

The City and the Writer: In Miami with M. Evelina Galang

(<http://wordswithoutborders.org/dispatches/article/the-city-and-the-writer-in-miami-with-m.-evelina-galang>)



If each city is like a game of chess, the day when I have learned the rules, I shall finally possess my empire, even if I shall never succeed in knowing all the cities it contains.

— Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

Can you describe the mood of Miami as you feel/see it?

Every year my parents visit and they tell me that Miami is like Manila before Marcos. And while my only memories of Manila before Marcos are mostly the inside of my grandmother's garden (green and tropical and lush with a stone grotto to Mary and a pond of giant goldfish and floating lilies), I think I know what they mean. For me, Miami is like no other place in the United States. When the doors at MIA swing open and the humidity washes over me amid the beep-beep of taxis and the cacophony of so many languages, I know I'm home. This is not only Miami this is Manila too. From the traffic on US One, to the resort blue waters of the Atlantic, there is symmetry between these two cities. From the

international quality of our people, to the little markets on Calle Ocho and the way friends and neighbors greet each other with *besitos*, this city feels like a piece of Manila. These days, my own little Miami garden with its avocado, mango, lemon, and *naranja agria* trees, brings me back to my grandmother's in Manila—not so much the look of all those palm fronds and lush greens, as the stillness I find there every morning.

What is your most heartbreaking memory in this city?

When Celia Cruz died in 2003, the city went into mourning. To fulfill her wish, her husband, Pedro Knight, escorted her back to Miami for a final public viewing. Thousands waited outside the Freedom Tower in downtown Miami, an historic landmark where Cuban refugees were processed from 1962 to 1974. For weeks her music was everywhere and the sadness too. If she would never get to return to her beloved Cuba, would anyone? It was hard not to have a heavy heart, even if you were not Cuban. Maybe that's the first-generation-American-born me responding to this experience, this need to always connect to home, but I was sad too.

What is the most extraordinary detail, one that goes unnoticed by most, of the city?

We are not all Miami Vice with the drugs and the clubs and the dangerous streets. We are all facets of humanity. One detail that I love about Miami is how there are so many little communities where you can go deep within and find your own stillness. There is a wonderful yoga community throughout South Florida and a very strong meditation community as well. In a big city like Miami, you can find stillness and many of us are doing just that.

What writer(s) from here should we read?

We are a city of writers. There are many of us you should read: Emma Trelles, Geoffrey Philp, Adrian Castro, Mia Leonin, Edwidge Danticat, Patricia Engel, Maureen Seaton, Carolina Hospital-Medina, Lester Goran, Lynn

Barrett, Jane Alison, Russell Banks, Denise Duhamel, Chase Twitchell, John Dufresne, Manette Ansay, Diana Abu-Jaber, Campbell McGrath . . . this is a dangerous task to name the writers from Miami you should read since I cannot possibly name them all.

Is there a place here you return to often?

The ocean. The ocean breathes no matter what is going on. Steady, calming, rhythmic. I keep a little chair in the back of my car and every couple of weeks I find my way to the shore and I listen to the ocean. I wade into it and I breathe with it. I let the currents carry me. I trust it. I find my grounding there. I breathe.

Is there an iconic literary place we should know?

Books & Books in Coral Gables! Anybody who's anybody writing literature (from my University of Miami undergraduate creative writing students to President Bill Clinton to Michael Ondaatje and Jhumpa Lahiri) has stepped onto the patio of Books & Books to read from their latest work of poetry or memoir or fiction. If you are a tourist, just go there and have a *cafecito* and watch the writers come with their laptops and their notebooks and their own thick manuscripts. You can read there, you can meet emerging writers and listen to your favorite writers read to you. If you're lucky, you might even meet owner Mitchell Kaplan, once president of the American Booksellers Association, the founder of the Miami International Book Fair and the recent recipient of the National Book Foundation's Literarian Award. To call Books & Books an iconic literary place is an understatement.

Are there hidden cities within this city that have intrigued or seduced you?

Once, my friend Chris Abani, looking out the car window said, "There are so many Miamis!" And this is so true! I know from people who have welcomed me with open arms from the *abuelas* next door (there are three widowed sisters who live next door to me and one *soltera* on the other side of me) to the Haitian Americans in Little Haiti to the old mothers of the Nanay Community (a Filipino-based community center for senior citizens of all nationalities) in North Miami. Maybe you expect me to talk about those cities—but there are others too and I love them all and the one I want to talk about could easily exist in any big city, but it is especially sweet here, I think.

