An Interview with Ana Menéndez

By Janelle Garcia

Born in Los Angeles to Cuban exiles, Ana Menéndez has received acclaim for her work as a journalist and novelist. Her first book, *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd*, earned a Pushcart Prize for the title story and distinction as a New York Times Notable Book. Her most recent novel, *The Last War*, follows a photojournalist as she comes to grips with the indelible mark combat journalism has made on her life, her marriage, and her identity. Currently, Ana Menéndez is a Fulbright Scholar at The American University in Cairo, Egypt. In this interview, she candidly discusses her craft both as an author and journalist.

**Coastlines:** Your latest novel, *The Last War*, takes place during the onset of the war in Iraq, yet the protagonist remains in Istanbul throughout most of the story, estranged from her husband who reports from Baghdad. Moreover, Istanbul functions not only as the setting for the novel, but almost seems to grow into a character. What made you choose to set the novel in Istanbul?

**Menéndez:** Yes, to me, Istanbul is one of the most important characters in the novel. I lived there for two years and adore the city – but personal preference is not enough to commit to a city as a setting. For me, Istanbul was the perfect backdrop to the kind of story I was telling. Istanbul is a city of deep history, of layers, of betrayals, of deception. It is also a city of beauty, of memory (some forgotten, some hidden), and of mighty imperial ambition. All of those are themes that I wanted to explore through these characters, for whom Istanbul also represents displacement.

**Coastlines:** Displacement was also a common theme throughout your stories in *In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd* as well as *Loving Che*. In *The Last War*, a fellow photographer asks Flash what her theme is as a photojournalist. Would...
you say authors should have a theme across their body of work, and is that something you have considered in terms of your own work?

Menéndez: “Should” is not a word that will ever inspire good work. Rather, I would say that authors almost always develop a theme across their body of work. Not because of a “should,” but because this is a process that comes naturally when one works as honestly as possible. So certain patterns emerge in someone’s work over time, but for the writer, this happens at an almost sub-intellectual level. The moment someone starts thinking of great “themes” or “style” in relation to some “work,” that’s the moment affectation enters the picture and ruins it. And everyone who matters will see it; a writer can fool herself, but never her readers.

For me, the theme of displacement is a natural one. It’s the context in which I grew up and it’s the context in which I try to make sense of the things I see. It’s my obsession, and you can’t write without an obsession. The work is too dull and tedious otherwise.

Coastlines: You mention writing with an obsession, which can also mean passion, I suppose. How does writing fiction differ from the work you’ve done as a journalist? Does a natural “obsession” or passion still drive the work?

Menéndez: The difference between writing fiction and writing journalism is a little like the difference between working with oils and working with fast-drying acrylics. With fiction, you have a long time before the work “sets”; you can re-contour, re-blend, touch-up, even wipe clean and start again. With journalism, you have about eight hours to get the picture done and then another four or five of obsessing, “Did I spell that name right, did I screw up that date, is the fact correct?” With journalism, there’s no going back. There are no “revisions” only “corrections.” It’s very unforgiving. There’s something to love and loathe in both “media”. The time and craft involved in fiction is ultimately more satisfying, but the lag time is tremendous and it can be isolating work. Journalism is energizing and every day involves a steep learning curve—plus you meet an array of the most interesting characters that you would otherwise never know about. But the work is grueling and thankless, especially so in recent years. Journalism is for the very young and ambitious. And, yes, also for the obsessed, or passionate, as you say.

A sense of curiosity and purpose still drives my writing, but my core motivation has changed, maybe even mellowed, over the years. I find it hard to summon the same level of outrage that I could when I was, say, 25. Now I just want to tease out the ambiguities in a situation, explore the greys; instead of seeking understanding, I want to show all the ways understanding is not possible.

Coastlines: Many writers have often confessed revision is the most difficult
part of writing. With your fiction, how much re-contouring and re-blending do you do? Having produced both short stories and novels, do you find your revision processes are similar for both forms?

**Menéndez:** I actually find revision to be the best, most liberating part of writing. I love it. Maybe it’s because I got to do so little of it as a journalist. But to me revision is a lovely luxury. What I dread is the blank screen. But once I have the bones of a story down, then the fun begins. I’ll usually print out the piece for the first time and go sit with it somewhere with a pen and just start fixing. I can spend hours and hours at revision, where I’m usually only good for an hour or two of straight writing. I don’t think there’s much of a difference for me in the revisions of short stories versus novels, except for the fact, of course, that novels take longer to revise. But it all depends on what I’ve written. Some stories will be revised once or twice, with minor changes. Some will be revised hundreds of times and be completely different tales at the end of it.

