

Conversation with the Author

Patti Sheehy

Q. *When did you start writing?*

My first real job was with a small New York City public relations firm. Our clients included many of the nation's top magazines. The president and editor were out sick for a while, and I took it upon myself to write all the press releases in their absence. When the president returned he called me into his office. He berated me for my temerity in taking charge while he was gone and then promoted me to staff writer. Go figure!

Q. *What inspired you to write your novel?*

The novel's protagonist is the father of a colleague of mine. She provided me with a short synopsis of the story and introduced me to Frank. I knew within an hour of my first interview with him that he had a dynamite story to tell--I was hooked.

Q. *How did you use your life experiences or professional background to enrich your story?*

I come from a big Irish family. Everybody is a great storyteller and there's a lot of jockeying for airtime. During Christmas we put on a family show where we dress in costumes and act out a song, a poem or a skit that we've written. The acts go on for hours. We've been doing this for years and it really sparks creativity.

Professionally, my magazine writing and corporate communications background disciplined me to keep my writing descriptive and spare. I was a history major in college which helped me research and weave historical facts throughout my book.

Q. *Is your novel more plot driven or character driven?*

That's a tough question. Frank is a very strong character and the story really revolves around him. On the other hand, the plot is so compelling that people tell me the book is hard to put down. I leave it up to my readers to decide.

Q. Who is your favorite or most sympathetic character? And why?

Frank was by far my favorite character. He was smart, determined and willing to risk everything for love. His ability to make life and death decisions at such a young age was remarkable. I just hope I did his character justice.

I was also very taken with *Abuelo*. His advice enabled Frank to escape and his love for his grandson was very endearing.

Q. Who was your least sympathetic character? And why?

Lieutenant Pino takes it, hands down. He was so ego driven that he shot himself in the foot. Frank and Pino were engaged in an epic battle of wills and it was amazing that Frank was able to outsmart not only him but so many members of Cuba's Special Forces. The interaction between the two characters was very compelling.

Q. What part of writing your book was most challenging?

During our interviews Frank recreated scenes and dialogue so well that I felt the first person narrative would be the most effective way to tell his story. While this provided a sense of immediacy, it left me with the problem of how to write the scenes where Frank wasn't there. I finally decided to fictionalize those parts of the story that Frank learned about indirectly or after the fact, making his story into a novel rather than a memoir.

Q. What do you hope readers will take away from your book?

I hope readers will learn something about everyday life under the Castro regime. I hope they will be inspired by Frank's tenacity and determination in facing almost overwhelming odds in his attempt to escape Cuba. And I hope they might consider the power of friendship and teamwork in attaining a goal.

Q. How do you dial up the tension to keep your readers on the edge of their seats?

This story is so inherently suspenseful that it would be difficult for readers not to be on the edge of their seats. My biggest issue was how to pace the book so the suspense would be most effective-- where to end chapters, how much to flesh out an idea while still maintaining momentum, etc.

Q. What writers have inspired you?

There are too many to name. I just finished Jodi Picoult's *Nineteen Minutes*, a compelling story about bullying and violence. *Shantaram* by Gregory David Robert is an autobiographical novel that takes your breath away. Ken Follett, Joyce Carol Oates, Daniel Silva are all mind boggling. And then there's poetry...

Kudos to Natasha Trethewey for being named Poet Laureate of the United States.

Q. What is the writing process like for you?

I'm a big believer in perspiration rather than inspiration. There's nothing like sitting down at the keyboard to get you going. I like to write in the morning when I'm feeling fresh, revise in the afternoon and then print out a hard copy to edit while I'm watching TV at night.

Q. What's the best piece of advice about writing you've ever received?

Edit, edit, edit.

Q. What's the worst piece of advice about writing you've ever received?

It's a waste of time; it's too difficult to get published.

Q. What's next for you? Any new books in the pipeline?

I've just finished writing the sequel to *The Boy Who Said No*. It's a story of love, loss and revenge, resulting in a Cuban refugee's worst nightmare. It takes the reader to unexpected places and answers many questions raised by my first book.

Q. Any final words you would like to say about yourself, your novel or life in general?

I was very fortunate to meet Frank Mederos and to tell his fascinating story. He has led a remarkable life and remains a remarkable individual.

My advice to anyone starting a creative endeavor is to believe in yourself, enjoy the process and maintain your focus.