

## **Interview by Sergio Andricain**

Yanitzia Canetti is a very unusual name in the Caribbean. Where did it come from? How was it that you were born in Cuba?

I was born in Cuba because of the work and grace of my restless parents. My first name was my mother's idea; she had seen it in a book about Eskimos. She changed the spelling so that it would be a bit more Castilian...but you can see that she didn't change it much. My last name is from Switzerland, from Brissage, in Ticino, which is the Italian section. My father's side is entirely Swiss-Italian, except for two or three who escaped to Spain, Italy, and Germany. My mother is 100% criolla, even though her parents came from the Canary Islands. And I am, as you'd expect, a fortuitous chili stew.

### **When did you decide to be a writer? Is there any other profession that interests you?**

I never decided to be a writer. I wasn't aware of the moment that I earned this title. I saw it one day in the papers and I liked it. Maybe I liked it so much that I repeated it, but it wasn't a premeditated decision. What I always knew was that I needed to write, I wanted to write, and I was going to write until I died, and maybe, who knows, I'd continue writing after that. When I was a little girl and was asked the classic question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?", I swore that I would be a mother and a nurse. Nurse later changed to doctor because it had less to do with injections, and then to stewardess because I liked to travel, and finally to diplomat, because although I liked to travel, I didn't want to clean up the little boy who threw up in seat 22B, as my grandmother did one day. The desire to be a mother did persist for a long time, but nobody wanted to explain where to study it or what the career consisted of. Now I know. I have a two-year-old son and another is on its way.

When I was finally grown up, I didn't study any of the things that I'd claimed I would. I studied journalism.

### **Before publishing fiction books, you worked as a journalist. What did you get out of this work?**

Before, during, and after it, I worked as a journalist. I currently write for several newspapers in the United States, and I sporadically write for newspapers in other countries. Of course journalism gives you the profession, trains you in the art of observing and judging, forces you to investigate and examine topics thoroughly, requires you to think about the audience you are addressing: all valuable skills for writing fiction.

### **What was your first book? Where did the idea come from?**

The first book I wrote was called "Los fantásticos viajes de Fantasía" [Fantasy's Fantastic Adventures]. It was a book for children and I wrote it in a school notebook when I was eight years old. Twenty years later I rewrote it and maybe someday I will have it published. It occurred to me as I was watching how the North Star appeared, the first to shine before dark. I tore through astronomy books from the time I was able to read and recited the laws of Kepler, though I didn't have the slightest idea what to do with this formula.

The first book I published was "Secretos de palacio" [Secrets of the Palace], in Cuba. It was a book of short stories for children, about the gossip of kings and princesses who, as it turns out, did not have blue blood and, as hard as it is to believe, went to the bathroom like the rest of us. The story actually occurred to me in the bathroom, as I was reading a story by Andersen, "The Princess and the Pea."

### **How did you arrive in the United States?**

By airplane. My husband was from this country, also a journalist. But the answer could have been "swimming," "in a rocket," or "flying on a broom." I might have gone to the United States or to Wonderland. Maybe I wouldn't have gotten anywhere, but I'm sure that I would have left where I was.

### **Where did the idea for "novelita Rosa" [Through Rose-Colored Lenses] come from? What were you trying to say with this novel? Did you investigate the world of Hispanics in the United States and the world of soap operas beforehand?**

The idea came to me in front of the television, watching how Rosa Elena completely despised Luis Armando Villahermosa. Can you imagine what it meant to me that a simple corn seller would despise a Villahermosa, nobody less than a Villahermosa? Seriously, the idea developed as I observed how soap operas were the topic of conversation for many immigrants. Soaps were their daily bread, their escape at night. At first my idea was to make people laugh. I also needed to laugh. Then I thought I'd try to make people free themselves from "all evil" by turning off the television. I don't know if they'll achieve that, but at least they will free themselves from "one evil."

### **Will this novel also be published in Spain?**

Yes, maybe this year. There they call soap operas "culebrones" (snakes), so this novel will be familiar to them even though it makes fun of the soaps. As for immigrants, they are everywhere and they all have that same anxiety in their stomachs: wanting to get on with a new reality and integrate themselves without

losing their own cultural identity. That sounds great on paper but is difficult to achieve in real life without causing psychological damage. And all of us like to laugh, even the masochists.

