



Patricia Engel
AUTHOR

A Novel Approach

Ridgewood native Patricia Engel releases third book

WRITTEN BY SAM PASSOW

Patricia Engel visited Cuba for research while writing her new novel, *The Veins of the Ocean*, but found initial inspiration back home, where she was raised in Ridgewood by Colombian-born parents. “I wanted the novel that I always wanted to read, which was a novel that really talks about how this world is in motion with people coming and going and leaving their countries, and all the emotional difficulties and hardships that come with that and trying to make a new life somewhere,” says Engel, who now resides in the Miami area.

The Veins of the Ocean, which will be released in May, tells the story of a young woman who leaves Miami for the Florida Keys after her brother dies on death row. She meets a Cuban exile whose love for the ocean and faith that it will reunite him with his children helps her start making peace with her family’s tragic history.

Engel’s first two books, *Vida* and *It’s Not Love, It’s Just Paris*, feature daughters of immigrants finding their place in the world, while trying to simultaneously hold on to and let go of family and cultural ties.

“To leave your whole life, everything that you know and go some place to start over with nothing takes such courage. I think few people understand and really respect it,” she says.

Growing up, Engel loved reading and writing but didn’t initially pursue a literary career coming out of Ridgewood High School or New York University, where she studied art history and French. She worked different jobs in Manhattan after graduation but kept writing for fun on the side.

“It was the thing that I loved to do most,” she says.

After five years in the workforce, she decided to take her writing seriously and explored MFA programs.

“I applied to a couple, but where I really wanted to go was Florida,” she says. “So when I got in [to Florida International University], I took the opportunity.” After receiving her MFA, she began teaching creative writing at colleges in the Miami area.

“I found that I was very productive here. It was easier for me to really focus and get work done,” she says. “I would take it year by year. So I stayed the first year, and I actually got a book finished. After another year or so, I got an agent and a book deal. I had a contract for a second book and I stayed here to finish the second.”

Living in Florida for almost 12 years opened her world to its large Cuban exile community.

“So I wanted to write about the reality of a place like Florida and what the people sort of live with when you live by the water and are basically facing Cuba, even if it feels so far away, like another world sometimes,” she says. “So I knew one of my main characters would be Cuban and that Cuba would be his story.”

A grant from the National Endowment for the Arts gave Engel the chance to take several trips to the island.

“Every time I went I found that, while I was learning a lot more about it,

there was so much more I didn’t know,” she says. “So I always felt like I had a reason to go back and sort of get deeper into things.”

A strong setting is important to Engel’s writing process. Her first book featured stories in a

Ridgewood-like suburb, New York City, Miami and Colombia, while her second was set in the

City of Lights, where she studied during college.

“I want the people who really know the place to read my work and to feel like I got it right, not that I’m just using the place as a prop,” she says. “Cuba is just like Paris as a place that tells its own story in a lot of ways. It’s so full of history and so full of life and so full of complications. I wanted it to sort of have a life of its own in the novel.”

Engel learned that her books also take on lives of their own upon release.

“You spend years alone writing a book and it’s published and it’s not really yours anymore,” she says. “It belongs to other people and they have their own personal experience with the book.”

That’s what’s so great about reading, she says. “Everyone has their own sort of journey with a book,” Engel says. “Sometimes people have very strong reactions to how a book ends or something a character does. They take it very personally.”

Engel’s 2013 reading and signing for *It’s Not Love, It’s Just Paris* at Bookends in Ridgewood was personal in a great way, as her childhood bookstore was packed with old friends, including former teachers.

“That night was a lot of fun,” she says.

Engel hopes to make it back to Bookends as she promotes *The Veins of the Ocean* next month. Going forward, she’ll continue writing about characters that capture her interest so strongly.

“I grew up with immigrants. I’m so fascinated and honored to be able to tell their stories in a very small way,” she says. “I will always do that just because I find them so endlessly inspiring.” ■

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