When my yoga instructor was dying of cancer, the entire community came out to support her. I won't forget that night in December when she sat on these fat pillows before a pool underneath the palm trees, watching her friends play music—dancing and singing for her. There was a long table of food—all kinds of fresh grains, greens and vegetables—scrumptious food, food of the gods. I remember dancing long into the night and at one point, it was my turn just to sit with her. She was so happy. When she died that next February, we all gathered once more, this time at the beach. We sat on the sands and told funny Suzy stories and when it was time, two of her dearest friends climbed into a boat, bringing with them a small urn. We stayed on shore—dozens of us—and we held giant stalks of sunflowers. And as the boat drifted into the sea, they scattered her ashes right there. We tossed the flowers after her and many of us dove into the water to swim with her and see her off. One last time. That little city of love seduces me every time.

Where does passion live here?

The passion is in the people. When you are walking down the street you must look into their eyes and you will see it. When you are at the local Publix and a *viejita* asks you to reach to the top shelf to grab her a can of black beans, you feel it. The passion is in the thirtysomething guy sitting in the bed of a truck looking at you in the middle of traffic and blowing you a kiss. The passion is in the water too—each wave that crashes onto shore. And in the wind and the way the palm trees nearly back bend during heavy rains. It is in the way you plant a seed into the earth and with the rains coming down each day, the way everything sprouts so fast and high you cannot eat all the fruit each plant bears. You must share it, with the people . . . and that is where the passion is, it is in the people.

What is the title of one of your stories about Miami and what inspired it exactly?

“Besos, Besos!” One fourth of July, I stood on the twelfth-story roof of Hecht Residential College on the University of Miami Coral Gables Campus. I looked at the cityscape that is Miami and I watched all the fireworks from every neighborhood. I was surrounded by light and I wanted to believe that in fact, the fireworks were coming from the kisses people were giving to one another because that is the kind of city Miami is. *Besos besos* everywhere!

Inspired by Levi, “Outside Miami does an outside exist?”

To me, we are a city of outsiders—we come from every walk of life and from every nation. I have lived in many cities and many rural towns. I have called Milwaukee, Norfolk, Fort Collins, Chicago, Ames, Harrisburg, Peoria, Manila, Regina, and now Miami home. I have been an outsider almost all my life, but in Miami, a city of outsiders a little bit of all these cities exists—and cities I have never lived in, though some I have visited and some I have only imagined. In a city of outsiders, we are all half-dreaming of going home, though many of us do not know where that home is and many of us go back and forth—New York to Miami, Port au Prince to Miami, Buenos Aires to Miami and for me, Milwaukee to Miami. All the outside lives inside Miami.

M. Evelina Galang is the author Her Wild American Self, a collection of short stories and the novel, One Tribe. She has also edited the anthology, Screaming Monkeys: Critiques of Asian American Images. Galang is the recipient of numerous awards, among them, the 2004 Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Awards Advancing Human Rights, the 2004 AWP Prize in the Novel and the 2007 Global Filipino Award in Literature for One Tribe. She has been researching the lives of the women of Liga ng mga Lolang Pilipina (LILA Pilipina), surviving Filipina “Comfort Women” of WWII, since 1998. In 2002, she was a Fulbright Senior Scholar in the Philippines where she continued her work with survivors. She is currently writing Lolás’ House: Women Living with War, stories of surviving Filipina “Comfort Women.” Her second novel, Angel de la Luna and the 5th Glorious Mystery is forthcoming from Coffee House Press in the Fall of 2013. She teaches and directs the Creative Writing Program at the University of Miami, and was named one of the 100 most influential Filipinas in the United States by Filipina Women’s Network.

NH’s Discovery of the Month: If you are from or have lived in the Caribbean or Latin America, you probably have a connection to/with Miami. The city is filled with Cubans, Haitians, Dominicans, Hondurans, Venezuelans, Argentineans, etc.—many came for political or economic reasons, and families followed. I remember going to Miami as a young girl and seeing, “We Speak English” signs. My memory of the place is of an unsafe city. But being with Cubans—the food, the music, the warmth and drama of their spirit—made Miami feel like home.