**If you had to define the main themes that you touch on in "Al otro lado" [On the Other Side], which would you mention?**

I think that loneliness and death are the essential themes; the two coordinates that cross at every point. But there is also the internal struggle between good and evil, the human perception of sin, vulnerability, fear, and love.

**Reality and fantasy, humor and eroticism, solemnity and impudence... its seems that you like mixtures. To what do you attribute this tendency?**

It may be because there is a mixture in my blood, I was born in a place as mixed as the Caribbean, and I see everything that way, in an amusing promiscuity. On the other hand, I don't imagine reality without fantasy, eroticism without humor, or solemnity without impudence... I could never help laughing when I had to salute the flag or sing the national anthem. The truth is that I wanted to be serious, as serious as I could, but the effort always made me have to stifle my laughter.

Also, Cubans live in a world of paradox and contrast; we go from the sublime to the ridiculous as easily as we go from the ridiculous to the sublime. Reality seems like pure fiction and literary fiction, especially contemporary literary fiction, almost always tries to reflect reality. The most sensual flirtatious compliments are the ones that can make you die laughing in the middle of the street. During the most solemn moments, you must give in and relax or you will go crazy. So we've grown up in a world where mixtures achieve a hyperbolic level, where classifying or separating concepts and categories would be like separating the beans from the rice before eating.

**"Al otro lado" got excellent reviews, but do you have any anecdotes about how it was received by the general public?**

I'd love to tell you one, but sadly I don't have any. Since I live at the end of the world, very little news reaches me about what is happening with my books. And to make matters worse, I tend to keep myself hidden. The rare times that I am motivated to come out of hiding, what I usually like to do is get together with old friends, who I am in touch with thanks to "Al otro lado." My friends are very charitable when they talk about my book. A friend of mine who is an editor, Annette, told me that she wasn't able to sleep for several days and that my novel had changed her life. After hearing that, whether it was the truth or not, I felt like it had been worth the time to write the novel.

It's true that the critics have been suspiciously benevolent. All at once I was showered with compliments. I was surprised by the similar points of view in reviews from Spain and the United States. But it's not the critics who have the last word. I would love to know what the general public thinks, as you say. The opinions I've received from readers are those of my friends, and friends tend to be kind with their criticism.

**What are you writing or what do you plan to write now?**

I'm finishing up another novel. It takes place in Cuba around 1984. It is about an anxiety. A man who writes. A woman who writes. A library that serves as an accomplice, and a few little perverse encounters that the characters have to deal with.

Between novels, I write children's books, because my son Ares is always following me around with his "tell me a story" face. I also write essays. As part of my work, I have to write stories, plays, and poems that will later form part of school texts. So my mind is in motion all day long.

**Do you feel like you belong to any one place as a novelist? I mean, do you see yourself as a part of contemporary Cuban literature, or of literature written by Hispanics in the United States...? Or do you not see yourself as part of a group?**

Of course I belong somewhere, I would think. In any case, I belong and that is what gives me peace of mind. And although it is far away, I continue to belong in Havana. We Cubans have never known how to live outside of Cuba without still belonging in Cuba. The more ties we break, the more we are tied. We carry a ton of memories like a cross. Some try to build up scar tissue, to forget, to lose themselves in other crowds, to speak another language, to invent another childhood, to imagine themselves as children of another country, but in the end, one fine day when a mother's son puts on a Cuban bolero or someone mentions yucca with mojo, right then and there your invented world is crushed, and your stomach and your blood and your nostalgia all remind you that you will never stop being Cuban, no matter how far away you go.

I feel like part of Cuban literature because I am Cuban and that's what flows out of me from all sides when I write. I feel like part of the literature written by Hispanics in the United States because I am a Hispanic

woman who lives in the United States and that's another thing that I cannot avoid. The reality of this country also permeates everything I do and think. I feel like part of Spanish literature because I have been influenced by many Spanish authors and I grew up with my grandmother's Castilian accent. I feel like part of the literature of many other groups whose authors have shared their dreams, ideas, and even philosophies of life (as a young girl, for example, I devoured Andersen, Grimm, Perrault, the Countess of Segur) but I've also been influenced by Greek mythology, the sensuality of Indian legends, and all of the idealized roughness of Nordic adventures. And, of course, I feel like part of universal literature, because I live on this planet and today, with globalization, "in everything there is a portion of everything," as Socrates said.

