the edits were going well and then... I finally came down with Covid in the summer of 2022, which delayed us a bit.

But here we are, at last. I say this in the acknowledgements, but all books are communal projects and this one was no exception. So grateful for the wonderful editing I received at Counterpoint. And for the unwavering (and often unremunerative!) support of my agent, Joy Harris.

JC: I'm fascinated by the way you structure *The Apartment*—linked stories revolving around Apartment 2B in one building, the Helena in Miami Beach—over decades, indeed centuries. Is there an apartment building like this one in Miami Beach?

AM: I think so—all over the old Art Deco district in Miami Beach, in fact: wonderful buildings that activists worked hard to preserve (and are still working—just this year there was another move to try to “redevelop” that district). Many of the buildings came up in the 1930s and 40s. Too many stories to recount inside all those walls! I myself have lived all over the beach, near 41st, near Third (before the area was built up) and finally in a building very much like the Helena on Jefferson Avenue. Though, of course, The Helena is the product of imagination, much of the life and circumstances would be familiar to anyone who lived on the beach over these past decades.

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JC: On my first read of *The Apartment*, I thought of John Cheever's short story “The Enormous Radio,” in which a couple in an apartment building in New York City begin to hear conversations by their neighbors over a new radio they've bought. And of the “Time Passes” section of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, which describes years passing in the empty house at the shore where the Ramsey family and friends have summered. (“The house was left; the house was deserted. It was left like a shell on a sandhill to fill with dry salt grains now that life had left it.”) What was the origin story for *The Apartment*? What gave you that first inkling of the novel to come?

AM: I'm not familiar with that Cheever story! But Cheever remains a huge influence, if not so much in style, in philosophy. Every time I pass through a new housing development, I remember a line from one of his stories about “everything smelling like

shirt boards.” And the strangeness of “The Swimmer” continues to inspire me, a reminder of all the magic that literature is capable of, no matter where a story is set.

And absolutely on Woolf—another guiding light. I don’t know how many times I’ve read *To the Lighthouse*, each time (as with Cheever) with awe at what literature can do. That section you quote no doubt had an influence on this book, as did her short story, “A Haunted House:” ““Safe, safe, safe,” the heart of the house beats proudly. “Long years —” he sighs. “Again you found me.” “Here,” she murmurs, “sleeping; in the garden reading; laughing, rolling apples in the loft. Here we left our treasure—”

Still gives me chills.

I’ve been such a voracious and eclectic reader for so many years that there can’t really be a single origin story for any book I write. But the initial spark for *The Apartment* was lit in 2010 when I read, for the first time, Georges Perec’s remarkable work, *Life: A User’s Manual* (*La Vie Mode d’Emploi*). I had to catch my breath after finishing it—it was so exhilarating. Just the density of lives and ideas and even banalities in that single apartment building. And the structure fascinated me—each “story” is written according to a series of elaborate constraints and their appearance in the novel follows the Knight’s Tour of the chessboard.

So: very formally precise and inventive and unlike anything I had ever read. The first drafts of this novel were titled *That Awful Incident on the Villa Baldini* and took place on a suburban street, hewing pretty closely to Perec’s structure and formula. With time, I dropped many of the constraints and the pastiche. Then (I can’t remember when exactly) my husband’s tenant left behind a suitcase in the apartment he was renting (I wrote about this in an [essay](#) that Lit Hub will publish this month I believe).

And I became very curious about this suitcase. Why leave it behind? What does it contain? And that led to questions about other travelers in the apartment. What did they leave behind? One of the reasons this novel took so long (apart from all that was going on in my life) is that it grew very intuitively, which is to say slowly. I rarely have any idea what I’m going to say in a book, just some curiosity, some question, some problem I’d like more clarity on. And this novel was especially free-form.

So much of it developed in conversation with my generous early readers, notably the scholar Isabel Alvarez-Borland. As I wrote and she and I talked, I returned again and again to the idea of what we owe one another. That beautiful line of Seneca’s: “Our common life is founded on kindness and harmony; it is bound in a compact of mutual assistance, not by fear, but by love of one another.” (Ward Farnsworth translation).

JC: What were your other influences as you shaped this novel? (In addition to Woolf, Perec, Cheever, I think also of Alejo Carpentier.)

