

ARRT Literary Book Discussion

Leadership Training with Special Guest- Author Cristina Henriquez

Thursday, July 9, 2015

Hinsdale Public Library

Leader: Becky Spratford

Note Taker: Becky Spratford

34 participants present

[Please refer to the [ARRT Literary Book Discussion Website](#) for more documents and information]

Cristina Henriquez [herein CH] joined our discussion. Below are notes, not a transcript of the discussion; however, for ease of comprehension, I have denoted who was “speaking” at the time. Either “ARRT,” meaning a member of our group or “CH,” the author. Please contact Becky Spratford [bspratford@hotmail.com] if you have further questions.

ARRT: We would like to start by asking you about authors and book discussion groups. In general, do you like to meet with them, what do you want from the experience, and why do it?

CH: This was my 3rd book and it really “caught fire.” As a result, I have been to and Skyped in with lots of book groups. The reason I do it is to connect with readers. Authors know people want to read their books and talk about them-- that is humbling.

She went on to talk about the different types of groups she has been to:

- Ones who want to drink and talk about me
- Other who want to talk about the ideas in the book
- Still others want to talk about the craft of writing-- those are her favorite.

But no matter what they want to talk about, CH wants groups that have prepared questions. “I like being a fly on the wall observing.” I am there to give insight. Please have something to ask me though.

I once had a group of high schoolers who prepared their own questions. That was one of my favorite discussions.

People want to talk about:

- family history
- publishing process

- recommendations for other books to discuss

ARRT: Why did you choose not to let Maribel speak for herself in the book?

CH: Honestly it never came up with my agents or the editor. Never. Maybe subconsciously it was because Maribel wasn't ready to tell her own story yet.

Maribel is the core of the book. Alma and Mayor in telling their own stories are revealing Maribel.

CH talked about how she structured the book in more detail. She talked about how she alternated Alma and Mayor's voices and then interspersed the neighbors in between, putting Arturo at the end.

As she wrote, she had an Alma file, a Mayor file, and a "neighbors" file and wrote their stories independently. She balanced them deliberately as she merged all of the vignettes. She worked hard to keep the voices of Alma and Mayor equal. She has equal readers who say they love Alma and Mayor which makes her happy; it means she did a good job balancing.

ARRT: Speaking of the neighbors stories. We loved them; so much so that in our discussion of the book, some people wished they could get more-- a whole book from the perspective of some of them.

CH: She shared lots of insight on the neighbors with us. First, the initial reason the stories were collected in the first drafts was as an assignment for Mayor in school. He was supposed to interview immigrants. The report was going to be turned in at the very end of the book and it would have been called, The Book of Unknown Americans. She lost the report as a plot device, but kept the title for the book as a whole. Her editor loved the title from the start saying, "It sounds big."

Also in her first drafts, CH wanted to tell Mayor and Alma's alternating stories and then stack all of the shorter neighbor stories at the end to make them a sort of Greek Chorus. But thankfully, her former agent convinced her not to do that saying that the plot would be over by then and many people would stop reading or only gloss over these wonderful vignettes. That comment devastated CH because she cared about their stories being heard. So she went back in and slotted them in to the story, but made sure she didn't lose the narrative thread.

Also, the school report started to feel like a “crutch.” The neighbors stories stood on their own. I needed to let them be their own stories.

ARRT: Some of us listened to the audio and really enjoyed it. Particularly, people liked how there were different people reading for all of the characters and their accents sounded authentic. Did you like the audio and were you involved?

CH: She had only wonderful things to say about the audio. This was her first book to be made into an audio and Knopf worked very hard on it. CH felt it showed. They auditioned many Hispanic narrators from the correct nationalities. They wanted to capture how, for example, a Panamanian accent as he is speaking English would sound. My Dad is Panamanian and his accent as he speaks English is very different than how someone from Mexico sounds when she speaks English. This highlights the individuality of Latin Americans. The publisher sent her audio samples for each character and then let her choose who would be the reader for each character.

ARRT: We talked a bit about Mayor’s mostly absent brother. Why is he even in the story?

CH: He was added late. For a while Mayor was an only child. But so was Maribel and that was weird. But as I was writing, Mayor needed to be more fully developed and as I tell my writing students, one of the best ways to flesh out a character is to give them a “friend” to react to. So by putting the older brother in, it created more “dynamics” for Mayor and made him a deeper character.

ARRT: What authors have you worked with who have helped to shape your writing?

CH: [Elizabeth McCracken](#) was one of my teachers at Iowa. She was the best teacher I ever had. There are things she told me in class that I still think about all of the time.

[Marilynne Robinson](#) was one of my teachers too, but I learned much more from reading her than from what she said in class. JUst as valuable though.

