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The Heiress of Water
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Q: As a writer, what interests you in a novel?

A: A novel allows you to get to know characters in the most intimate way, to hear their private thoughts, to witness their joys, fears, shames. Unless you're eavesdropping, reading a novel is the only time you get to know what other people talk about behind closed doors. It provides a way to view another mind, and therefore, another world.

Q: Is there a part of you in Monica Winters?

A: I would have a lot of biographical facts in common with Monica, and we have a similar temperament. If she were real we would be great friends, but the events of her adult life are very unlike mine, as is our family life.

Q: Who or what does Alma Borrero represent?

A: Alma Borrero is highly flawed, especially as a wife and a mother; but I admire her for having the guts to reject cultural expectations that she finds to be personally inappropriate. I haven't always been gutsy in this way, especially when I was younger. I find that Latin American culture can be especially inflexible in its expectations about what a woman should do with her time, how she should look and how she should behave. There is the emphasis on physical beauty and a general lack of appreciation of depth or intellect in young women. Alma isn't remotely interested in beauty, wealth, society or even being a wife and mother—all the standard feminine values. Alma is constantly going against the grain of what's expected of her, and that can be exhausting if you're doing it all your life. The tragedy of her family life is the consequence of a single moment of weakness in which she compromised with her parents and married a man she didn't love. Her otherwise stubborn nature represents a kind of feminine ideal to me, and I admire that unflinching focus on her life's passion. I find her fascinating.

Q: What kind of research did you have to do to write Heiress?

A: I had to research a lot of the details of El Salvador's civil war. Since I was Monica's age at the time, my perspective of those events was that of a child, and so I had to go back to books and old newspapers to process it with an adult mind. Marine science and head trauma were subjects that I had to research extensively, and in addition to consulting books, academic and professional journals, I did some field research by consulting with experts in both subjects.

There was this one perfect, sunny day when I got in my car and drove out to Sanibel Island to visit a shell museum, to speak with mollusk scholars and view their vaults full of cones from around the world. In the quaint downtown area, I found shell boutiques that catered to serious collectors, where rare seashells were displayed (and priced) like jewels. After I'd gathered more information on shells than I could ever use in twenty novels, I drove around the island and combed the beach for its famously abundant seashells, gathering a few souvenirs to remind me of this lovely day. I was utterly smitten with Sanibel's natural beauty. I imagined that Alma and Monica would one day meet here for a vacation. They'd be in heaven.

Q: What compelled you to write so lovingly about seashells and the sea?

A: One of the fondest memories I have of growing up in El Salvador is of combing remote, virginal black sand beaches for seashells. Every once in a while, I'd find something that looked like it was designed by Dr. Seuss, whimsical and inviting to the imagination. Back then, it never occurred to me to buy a book that classified them, I was just happy to clean them and take them home and enjoy their strange beauty. It wasn't until I started writing about those recollections that I saw the opportunity to give those memories structure by adding a scientific perspective. As I began to research mollusks and seashells in general, I discovered that there is an entire sub-culture of people who are obsessed with seashells, collectors who attend conferences and pay thousands of dollars for the rarest ones. Although I am not a collector myself, I could empathize with this passion, so I let the research guide my imagination. Later, when I stumbled upon the real-life research that is being done on the medicinal potential of cone venom, I was further captivated.

As for the sea, I have lived near a shore all my life: in El Salvador, in Connecticut and I lived in Miami for ten years. I lived in one of those high-rise apartments with a floor-to-ceiling view of Biscayne Bay, and I always enjoyed watching sailboats parade across my living room. I took sailing lessons out of a marina in Coconut Grove. In Connecticut, I also got to do boating and sailing with relatives and friends and have always derived a very calm, spiritual feeling from being near water. But there is something about El Salvador's remote beaches that is intensely spiritual and artistically inspiring to me—maybe it's the nature, the solitude, the irony of violence that happened in the land beyond. I have no doubt that the psychology of color plays a role—a crowded beach of power-white sand is festive, but a deserted beach of black, volcanic sand calls to mind richer and darker moods. Since my parents live in El Salvador, I am still able to maintain a connection with those places that so captivated me as a child. Negrarena is a fictional place, loosely based on a place called Playa El Cuco on the eastern shore.

Q: Why did you choose to write about someone who is in a persistent vegetative state?

A: The subject of unconsciousness surged up during the process of mining my own life for material. When I was eleven, my brother contracted a virus that left him in a coma for two weeks. I have never been in a coma, thank heaven, but I have fainted at least a half dozen times, and each time, I experience this sensory rush, a loud ringing in my ears and flashing lights in my vision, it's very scary, and I always think that I'm dying. A few years ago, I compiled a huge pile of research on the subject out of pure curiosity. From fainting and my brother's coma, my interest began to include even more serious conditions. Eventually, I realized that there are many elements in this area that still remain a mystery to science, and anything we don't know can be claimed by imagination. The scenes inside Yvette's head were some of the wildest writing I've ever done. I related it my own scary fainting experiences, where being "kicked out" of consciousness is much like being incarcerated, a claustrophobic cell from which I would desperately want to escape.