Abstract (Summary)

"I just kept asking myself: What is essential?" [CRISTINA GARCIA] explains while perched on a window seat in her room at Manhattan's Mansfield Hotel. Garcia, 44, is visiting from Santa Monica, Calif., where she lives with her 10-year-old daughter Pilar. But she's hardly in foreign territory - born in Cuba, she lived in New York from the age of 2 until graduating from Barnard and heading off to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore; her old high school, Dominican Academy, is practically around the corner from the hotel.

On the face of it, Garcia's magical, lyrical novels contend with the same issues she and her Latin American literary peers - such as Julia Alvarez and Isabel Allende - have come to be associated with: immigration, identity, family. But obsessions - intellectual or romantic, Garcia's or her characters' - are always surging just beneath the surface. Among the characters in her first two novels, "Dreaming in Cuban" (1992) and "The Agero Sisters" (1997), are a woman who writes one letter a month for 50 years to her long-lost love, and an ornithologist determined to catalog Cuba's entire bird population. In "Monkey Hunting," [Chen Pan]'s resolve to make a life for himself in his adopted country is ultimately what saves him. "I'm interested in extremism. In the furthest possible boundary that exists before going insane," Garcia says. "I like conflagrations, not brush fires, and there's a real heat to obsession."

Full Text

(844 words)
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Originally, Cristina Garcia's new novel,"Monkey Hunting" (Knopf, $23), was the 700-page story of an Afro-Cuban-Chinese-American named Domingo Chen. But during the revision process, curious things began to happen. Characters fell away. Landscapes shifted. After deleting 449 pages, Garcia had something altogether different from what she'd started out with.

"I just kept asking myself: What is essential?" Garcia explains while perched on a window seat in her room at Manhattan's Mansfield Hotel. Garcia, 44, is visiting from Santa Monica, Calif., where she lives with her 10-year-old daughter Pilar. But she's hardly in foreign territory - born in Cuba, she lived in New York from the age of 2 until graduating from Barnard and heading off to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore; her old high school, Dominican Academy, is practically around the corner from the hotel.
What was left after her radical edits was the story of Chen Pan, a rural Chinese farmer who moves to Cuba and escapes slavery to become a successful merchant; his granddaughter Chen Fang, who was raised as a boy in China; and Domingo Chen, Chen Pan's great-great-grandson, who is raised in America and goes on to fight in Vietnam. The book spans two centuries, three continents and five generations. But incredibly, the version that ended up in bookstores is only 251 pages long. "It took making some brutal decisions. But I wanted to move from essentiality to essentiality, from obsession to obsession."

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As the extensive historical research that sustains her books bears out, the heat that fuels obsession is also what fuels Garcia's writing. "I need that level of passion to stimulate my own interest. Unless I'm compelled almost to the degree of obsession or compulsion, why bother?" Though her passions are wide-ranging, and assume different contours from book to book, invariably a trio of themes recur: family, cultural history and Cuba.

"Monkey Hunting" is a particularly impressive example of all three of these interests. Genealogy may "rule Latina literature tyrannically," as one critic has put it, but for Garcia, it rules for a reason. "Genealogy is destiny," she says, explaining why all of her novels to date have as their spine a familial relationship.

In order to tell the story of Chen Pan and his descendants, Garcia not only created a complicated family tree, but also immersed herself in American, Chinese and Cuban history. Creating Chen Pan alone became an entire education. "This book is as far removed from my own experience as it could possibly be. Unlike my crazy Cuban women characters, who I can write with my eyes closed, Chen Pan is a character I had to approach from the outside in. Before I could make him anything but a puppet moving woodenly through the text, I had to read a lot of Chinese history, and a lot about colonial Cuba," she says enthusiastically.

And at the book's heart, of course, is her native land. "Cubans in Cuba tend to think that I'm not authentic, that I'm not a real Cuban. I find it amusing that people try to deny me part of my identity. There is no one way of being Cuban. For some reason, Cuba is a repository for so many dreams and projections and distortions."
A reviewer once pointed out that "Cuba - hard to embrace, impossible to let go - occupies a psychological zone in the American fantasy." "Hard to embrace, impossible to let go" is as good a description as any of the form obsessions often take.

Is Cuba somehow constituted to occupy this zone? Garcia thinks so. "Even before the revolution, Cuba had a disproportionate share of the world's attention. It's at a unique crossroads geographically and politically. There's something about it - so alluringly situated off the tip of the United States, the paradox of it, the inability to define or own it."

It is this Cuba - an island of invention, an amalgamation of the real and unreal, memory and nostalgia - that preoccupies Garcia. "I'm never speaking for anyone but myself, and my own peculiar obsessions, and if other people find that interesting, I am thrilled."

[Illustration]
Caption: Newsday Photo / Ari Mintz - Cristina Garcia

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