Although he did not teach me, the writing of [George Saunders](#) is a big influence.

[Junot Diaz](#) has given me permission to play with the style of my books and stories.

When writers are “meaningful” to me it is because they “give me permission to do something.”

My first love is the short story-- both to read and write. I love that economy and precision with words. All of these authors do that well.

Some writers are good at writing and others are good at storytelling. Rarely are they good at both. My focus is on writing-- to the detriment of the plot at times. I wanted to be a poet, but I was very bad at writing poetry. I still read lots of poetry though.

ARRT: What inspired you to write this book?

CH: I got the idea back when the country was dealing with a one sided, negative immigration debate. All of the stories of illegal immigrants coming in from Mexico, Arizona wanting to pull people over and check their status, only stories about “bad” immigrants. Obviously that is not the whole story. I wanted to tell a fuller version of Latin American immigrants. Not everyone is “sneaking in.”

I took my Dad’s story for inspiration. He is a dark skinned Panamanian who has been treated poorly over the years because of that. He came to America on a student Visa to study chemical engineering with plans to go back home after school, but he met my Mom who had been to Panama in the past and lived just down the road. They fell in love and he stayed.

I thought about the debates in the news and said to myself, “Where is his story?”

People come for all sorts of different reasons, and it is not always to “search for a better life.” I needed to tell that story.

The neighbors stories are all there to honor my Dad and his “simple” story. All of their immigration stories were unique and “simple.”

My mom is a translator for a school district in DE with a focus on the Special Ed kids. She works with kids like Maribel and all of the people she translates for in the school district come from all of the different Spanish speaking countries. That is where that part of the story came from.

I also consciously mixed documented and undocumented immigrants. I even purposely made the Riveras come to America with papers and knew I would have them lapse for some reason. I created a legal family that readers would sympathize with and made them illegal during the novel. This was to challenge all those people who say, “I’m not against legal immigrants, just illegal ones.” Okay, let me complicate this for you. What do you do with the Riveras then? I wanted to make people think.

ARRT: Why did you choose the quote for the novel's epigraph?

CH: I love the poem it is from [Bob Hicok's "A Primer"]. It is such a "white poem," but it speaks to all people. It is set in the middle of the country. I have had that quote on my wall for years. It was my guiding light as I wrote.

Here is the epigraph: *Let us all be from somewhere.*

Let us tell each other everything we can.

ARRT: When do you write?

CH: My ideal process is wake up, work from 8am-noon, and call it a day. Then I read in the PM. But with 2 small children that is not realistic. 85% of this book was written right here at the Hinsdale Public Library. I got a sitter as often as I could. My brain works better in the AM. I can't write after they go to bed.

My youngest will be in AM preschool come Fall and I will be writing while he is in school.

I also use time and not a word count as I work. That goes back to my obsession with words. Sometimes all I write is a sentence or 2, but I spend hours making it perfect. That makes me happy with my day's work though.

ARRT: What books do you love that we should promote to our patrons?

CH: [Dept. of Speculation by Jenny Offill](#) was great and it is groundbreaking structurally.

[Love Me Back by Merritt Tierce](#) is about a girl working in a Dallas steakhouse who makes bad decisions. This is a narrator you will never forget and she is unlike any you have ever read before.

[A Little Life](#) by Hanya Yanagihara

[Prayers for the Stolen](#) by Jennifer Clement

I love everything Eula Biss writes, but in particular [On Immunity](#) is a great title for book clubs.

[Between the World and Me](#) by Ta-Nehisi Coates is a letter to his son about race in America. Amazing.

ARRT: What are you working on now?

CH: I prefer short stories. It's my natural stride. That is what I am writing now. I feel like *The Book of Unknown Americans* is a short story writers version of a novel.

I was writing another novel but it was making me miserable so I switched back to stories and I am much happier.

I am re-reading [Edward P. Jones](#)' stories and it is inspiring me right now. In one sentence he moves back and forth in time and introduces 3 characters. It is beautiful. He is brilliant.

She also talked about how helpful the librarians at Hinsdale PL have been. They have helped with all of her research, finding her books she would have never found on her own.

The librarians have also been my professional support network. I write at home, alone. The other people in town know me as my kids' mom, but the librarians help me write and ask me about how the writing is going. They are my community, my people.

I have also been happy to have my book picked to be a One Community read. In my experience it has always been done well. She talked about how Arlington Heights Memorial Library made her book into a float for their Community Read this summer. Multiple representatives from that library were in attendance at this program.

CH loves how the book has been able to galvanize people through these events. She is also impressed with the way libraries create conversations that are tangential to the book in this programming.

My favorite part is when young people get involved and see something of themselves and their families in my book. It is great.