**Coastlines:** You were a journalist before you ventured into creative writing. What prompted you to pursue fiction writing?

**Menéndez:** It’s more like what prompted me to be a journalist….I had been writing through high school and college, but when it came time to be an adult, I panicked. After I graduated from FIU with a degree in English, I went into the first job that would hire me, and that turned out to be journalism. I always dreamed of going back to fiction -- the pace of journalism, while exciting, was always difficult for me. I got my chance in 1997 when, just burned out on daily journalism, I applied to a few schools and luckily got accepted at NYU. It was the best thing I ever did. I did not go in planning to write a book or do anything more serious than just hang out, read, and learn. As it happened, I enjoyed writing short stories and the support and direction at NYU were so extraordinary that my class writings ended up becoming my first book. I benefited from wonderful friends and mentors, and I look back on those two years as some of the happiest in my life.

**Coastlines:** Your first book was well-received, with the title story, “In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd,” earning the Pushcart Prize. You followed this short story collection with two novels: Loving Che and The Last War. As a writer, what obstacles did you encounter in making the transition from short stories to novels?

**Menéndez:** Well, the worst thing is that novels take so much longer....I’m not sure there were “obstacles” (the biggest obstacle I have to deal with is my own laziness) but of course a short story is different from a long story. I’m not sure I’ve learned how to write either kind, so I’m uneasy about the question. I think the important thing to concentrate on is the story itself, not the long or short of it. Once you do that, once a “Writer” stops thinking of himself as a ”Writer”
and just settles into what she does best, which is spin yarns, then the process will take care of itself. A story will let you know if it wants to be short or long. The author shouldn’t be the one deciding.

All that said, I do miss the short form. For one thing, it’s very immediate, almost like journalism in some ways. Some people have even been known to finish them in one sitting. So it’s possible to hold the entire thing in your mind at once. I went to a wonderful talk by Ha Jin where he said he knew his novel wasn’t finished until he could fit the whole thing in his mind. With short stories, it’s obviously much easier to do that.

Coastlines: Perhaps “challenges” would have been a better word than “obstacles.” As far as seeing yourself as a writer, do you find you are able to divorce yourself fully of that concept and all the baggage that comes with it when you are writing? In other words, does the idea that you are creating a product to be consumed by readers ever influence your work?

Menéndez: Not at all! I much prefer the word “obstacles.” The word “challenges” is for people who are afraid of both.

Well, this new question of yours has two parts. One concerns the idea of thinking of oneself as a “Writer.” The other concerns the idea of “producing” a commodity. Of course, these are fair points, given the reality of our lives. The truth is that we live in a society where people with titles produce things for consumption. And writers, painters, poets, like it or not, are part of this reality. We operate within its rules. But any artist for whom this economic model constitutes the only reality is bound to be a very poor one.

So, to answer your question from a different perspective, I would say that I see myself as I’ve always seen myself, which is as the family storyteller. When everyone has gathered and I have my audience (because I love an audience) I tell them stories that I hope will amuse, delight, even frighten them. And that by doing so, I will leave with them some reminder of me. The story is not complete until it falls on their ears and I see their reaction. Writing is like that, only with a somewhat larger family. In other words: of course I write with a reader in mind. Why else would I do it?

Coastlines: I like the idea of writer as extended family storyteller; it suggests intimacy in a way the title “author” does not. With the topic of audience in mind, The Last War’s protagonist, Flash, accuses Alexandra, a writer, of being afraid of saying what she wants in her writing. Have you ever felt fear or reluctance when writing, particularly about potentially controversial topics such as Cuban politics (a common theme throughout your first two books)?

Menéndez: Given what I went through as a [Miami] Herald columnist, I wish
I had felt more reluctance about writing what I wanted sometimes. In Miami, too often, one pays for honest thinking. But, more seriously and to the point, the answer is no. Though, of course, in many ways, Alexandra c’est moi, it’s not true in this particular statement. As a journalist, I was always bitingly honest, even when I did fear for my emotional well-being. And as a fiction writer, it just never factored into the equation. Fiction is a much more forgiving medium. Part of it is probably because so few people actually read literary fiction. But part of it is also because the form allows for a lot more nuance in approaching delicate subjects. Where the column had to resort to a kind of shorthand which was always vulnerable to willful misinterpretation, that has never been true of my fiction.

**Coastlines:** Yes, when you put it that way, writing fiction seems less risky in that regard when compared to journalism. On a different note, what are you working on now?

**Menéndez:** You will laugh, but at the moment, I’m working on a novel about Miami. I can’t seem to get away.