AM: Yes, Alejo Carpentier remains an influence on everything I write. Also Juan Rulfo and César Aira, whose enigmatic short novel *Ghosts* delighted me. More recently Elena Ferrante for the brilliant way she often avoids sense-making in favor of almost disorienting moments of magic (seems a reduction of what she's doing in the Neapolitan Quartet with the shattering pot or in *Days of Abandonment* with the disembodied woman to merely call it "magic").

And Olga Tokarczuk's work is a constant source of awe to me as a writer. There are so many more I could mention: Italo Calvino, Jean Toomer, Daniela Hodrova, Sandra Cisneros, James Baldwin (for the way his fiction is powered, for example, by connection and interconnection). And the work of Svetlana Alexievich has been hugely influential: the voices she gathers in *Secondhand Time*. So devastating and brilliant. Really, the list is very long. I do consider myself a reader before I consider myself a writer.

JC: Your opening shows us a woman "collecting the eggs of nesting sea turtles this evening..." She lives in the time generations before the arrival of Menendez de Aviles, who claimed Florida for Spain in 1565. You end that first section with a comment to the reader: "But you who exist outside of time, look: The setting sun drops its boulder of night. Within heartbeats, the land disappears.

In the morning out of the mangroves rise hundreds of new buildings, smooth and whiter than sand—dazzling in their monstrous beauty." What inspired this perspective, and the poetic sections that follow, which seem to be from the point of view of the place itself ("*Time, spooky and fickle. Not arrow, but snake*" and "*The apartment is between tenants again.... The curtains are drawn, the lights are out*")?

AM: Again the influences are many, but I've been interested lately in the way the reader is situated in the novel. Reading is itself a temporal act, but it's outside the temporality of the novel itself. So in many ways the "voice" in a novel, which is the reader's voice as well, leaks out of the pages, joins the contemporary. We learn these three basic POVs in school, of course, and they're a good enough short-hand.

But if you read a lot, you realize there is so much gradation there: narrators who sit just aslant of the story they're telling, unreliable narrators, judgy narrators, and in the case of Woolf, buildings and time itself that tell stories. I earlier mentioned Olga Tokarczuk, one of the most exciting innovators writing today. In her Nobel speech she talked about the "fourth person narrator" (From her speech: "I also dream of a new kind of narrator—a "fourth-person" one, who is not merely a grammatical construct of course, but who manages to encompass the perspective of each of the characters, as well as having the capacity to step beyond the horizon of each of them, who sees more and has a wider view, and who is able to ignore time.")

It's a style that's on full display in her book *House of Day, House of Night*, for example. And some of those ideas undoubtedly influenced me as I was thinking of who or what is telling this story. Incidentally, it was Dan Smetanka's idea to include this section before recorded time, to return to what the land was and I'm really grateful to him because I think it opens up the story in a way that emphasizes what I think is one of the central ideas in the book—that interconnected sense of history with a small "h".

JC: Your first resident, newlywed Sophie, moves into apartment 2B in the Helena on January 8, 1942, as the wife of an officer in the U.S. Army Corps, which has requisitioned the building. "Some days, when there's a strong north wind, the smell of gunpowder fills the apartment," you write. Sophie sees the building as a "remarkably egalitarian, village... Everyone a transplant from somewhere else; everyone united in the war effort."

But that doesn't last long. German torpedoes strike in the night, leaving a neutral oil tanker burning. Sophie loses her innocence in that moment. "War is a tunnel bored through the darkness. All of us riding blind, unsure what awaits us in the shadows until a flash reveals the faces of fiends." You build the story toward this moment. And the other stories of residents of the Helena, as well. Did you write these stories in search of these moments of realization, moments of truth.

AM: I think so, yes. Why do we tell stories? For me, I'm interested in what learning takes place. What foundation is shaken? What idea is abandoned? What new understanding emerges from the actions the characters either enact or passively receive? More than conflict, what drives the stories I care about (both mine and others') is this idea of connection and disconnection; of previously held beliefs that give way to new information, perhaps even new ways of living.

JC: Ultimately, this novel includes characters affected by decades of conflict—World War II, the fall of Batista and Fidel Castro's regime, including the "special period," when so many were in dire straits, struggling to find food; the Vietnam War, with PTSD still afflicting veterans; the fall of the Berlin wall and the Prague Spring, the Tajiks fighting against the Taliban under the leadership of Massoud, who was murdered the day before September 11, the violence in Honduras, which has had the highest murder rate in the world between 2010 and 2015. This creates a distillation of moments, immigrants and troubled souls who arrive at the Helena from various points around the world, seeking shelter, seeking home. How did you choose the conflicts to include, reaching far beyond this region?

