Only sixteen when her family fled Cuba on the Mariel boatlifts, Mirta Ojito graduated from Florida Atlantic University with a communications degree and later made a visit to Cuba as a reporter. She won a Pulitzer Prize for “How Race is Lived in America,” a series of articles on race relations published in *The New York Times*. The memories she revisited on her return to Cuba became the impetus for the widely researched 2005 Cuban exodus memoir, *Finding Mañana*. Throughout its pages, Ojito weaves together her story with the story of five heroes who made the boatlift possible. Mirta Ojito is currently a professor in the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University.

**Coastlines:** Do you consider yourself a writer or a journalist?

**Ojito:** A journalist.

**Coastlines:** In *Finding Mañana*, you write that as a child in Cuba, you wanted to be a journalist.

**Ojito:** I was about thirteen when Barbara Walters spoke in Cuba and interviewed Fidel Castro.
**Coastlines:** You recalled your surprise at Walters’s direct questions.

**Ojito:** I realized she had such power! She was asking questions that nobody else in my generation would have thought of asking him. And not only that, but he felt he needed to answer them. I think, at the time, he wanted recognition and respect from the U.S., and he must have been flattered that Barbara Walters wanted to interview him. I was really very impressed by the fact that this woman, so young and beautiful and smart, could interview someone like Fidel Castro and get him to answer all her questions. Anybody can ask questions; getting good answers is an entirely different matter.

**Coastlines:** How would you define the difference between writers and journalists?

**Ojito:** When I think of writers, I think of fiction. I think of novels; I think of great works of literature, which is not always the case, since there are many terrific writers of nonfiction. But, to answer your question, I’m comparing a novelist and a journalist. Everything I do has a base in journalism. I like writing, but I enjoy the process of reporting even more. I want to know who did what to whom and, most particularly, why. I’m intrigued by motivation. A novelist doesn’t have to find the true motivation of a character; she can make it up. But I want to know the truth. It is that constant search for the truth and my curiosity which drive my journalism and, therefore, my writing.

**Coastlines:** In the historical moment, those key players were very misunderstood, but I feel like *Finding Mañana* reveals their true intentions—what they were trying to do—from both sides of the story.

**Ojito:** That’s what I mean when I say I want to know intentions, motivations. Why would Benes throw away his life, affiliating himself with Fidel Castro? What did he have to gain himself by bringing prisoners from Cuba and opening the door to the U.S.? It’s easy to misunderstand someone like Benes, unless you understand where Benes comes from. He’s a Jew, the son of immigrants, who grew to love Cuba very much. He saw himself as Moses, someone with a sense of mission. When he said that, when I was able to get to the nature of his motivation, that was an important moment in the reporting of the book.

**Coastlines:** Is a journalist’s curiosity the reason you chose to frame *Finding Mañana* using these historical characters, people like Bernardo Benes and Héctor Sanyustiz?

**Ojito:** Yes, I couldn’t keep them out. Originally, I didn’t want to write a memoir. I didn’t think my life was that interesting. But I was interested in their lives; I really wanted to find out how the Mariel boatlift had happened. Who were the key players here? I was fascinated by the fact that a used car salesman, a banker, and a bus driver, who were attempting to change their personal circumstances, ended up changing the lives of so many others. I
discovered that Mariel wasn’t about governments deciding what they were going to do with the little people. It was the little people deciding what they were going to do with their lives that forced the two governments to make their decision to one, open up the port of Mariel, and two, accept them into the U.S. The Mariel boatlift would not have happened if people hadn’t taken their lives into their own hands and decided to change their own personal stories. By changing their stories, they changed history. But to remove myself from that story, when I was so clearly a part of it, felt artificial. So, my book isn’t a memoir in which I included other people; it is about the boatlift and the people who made it possible, in which I included my own story.

Coastlines: Because Finding Mañana is partly a memoir, you had to recall very personal details of your former life in Cuba. As the author, how do you recreate a room or a moment on the page? Does remembering such details require visiting the original place?

Ojito: When something is taken away from you at an early age, and it is something that you love dearly, you remember it always. For me, that was the place where I grew up. That place becomes sort of a safe place in the imagination that you can go back to again and again. And that was my special room, my special place, my home. And so I remember everything about that apartment, from the rough feel of the bedspread, to my dolls on top of the armoire, the coolness of the tiles as I walked on them, the hum of the old refrigerator in the kitchen, and the feel of the sun on my skin as I stood on the terrace. It just stays with you. I did go back to Cuba before I wrote the book, and I went back to that apartment in January 1998, during a trip to cover a story about the Pope’s visit to Cuba.

Coastlines: You write about the emotion of that visit, of walking up the steps to the house in Cuba where other people now lived; you even saw your mother’s glasses in the cabinet.