The truth is, I don't spend much time thinking about the classification of things, or placing myself in a category and believing that I belong there and not here. What I do know is that yes, I do belong somewhere. As for the exact place, I will leave it to the critics to decide.

#### **What is your greatest ambition when you write a book?**

I think that more than ambition, I have hopes. What I most hope is to share my thoughts with someone (and that someone, if nobody else, could be myself). I also hope that every book will help me to grow in some way. I know that literature makes me a better person and allows me to know things and to know myself. When I write, I enjoy it through and through. I feel like the queen of the world, I feel like a good fairy and a wicked witch. I can do and undo, live many lives, die many deaths, violate all that has been created and instituted, go anywhere I please without a passport. It is the greatest feeling of freedom. Any act of creation, I imagine, gives you the same feeling. For me, writing a simple book gives me such happiness... for God it must have been orgasmic creating the world.

#### **Is it difficult for a writer to publish in Spanish in the United States?**

Yes. I have been able to publish in Spanish in the United States because my work is connected to bilingual education programs. But if I wanted to publish a novel for adults in Spanish, that wouldn't be so easy. I would have to write it in English and pray to the one thousand and one virgins. This market has always greatly underestimated our language, as you can see in the constant conflict with Latinos. Some people are even annoyed if Spanish is spoken in the workplace. They want to "understand everything" and "control everything"... but from very a primitive standpoint. They want Hispanics to learn English and speak only English... but they do not want to learn Spanish because of the ridiculous pretext that the official language is English and they don't need to learn any more than they already know. The United States is the center of the world. The rest of the planet consists of picturesque tribes that are nice to visit on vacation and to talk about later at a barbecue with friends. There are more than 30 million native Spanish speakers in this country. But they try to ignore this fact. They look at us as "folkloric" and it is difficult for them to conceive of a multicultural world.

The publishers that publish in Spanish prefer books that talk about the drama of adapting to a new culture, about how they crossed the border or how they almost died crossing the ocean on a raft. They also like melodramatic personal histories. But I bet they would never publish a science-fiction novel or a tale of adventures in Nepal by a Mexican author. They want stories that "reflect the reality of immigrants and tell about their 'extravagant' traditions." They also tend to translate bestsellers from the Spanish or Latin American market into English. That way they have greater possibilities for sales.

There are few, very few, publishers who will publish a Hispanic author in Spanish.

#### **It is possible to be a literary assessor for a large publisher, a translator, an editor, and a mother? What is your secret for achieving all this?**

I don't know. Sometimes I fail and I end up pulling my hair out. I work hard and I work almost all of the time like everyone in this country. I get up at six. Well, my son, who is a Swiss watch, wakes me up at six. At that moment I begin my routine as a mother. Later I drop him off at day care and I go to work. Part of my work is editing and translating literary texts. I recommend books that should be included in educational programs or that should form part of a course in literature. When the work day is over, I pick up my son and we go for a walk in the woods. Or sometimes his dad takes him for a walk. Most of the time, the three of us go together, counting trees and squirrels along the way. Then we walk home and again begin the routine of giving baths and making dinner and reading stories and singing something from my extensive repertoire of songs before he goes to bed. At that point my husband and I have some time to ourselves. And when everyone is asleep, I sit down to write my novel until 2 or 3 A.M. I don't always work so late, but I don't sleep much. Now I am sleeping more because I am expecting another baby and I don't want to affect him with my lack of sleep.

On the weekends, I finish work that is pending, write for newspapers, prepare reports for Monday, and do five hundred other things. But I always find time to take Ares out to explore the world.

So I really don't have a secret. But if you have one, please share it with me.

**How would you describe Yanitzia Canetti today?**

Very mischievous, a true friend to my friends, in love with what I do, in love with my family, and, as always, full of plans and dreams.