



Christina Fitzpatrick

What's the Girl Worth?
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A Conversation with Christina Fitzpatrick

Q: Judging from the physical similarities between your description of Catherine Kelly and your author photo, as well as clues from your acknowledgements page, this novel seems to have autobiographical influences. How much of the story is based on your own experiences? Is there a real-life Esteban, Felipe, Raul? Were the scenes in Boston based on experiences in New York?

A: I have answered this question a number of times, and it seems no matter how I answer, the conclusion that people reach afterward is that this novel is autobiographical. I deny that and get somewhat angry over it! (The exclamation is playful, not agitated).

My fiction is in fact a work of my imagination, and I chose topics and themes that will incite emotion -- whether that emotion be happiness or anger or grief. What every writer knows, sooner or later, is that the only way to fuel your imagination and spark its exuberant energy is to use your own emotion, your own passion, within the storyline. And that is what I do, and will continue to do, as long as I write. I would consider myself a fake otherwise.

But to the answer question about my own experiences, yes, I did go to Madrid as a college student. Yes, I've worked in bars for many years; but no, the bar stories in the book are not true. There was no real Esteban, although there was a Spanish friend who had a red Porsche, and for the rest of my life, I will remember how alive I felt in that car as we zoomed and zoomed through busy Spanish streets. There was no Felipe either-- I'm sad to say. Wouldn't it be a great story if he did exist and he read the book, and he fell in love with it, and he called me, and we got married in a Spanish castle? But alas, he is fiction. (Incidentally, longing is another emotion that fuels the imagination into a fiery frenzy.) On other hand, Raúl is a mix. I knew a man in Madrid who lived near me and he offered me a Mars Bar at least once a week. He was round and strange and dressed in red a lot, but I have no concept of where he was from or what he was getting at with the Mars Bar proposals.

And lastly my father never visited in me in Madrid or anywhere when I was a young woman. He died when I was a child. Furthermore when he was alive, we never went to bars together and he never hit my mother with a brick. We did, however, see "Sleeping Beauty" once, and he was in fact an alcoholic.

Writing about a father and daughter in Madrid was entirely unfamiliar territory for me, and that's why I chose the topic (or rather: It chose me). Although I admit that I did know Madrid, and I knew what longing for a father was like. Essentially, I had the formula: But it was like writing science fiction in a way -- their first conversations and meetings were as mentally challenging as putting two aliens together in a café on the moon. To me, that is how fiction is supposed to work. It's like when you dream -- the most vivid and believable of dreams take place somewhere that you've been or frequent, say your office, and weird things might happen in that office. Alien creatures could stumble in; your dead grandmother could stand in the doorway, ask you for a paperclip. Still, no matter how strange, you believe the dream, because all the realities are there: your same desk, the same spots on the windows, the same smell of the carpet, the same objects around your computer -- and whether one of those objects is a Mars Bar or a box of paperclips, it keeps the dream intact. Those small details house the dream, keep it alive. Your mind does that naturally every night you sleep. And as a writer, I've learned to do that awake. I don't label that as being autobiographical or semi-autobiographical; it's all invention to me. Difficult, heartfelt invention.

Q: Your previous work of fiction, *Where We Lived*, is a collection of stories that interweave with each other. Which do you enjoy writing more -- a novel or short stories?

A: This question is hard to answer because both forms offer their own rewards. I do love short stories. I like how exact they are, how quick to the chase. I like how much time you get to spend on every sentence. Whereas with a novel, you are always forging ahead and so caught up with the plot that, I think, the art of the prose becomes a secondary affair. True, I have only written one novel, so I may change this attitude.

An additional reason that I love short stories is that you can be completely schizophrenic with your work. You can be dark and morose in one story, then turn around and be campy and thrilled in another. I adore that freedom. I hate being locked into one kind of voice, one kind of tone. I suppose that's why most authors write novels in more than one perspective; it offers a bit more leeway. In the future, I want to always work on short stories while I write my longer works. That way I can still meander into other territories and voices.

Q: In *What's the Girl Worth?*, you allow your Spanish characters to speak their own language, then you translate it into English. As a result, readers trust Catherine more as she is now their interpreter as well as their narrator. Was this a technique that you set out to use or was it something that you found you were doing automatically while writing the book?

A: The first time I talked about my novel to my first editor -- before she had seen a single word -- she told me she hated when writers put dialogue in foreign languages without explaining its meaning. As a reader, she said it confused her and stopped her and made her spend too much time trying to guess what the foreign words meant. So I took that to heart. Yet concerning my own aesthetic, I hate, for instance, movies that take place in France, but everyone's speaking English with a French accent. I think that's ridiculous.

So I tried to create a happy medium in the book. Even when one of Catherine's roommates had dialogue quoted in English, I tried to make the reader aware that Catherine was translating. Besides any story about a character new to a country that is speaking a foreign language has to include the language barrier. It's huge, overwhelming, and at times, completely alienating.

So the translations weren't as much a narrative technique as they were a part of character and plot development. For Catherine, the language barrier forces her to let down her guard. She becomes close with English-speaking Esteban and falls for Felipe's careful childlike English. If Felipe didn't know any English and if Catherine's Spanish wasn't improving by the time she met him, they may not have fallen in love. By the end of the book, language becomes a source of strength for Catherine, a means of communicating and living and loving, a means of becoming someone new.

Q: Alternating between Catherine's past in the States and her present life in Spain, this novel is two stories -- the story of a young girl abandoned by her father and how that affects her relationships with men; and the story of a young woman stepping outside the world she knows to experience a life that she feels is beyond her grasp. When he comes to visit her, Catherine's father brings these worlds together and Catherine can choose for herself what to let go of and what to reach for. Did you struggle with how this novel would end, how Catherine would come to terms with her past and future?

A: I knew there had to be change in the end. I couldn't have you read 400 pages and then have Catherine just as closed off as she was in the beginning. But I didn't want a Hollywood ending in which her father begs for forgiveness or has a dramatic excuse or simply behaves nobly in a sudden, illuminating situation. They couldn't become good friends in the end either. I was certain of that. I also couldn't tolerate any warm fuzzy flash-forwards in which he attends Catherine graduation or meets Harlan in her Boston apartment. The only sure thing I knew from the beginning was that she had to forgive him, figuring out how was the struggle.

Catherine was the one who dictated how. As the writer, I wanted something quick and simple, perhaps one big showdown on page 201. But Catherine wouldn't comply. She was too stubborn, and that stubbornness was not drawn from my own experience; it was drawn from how I imagined one of my readers. I imagined her in her late teens, lying on her bed barefoot, reading. This girl, I decided, had similar issues with her father, although not exactly the same. Yet against her will, I concluded, she still loved her father with all her might. So I went along with this little vision of mine, page after page, as I wrote and Catherine finally forgave. I was vigilant, though, in making sure that the ending would not disappoint my reader, wouldn't be so happy, so infused with storybook bull, that she would lose her connection to Catherine. So I made the ending bittersweet, one where Catherine's subtle elixir was not meeting her father; it was, instead, allowing herself to overcome her anger and live in a new world.

Q: You spend a lot of time abroad. Do you plan to write a memoir of these travels or will they continue to appear as settings in your fiction?

A: I have no interest in writing a memoir as long as I live. True, this may change as I get older. But for now, I only want to write fictional stories. That's actually part of the thrill of traveling. My mind is always concocting what could go wrong or what miraculous thing could happen in each place I visit. Foreign locations are ripe with possibilities. Besides if I were to try to describe a city truthfully, it would be a great hardship. I love to exaggerate. I love to invent streets and bars and, most of all, characters that could exist in a given locale, but sadly don't.