

Saturday, November 15, 2025

Mirta Ojito

Born in Havana, [Mirta Ojito](#) is a journalist, professor, and author who has worked at the *Miami Herald*, *El Nuevo Herald*, and the *New York Times*. The recipient of an Emmy for the documentary *Harvest of Misery* as well as a shared Pulitzer for national reporting in 2001 for a series of articles about race in America for the *New York Times*, Ojito was an assistant professor of journalism at Columbia University for almost nine years. She is the author of two award-winning nonfiction books: *Finding Mañana: A Memoir of a Cuban Exodus* and *Hunting Season: Immigration and Murder in an All-American Town*. Currently, Ojito is a senior director on the NBC News Standards team working at Telemundo Network.

[Deeper than the Ocean](#) is Ojito's debut novel.

My Q&A with the author:

How much work does your title do to take readers into the story?

I don't exactly know when I decided on *Deeper than the Ocean* as the title, but I do know that I never considered any other. The narrative in my historical novel is anchored on a very real event: the 1919 shipwreck of a Spanish ship, the *Valbanera*, with 488 people on board; most of them, immigrants who left Spain and were en route to Havana, Cuba, in search of a better life. A devastating hurricane derailed those dreams, and the ship sank far from Havana, off the coast of Key West. When it was found, the ship was buried in a bank of soft sand, and the bodies had disappeared. It is believed they were buried deep, deeper than the ocean. But the title also alludes to the love story that drives the story and to the ties that run deep and connect families across the oceans, migrations, generations, and unimaginable losses.

What's in a name?

Everything. When I first conceived of this book I saw an image: a woman wearing a mauve dress running on naked feet, desperately searching for her infant daughter in a ship, her long curly red hair flowing behind her. That was it. I didn't have any more. But I knew her name: Catalina Quintana, the name of my maternal grandmother, whom I never knew. She died at 40, a day after my mother turned 16. Mary Oliver has a poem that begins with this line: "Needing one, I invented her." I've always needed my grandmother, and so I invented her. I infused the character with all the stories my mother had told me about her, and the rest... the rest is the novel.

How surprised would your teenage reader self be by your new novel?

Very surprised. When I was a teenager, my mother's stories were such an integral part of my life that I never saw them as magical or inspiring — essential elements for a novel. It wasn't until later, much later, that I began to pay attention and to remember my own visits to my mother's birthplace and to understand that her entire life was the stuff of novels. Not



surprisingly, she told me several times that she had always wanted to be a writer. “One day,” she used to tell me, “I’m going to write the story of my life.” In many ways, this book is her gift to me, and, of course, mine to her.

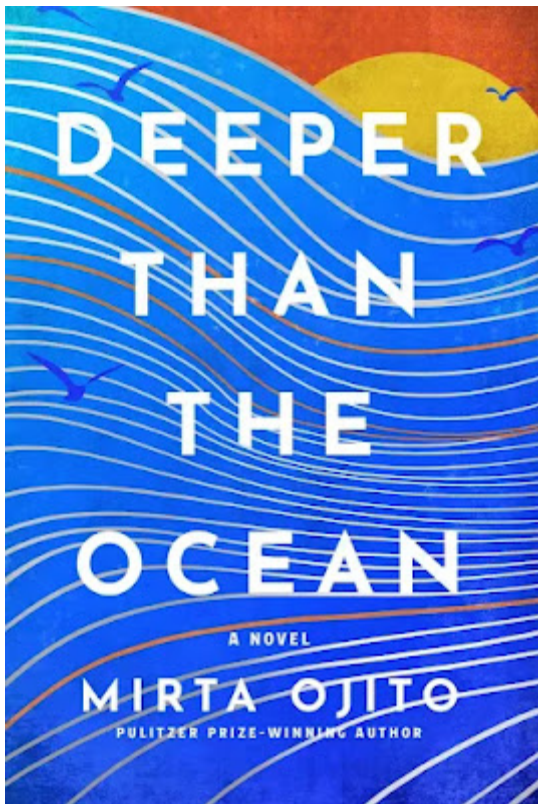
Do you find it harder to write beginnings or endings? Which do you change more?

Beginnings. Always the beginnings. As a journalist you know that you must grab the reader with the first sentence. And while a novel gives you more freedom and possibilities as a writer, I still sweat out that first sentence as if I were writing a lede on deadline. Endings have their own force, of course, but they happen organically. The story takes you there, and, instinctively, you know you’ve reached the end.

For example, I changed the beginning of this novel several times, but never the ending. Because my novel is a dual narrative in two different timelines, I had the choice of beginning with Catalina Quintana, the character in 1919, or with Mara Denis, the character a century later, in 2019. Ultimately, I went with the contemporary character because Mara is the one investigating her family’s past. It seemed appropriate, then, to begin not in the past but at the beginning of the search, the quest that informs what happens later.

Do you see much of yourself in your characters? Do they have any connection to your personality, or are they a world apart?

Yes, readers who know me are certain that I modeled the character of Mara Denis after my own, and they are not completely wrong. Of course, I’m not Mara, but I gave her many



elements of my life and of my own memories. She is Cuban and a mother, like me. A journalist, like me. And she is 55, the age I was when I began writing the book. Crucially, I also gave her a flare for scarves — which I’ve been told I have — and a love for Santander, a city by the sea in the north of Spain where I used to spend summers when my children were young.

Interestingly, Mara has inspired me to follow her steps. In the book, she is searching for her Spanish ancestors; specifically, her great-grandmother. I’d never done that before, because I never knew where my great-grandparents were from, but I’ve just learned that my mother’s grandfather went to Cuba from the Canary Islands, and now, like the character in the book, I’ve begun my own search.

What non-literary inspirations have influenced your writing?

Paintings have always inspired me. For some reason, before I begin a writing project, I visit a museum. Sometimes I take notes. Sometimes not, and I just stand there focusing on a painting, and trying to understand the art and the process.

I’m also influenced by the news. I can’t help it, I’m a journalist. In fact, *Deeper than the Ocean* begins with a phone call in the middle of the night. Mara’s editor in New York wants

her to go to the Canary Islands to cover a story about a boat full of African immigrants that capsized near one of the islands. Mara goes, of course, because reporting is her life, and because, unknown to her, those islands are imprinted in her DNA and in her soul.