AM: Thank you for noting this, Jane. I was a freelance reporter and photographer in several conflict zones about twenty-five years ago and the experience left a life-long mark on me. I certainly didn't do the work long enough to call myself a war

correspondent, but it was long enough to see the warping effects of violence, both at the individual level and at the societal.

I've been interested for a long time in how the trauma of war and displacement plays out across generations. So this was one of the main ideas I wanted to explore in the novel. Many of the conflicts in this novel have ties to the United States, which of course can sadly be said of many conflicts in the world today. We are all implicated. But simply on a craft level, as a writer, there were some conflicts that I wanted to include for personal reasons.

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The conflict in Lebanon is one of them, as my great-grandparents fled to Cuba following early conflict there at the turn of the last century. The violence in Cuba and its long aftermath is of course a special obsession as the daughter of Cuban immigrants. And the conflict in Afghanistan looms large for us as Americans and for me personally as I spent ten unforgettable days in the country in 1998.

JC: How did you build your catalogue of characters, residents of this building from Sophie to Eugenio, the Cuban concert pianist turned wedding player who left Havana in 1952 as Batista was about to be deposed, and is still in the apartment ten years later. Pilar the journalist, recently "involuntarily separated" after eighteen years at the "Miami Horror," and forced to move back in with her parents; Lenin Garcia, a young Cuban man who worked as a prostitute ("It was the fastest way to obtain hard currency after the special period") and dies in 2B in 2011, and Lana, a painter who has relocated to Apartment 2B from Cairo and learns of Lenin Garcia's death from her neighbors.

AM: Oh in the early Perec-influenced version, there was really a cast of thousands! These are the ones who passed the audition and got call backs. I can't really say how I settled on them. They just felt right. I did want them to reflect a range of experience and outlooks. I didn't want them to be merely ciphers for my ideas (though perhaps it is inevitable that our characters become that unless we have the powers of Dostoevsky).

JC: By what process did you arrive at the story told by Lenin Garcia's disembodied voice?

AM: Like everything else in this eternal novel, it was a very long process. I wish I would have kept a journal while I was writing it, because I've forgotten why I made some of the decisions I did. All I can say is it just felt right, which I know is very unhelpful. Initially

there was much more about Lana's story in Cairo and then I thought it was not right for a person like her to be divulging so much.

The disembodied narrator was an early decision, spurred partly by this curiosity of who tells the story and also as a reaction to a slightly infuriating presentation I went to a few years ago from a "digital humanities" professor who used AI to scan thousands of novels. Up to this point, I was fine with it—the field of digital humanities has made a lot of interesting discoveries that might not otherwise have been made (no one human being can read every newspaper ever published between 1900 and 1999, for example, let alone draw conclusions about the evolution of language). It's when this researcher started making sweeping statements about being able to predict what POV a book is written from the first page, or some other nonsense like that, that I got annoyed. I thought, well that can't be right.

As I recalled, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Diaz's groundbreaking novel, seemed to start in one POV and end in another. And how do you even categorize a POV such as you find in *Pedro Páramo*? So I thought, I'll show that smug researcher and throw a POV twist in this story! Yes, writers can be that petty. But more broadly, the book for me began with Lenin's story—the story of the Cuban immigrant who must really struggle, who is not necessarily embraced by the earlier "historical exiles," and who finds himself without the social support that earlier exiles enjoyed. He is our brother, he is us, and I suppose I wanted a reminder.

JC: What are you working on next?

AM: My suntan! No, only partly joking. I do feel I need a break from the writing, and have gone back into my beloved books. Looking forward to finally reading *Trust* by Hernan Diaz on the plane this summer. Along with Annie Ernaux's *A Girl's Life* and *The Black Cathedral* by Marcial Gala (which happens to be translated by my friend Anna Kushner).

And I'm right now reading and am loving *Notes on Complexity* by Neil Theise. Also looking forward to painting a little bit—our wonderful Indie store Books & Books here in Miami has been kind enough to put on an exhibit of some of the paintings I made while writing *The Apartment*. It's all amateur stuff, but as I tell my students, every writer needs a separate, incompetent, art that is empty of expectation or the sometimes crippling demands that come with knowing a subject well.

All that said, I'm not trying to be coy: I do have a new novel in the works. It's about a woman who misses her flight and decides to stay on in the airport. It's a light-hearted story, I promise. I'm calling her Mrs. Diaz-Wakefield.