

ARI SHAPIRO, HOST:

In 1940, construction workers in Miami Beach laid the groundwork for an art deco building called the Helena. Over the decades, apartment 2B would house painters and musicians, army men and refugees. The building and the people who live in it all spring from the imagination of Ana Menendez. She's the author of the new book "The Apartment." Welcome to ALL THINGS CONSIDERED.

ANA MENENDEZ: Thank you so much. It's wonderful to be here.

SHAPIRO: Before the apartment at the center of your novel exists, you introduce us, in the book's opening pages, to an Indigenous woman collecting sea turtle eggs. Will you read from the end of this introduction, this prologue?

MENENDEZ: Yes, I'd love to.

(Reading) Here, where the woman disturbs the burrowing creatures, in this same patch where she pauses to listen to the sea's roar, many years from now, workers will cut a path by hand. A street will cover the wound. A man named William will buy a plot, and an architect named Henry will design a two-story building. He'll name it the Helena after his mother, who told him stories to help him sleep.

SHAPIRO: And so we begin the next chapter, and we're in 1942 - many decades or centuries later. Why did you want to begin before Europeans arrived in Florida?

MENENDEZ: That was a rather late decision. And what I hope it gives the book is the sense of time as almost another character in the book and gives it the sweep because the ending is also meant to push you way eons into the future.

SHAPIRO: You introduce us very early on in the text to a Spanish word, *morrina*. What does the word mean? And how did you think about the concept in relation to the narrative you were writing?

MENENDEZ: It's a concept that I think runs through maybe all of my books - this sense of *saudade*, as the Portuguese maybe would describe it. Most cultures have a word for this. It's this sort of bittersweet nostalgia - the sense that the past is sweet and wonderful to wallow in precisely because it cannot be recovered. And I think that that's an obsession that has run through most of what I write - not consciously but simply as a product of my upbringing and my own situation. My parents, of course, are immigrants. They call themselves exiles from Cuba. And so for me, it speaks to, you know, one doesn't need to be an exile or a migrant to have this sense that things were sweet in the past and to sort of take refuge in it.

SHAPIRO: There's a kind of paradox here that this is a book about a literal home, and yet it's full of a sense of kind of restlessness and longing and displacement.

MENENDEZ: Yes, indeed. I think there's - you know, this one, obviously, is from my imagination, but there are so many buildings like this all over the world, frankly, and all through time and history. But you do get the sense once you rent an apartment that there are many, many stories in those walls that you'll probably never really know.

SHAPIRO: Most of the characters who we meet disappear at the end of their chapter as time moves forward in the book. Was there anyone whose story you personally had a hard time letting go of, somebody who you wanted to follow for more than a chapter, who you thought, oh, I wish I could write a whole novel about this person?

MENENDEZ: Probably at some point all of them - and, you know, I've been working on this novel for such a long time.

SHAPIRO: More than a decade, right?

MENENDEZ: More than a decade, yes. Some of these characters I did revisit again. So in my mind, they never go away. I mean, they are almost a ghostly presence throughout. And they leave bits of conversation, you know, even, you know, philosophies. They leave their loneliness. And so for me at least - and it's probably because I'm so intimately entwined with these characters - they persist through to the end for me. But, you know, there were characters that I feel like I spent more time with just to get them right, perhaps. So Pilar is one that I spent some time with, I think, even though that's a rather short...

SHAPIRO: Tell us about her.

MENENDEZ: Yes, Pilar is a very angry journalist who's laid off during the Great Recession as the great sort of decimation of American journalism in 2008, 2009...

SHAPIRO: And you have personal experience...

MENENDEZ: Right (laughter).

SHAPIRO: ...As a journalist, we should say.

MENENDEZ: I do. I mean, she's not me, and I never had to move back in with my parents. Thank goodness. But I do feel for her, and I - a lot of - I had a lot of fun with that character because a lot of the Miami that she remembers is the Miami that I remember - the, you know, Tropical Park and El Cristo Restaurant. So it's hard for her to leave. And I think that's true of many of my generation, at least, who grew up in the place.

SHAPIRO: There was one line in the book that jumped out at me, which was, (reading) have you noticed that most of the stories men tell are about how smart they are and how stupid everyone else is?

And I wondered if that's the case, what do you think most of the stories women tell are about, as a woman storyteller yourself?

MENENDEZ: I think the women in this book - I'm not going to be as generalizing a chauvinist as my characters, but I think in this book, the stories that the women tell are for connection. They are seeking connection. They're seeking understanding. They are seeking more of a horizontal relationship than a vertical one. And again, that's - you know, the women, especially in the Lana section, are doing that. That's not to say that all women do that.

SHAPIRO: And tell us a little about Lana.

MENENDEZ: Yeah, Lana is a mystery. She shows up in apartment 2B after a lot has happened that she's not aware of, but the rest of the building is. And she's seeking to forget, right? She is also running from ghosts in a lot of ways. She claims to have come to Miami precisely because she doesn't know anybody there, and then she's pulled into this sisterhood that has developed and that is trying to understand her and welcome her.

SHAPIRO: Did writing this make you think about those who lived in your home before you? Or did you write this in part because you were already thinking about those people?

MENENDEZ: You know, I didn't, no. And I don't. I mean, I do think when I go into, you know, new places when - especially hotel rooms, for some reason - you think of all of the, you know, hundreds of people who have been there before. And so there is always that sense when you walk into a place that's been inhabited. I do get a sense of the stories. But, you know, when you're a hammer, everything looks like a nail, right?

SHAPIRO: (Laughter).

MENENDEZ: I think when you...

(LAUGHTER)

MENENDEZ: ...Tell stories, you find them everywhere. But it's not anything that I've gone very deep into imagining, though. I don't think I want to (laughter) imagine the lives of people who've inhabited my spaces (inaudible).

SHAPIRO: You'd prefer not to be haunted is what you're saying.

MENENDEZ: Yes, that's right. That's right.

SHAPIRO: Ana Menendez is the author of the new novel "The Apartment." Thank you so much.

MENENDEZ: It's been such a pleasure. Thank you, Ari.