Ojito: I saw the same table and chairs in the living room, and, on a wall, the painting that one of my mother’s cousins had given us. The same refrigerator. The ironing board behind the door of the kitchen in the same place where my mother kept it. The people who lived there then had lost their homes in a hurricane. The government had given them the apartment, and I’m sure that they were very grateful that it came furnished. For me, it was a very emotional visit.

Coastlines: There are moments in the book when you remember yourself as a girl. How do you remember these details that significantly shape the personal aspect of the memoir?

Ojito: When I came from Cuba, I immediately asked my uncle for paper and pen, and I wrote down everything that had happened, from the moment that the police knocked on the door to the moment when I stopped writing, just about three months after I got here. And I kept it all, putting
it in a file, and then when the time came to write the book, that’s how I “remembered” the time when the police arrived, the red clock on top of the TV, and the color of the skirt that my mother was wearing. I couldn’t have remembered that. But I took notes when I arrived. And I think I knew back then that I had witnessed something really extraordinary that was going to change my life. I didn’t know I was going to write a book, but those notes were of tremendous value. The times, colors, and details that I had forgotten were there. It would have been really hard to remember all of that without looking at the notes.

Coastlines: When you’re writing a memoir about an earlier time in life, how much distance is needed to be able to write the story? How much perspective do you need before you can step back and say, this is what happened; this is what I was thinking?

Ojito: Various friends and reporters and people who heard my story about coming from Cuba on the boatlift would say to me, “Oh, you have a book in you.” But it didn’t become a book for twenty-five years. However, do I think you have to wait twenty-five years to see if you have something to write about? No, I don’t. I think it depends on the person. I think it depends on when the experience took place, how much you remember, whether you took notes, how much you want to say, whether or not your parents are alive, and if what you’re writing about would hurt them. So I think it depends on the person, on the circumstances, and on the story you want to tell.

Coastlines: How different or even strange do the circumstances have to be in order to be able to write a good memoir or a good piece of nonfiction? Does it take an exodus from Cuba, or do you think good art can come from ordinary life?

Ojito: There is a difference between a piece of good nonfiction and a memoir. When I think of nonfiction, you can write about coming to Starbucks today with me. There is something here that maybe captures your attention, or makes you think of a place, a time, or a person. And that could be a pretty good piece of nonfiction writing. A memoir is different in that it must be really personal yet, at the same time, completely universal.

Coastlines: So is universality what makes a memoir successful?

Ojito: I think that for a memoir to be successful, it has to be both very intimate and very universal. Even if you’ve never been to Cuba, if you have never gone on a harrowing adventure in a boat, you can still connect with that idea of losing home—and we all do, because we all grow up. Another universal theme for the book is the fact that it is people who change the world, not governments. People can connect to that. Finding Mañana is not so much about me, what my father said, or what my mother said; it’s about the idea of taking command of your life, driving a bus into the gates of an
embassy, and saying, “You’re not going to let me leave, but I’m getting out of here.”

**Coastlines:** Do you think your background in Cuba influences that idea of taking command of your own life? The freedom to be able to choose to do what you’re passionate about?

**Ojito:** It makes me more appreciative of anything that has to do with freedom. I think it gives me more empathy and the ability to understand people who come from circumstances similar to mine. Or maybe even different from mine.

**Coastlines:** What does it take to finish a book like *Finding Mañana*?

**Ojito:** I had fallen in love with the idea of the book. I left my job at the *New York Times*. I sold my apartment in New York. I uprooted my family. I moved them all to Miami. And I said, “I’m going to write this book.” And it’s exactly like falling in love with somebody who lives halfway across the world: you follow him or her. I followed the book. It was my passion.

**Coastlines:** How do you create that feeling of trust between the people you’re writing about to uncover the personal information that shows their humanity and, therefore, their importance in the story?

**Ojito:** I wasn’t creating a feeling of intimacy; I was living it. I was really interested in the stories of the people in this book. People know when you’re faking it, and I wasn’t faking it. I care deeply about every person in my book. I could only offer them a little place in history and maybe a little delayed recognition. I think you’d be surprised at how much people are willing to reveal about themselves. People want to be acknowledged as human beings, particularly people who have done something important that has gone unrecognized, as the people in my book had.

**Coastlines:** Is that an important part of the writing process, as well? To connect with those within the pages of your book, to see how finally being recognized has affected them?

**Ojito:** You want to make sure that in telling your story, you’ve stayed as close to the truth as possible, and that the characters recognize themselves from what you’ve written. Mike Howell and Villaboa and Benes have all read the book, and they have enjoyed seeing themselves in print. That’s not a part of the writing process; that’s a part of the human process.