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## Patricia Chao

**Mambo Peligroso**  
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**Are there similarities between you and Catalina in *Mambo Peligrosa*? What would you say are the most significant differences?**

Like Catalina, I'm a mongrel — she's Japanese Cuban born in Cuba and I am half-Japanese and half-Chinese and by birth American. Though she's Latina and I'm not, we both have Japanese mothers and have to deal with the issues of conflicting cultures. I drew on my own experiences to depict Catalina's story of falling in love with New York City mambo and the subculture that goes with it. However, the novel is not autobiographical. Catalina is much younger than me, and I made her a completely different physical type. She's also more naïve and a more talented dancer — both of these characteristics were important to the story.

**What is it about men like Oswaldo that makes women so drawn to them?**

They are who they are. They do not pretend to be something else. Oswaldo is open about the fact that he's a womanizer and that nothing is as important to him as mambo. This is refreshing in a society where many people have ambivalent personas. Of course Oswaldo also happens to be extremely good-looking and a challenging, creative dancer and sexual partner.

**Wendy is such a tough cookie. Even though she had cancer, it would not have been within her character to just let the disease take over. Did you intend for her to take matters into her own hands, or did Wendy just run out of luck in the end?**

I knew very early on in the writing of this novel that Wendy was a doomed character. She has a self-destructive streak. This is clear in how she sabotages her promising gymnastics career. She is also hard-wired as an addict. At one point Oswaldo says about her: "Once a junkie always a junkie."

For all her seeming joie de vivre, Wendy spends a lot of energy battling her inner demons — she lives in a delicate balance, and when the balance is upset, i.e. by news of her cancer, she succumbs to the demons. I don't think she intends to overdose at the end, but she is certainly aware of the risks.

**Over the past decade, you became immersed in Latin music and dance, and were inspired to write this book. But how did you become so intimate with the mindset, culture, and struggle of the Cuban exiles in Miami?**

My love affair with Cuba began early in 2000 when I was invited to attend a conference/workshop called Writers of the Americas which took place in Havana and featured writers from both Cuba and the United States. Cuba stunned me. I felt as if it were returning to a long-forgotten dream. Among other things, it was where the salsa I'd been listening and dancing to had its roots. But it was the indomitable spirit of the people that moved me most. I returned to Cuba later that year, and then again in 2004.

Regarding the other Cubans, that is, the ones who emigrated to Miami — I researched by reading copiously and doing some interviews. I am very familiar with the plight of the exile. My Chinese father was barred from his homeland for almost 30 years and the exile motif was a big part of my childhood.

**Why does Guillermo allow himself to be manipulated by his wife and in-laws? He's not particularly patriotic. He couldn't care less about Castro. He's not even passionate about his wife. What would you say motivates him?**

Guillermo has the personality of someone you might meet in real life, but he is hard to put into print because he doesn't have strong edges. He is a very simple passive man who was born into a complex society in extreme times. Sometimes these types become unwilling heroes, sometimes they separate from the society and live their own quiet lives, and sometimes, like Guillermo, they become swept up in the tide of events and meet with tragedy. Guillermo would be happy just tooling around on his yacht. It's only when he is in prison and has time to reflect that he realizes the life he's been living is not the right one for him.