When I moved to Europe in 1991, I only went to Miami occasionally, and for a few days. It was not until I met Richard Blanco a decade or so ago—by then I had moved to New York City—that I started following the Miami cultural, literary, and especially its exciting art scene. [Art Basel \(https://www.artbasel.com/en\)](https://www.artbasel.com/en) found a home in Miami Beach and everything changed, turning Miami “cool.” The annual fair is one of the most important in the art world. Now, art galleries and exhibition spaces are everywhere. A few of my favorites are: [Gary Nader Fine Art \(http://www.garynader.com\)](http://www.garynader.com) gallery, [Dorsch Gallery \(http://www.dorschgallery.com\)](http://www.dorschgallery.com), the [Margulies Collection at the Warehouse \(http://www.margulieswarehouse.com\)](http://www.margulieswarehouse.com), and [Locust Projects \(http://www.locustprojects.org/\)](http://www.locustprojects.org/). There is also electric new architecture—Frank Gehry’s New World Center, the Swiss architectural firm Herzog & de Meuron’s Miami Art Museum, South Miami-Dade Cultural Arts Center and 1111 Lincoln Road, Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts of Miami-Dade County, and the revival of neighborhoods like Wynwood and the Design District (a great spot for writers in that area is [Lester’s \(http://lestersmiami.com/\)](http://lestersmiami.com/)).

So when Evelina Galang invited me to read at The University of Miami reading series, [USpeak](http://www.as.miami.edu/english/creativewriting/readingseries/uspeak) (<http://www.as.miami.edu/english/creativewriting/readingseries/uspeak>), which she curates, followed by a reading at the beloved [Books & Books](http://www.booksandbooks.com) (<http://www.booksandbooks.com>), I was extremely excited. My good friend Edwidge Danticat was there, and I discovered a whole new Miami.

Some bookstores: [Librería & Distribuidora Universal](http://www.ediciones.com/index2.htm) (<http://www.ediciones.com/index2.htm>), a Spanish-language bookstore, [Librería Mapou](http://www.librerimapou.com/) (<http://www.librerimapou.com/>) run by the Haitian poet Jan Mapou's not far from the Little Haiti Cultural Center.

Some readings series and venues: Writers on the Bay run by Florida International University, [Lip Service](http://www.lipservicestories.com/) (<http://www.lipservicestories.com/>), the spoken-word series at [Bohemia Room](http://www.thebohemiroom.com/index.html) (<http://www.thebohemiroom.com/index.html>), [Centro Cultural Español](http://ccemiami.org/) (<http://ccemiami.org/>), Gean Moreno and P. Scott Cunningham cofounded [O, Miami](http://omiami.org/) (<http://omiami.org/>) and *Jai-Alai Magazine*—part of an a larger initiative called [University of Wynwood](http://www.universityofwynwood.org/) (<http://www.universityofwynwood.org/>), a fake school to stir up the Miami literary scene, and The [Sackner Archive for Concrete and Visual Poetry](http://ww2.rediscover.com/sacknerarchives/Welcome.aspx) (<http://ww2.rediscover.com/sacknerarchives/Welcome.aspx>), that has a fine collection of concrete and visual poetry.

Some festivals: The [Key West Literary Seminar](http://www.kwls.org/) (<http://www.kwls.org/>), the [Sanibel Island Writers Conference](http://www.fgcu.edu/siwc/) (<http://www.fgcu.edu/siwc/>), Miami Book Fair International, and The Palm Beach Poetry Festival—I met the wonderful director, Miles A. Coon, when I was giving a reading at Longfellow National Historic Site in Cambridge.

At the Miami airport, there was a wall of famous Latinos from Miami—Emilio and Gloria Estefan, Maria Celeste, *Telenovela* stars, musicians, athletes. I looked at all those faces and smiled. Before leaving, Edwidge asked me when I'd be back, and I realized, some places you never really leave.

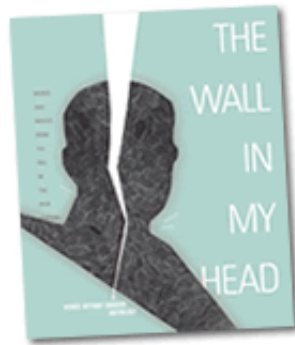
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[About Nathalie Handal \(/dispatches/contributor/natalyahandal\)](/dispatches/contributor/natalyahandal)

Nathalie Handal is an award-winning poet and playwright. She has lived in Europe, the United States, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Arab world. She is a Lannan Foundation Fellow, recipient of the Alejo Zuloaga Order in Literature 2011, and an Honored Finalist for the Gift of Freedom Award. She has been involved either as a writer, director or producer in over twenty theatrical or film productions worldwide, most recently her work was produced at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the Bush Theatre, and Westminster Abbey in London. Handal is the author of numerous books including, *Love and Strange Horses*, winner of the 2011 Gold Medal Independent Publisher Book Award, and an Honorable Mention at the San Francisco Book Festival and the New England Book Festival and the landmark anthology, *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia & Beyond*. Alice Walker praises her latest collection *Poet in Andalucía* (Spring 2012) as “poems of depth and weight and the sorrowing song of longing and resolve.”

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“Thought-provoking, oddly nostalgic”



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