

Interview with Patricia Engel

[00:00:11] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim the bookshelf and read the world. Today, I'm talking to the wonderful Patricia Engel about her latest novel, INFINITE COUNTRY, which is out now from Avid Reader Press. You can find a complete transcript of our conversation over on our website, readingwomenpodcast.com. And don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:38] **Kendra** Now, normally this time of the month, we are releasing our first episode of our theme. But this is a five-Wednesday month. So we will have an extra interview in this month already. So we're just going to space them out a bit. So next week we'll be having our first themed episode.

[00:01:05] **Kendra** Also, it is the first of the month. So that means we have a brand new Patreon podcast episode. This month, I'm talking to one of our guests from last month, Evelyn Bradley and her wife, Vanessa Bradley. We met each other . . . or all of us met . . . I met them? There we go. I met them at our book club, which is hosted by M. Judson Books. And they recently moved to Canada. Well, I say recently. They got married and moved to Canada about a year ago now. What is time? But I love an excuse to sit down and chat with them about book clubs, what it's like hosting a book club, the importance for Vanessa and Evelyn when they founded the LGBTQ+ Book Club in town and what that was like for them, what they look for in books they choose for book clubs. So if you are hosting a book club, attend a book club, are thinking about starting a book club—this is a great conversation to listen to. They have a lot of wonderful insights on running a book club and what that's like and the effort that goes behind choosing those books. So if you would like to listen to our special Patreon podcast episode, you can find a link to our Patreon in the show notes, or go over to patreon.com/readingwomen.

[00:02:19] **Kendra** All right, so today is a conversation with an author I loved for a while, and that is Patricia Engel. I first read her work when Autumn and I discussed THE VEINS OF THE OCEAN a few years ago when it came out. This novel, INFINITE COUNTRY, is a slim novel about a family separated because the father was deported back to Colombia. And so he and the youngest daughter live in Colombia with the daughter's grandmother, his mother-in-law. And the mom lives with the two oldest children in America. And so this is a family that's divided by all these different things, not just their physical location, but there's an emotional separation. It's a journey of this family coming together and falling apart and what that looks like.

[00:03:11] **Kendra** We start with Talia, who is a teenager. She's the youngest daughter. And she has just escaped this, like, teenage girls' prison that's run by nuns, basically. And so she is trying to get back to her father so that she can return to America to be with her mom and her two siblings. And, you know, from the first moments of this book, you're immediately drawn into this family, and you become invested. And I just am so blown away by Patricia Engel's ability of characterization. And I talk about that a lot and ask her a lot of questions about the process of writing this book because this is an incredible talent, and I want to learn from her and understand the method that went into creating this book. And so I feel like readers will really love learning what happens kind of behind the scenes when an author is creating a book and then moving forward into the different things that she used in the novel to tell this family story.

[00:04:10] **Kendra** I didn't have the audiobook for this particular book. So my spouse, Sam, read the book to me. And he really enjoyed it as well. And he has this bad habit of, at really key points in the novel, he will quit reading out loud and just start silently reading. He'll go, "Oh my word, I can't believe this is happening!" I have no idea what's happening. Sam! You can't do that to me. So it is really a great book to read by yourself or with friends or to have a discussion with friends. I just thoroughly enjoyed this novel and couldn't have been more thrilled to talk to Patricia about it.

[00:04:44] **Kendra** So a little bit about Patricia Engel before we jump into our conversation. Patricia Engel is the author of THE VEINS OF THE OCEAN, IT'S NOT LOVE, IT'S JUST PARIS, and VIDA, all of which have won various accolades and awards. She's a very prolific author. She is also the recipient of fellowships like the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment of the Arts. Her stories have appeared in The Best American Short Stories, The Best American Mystery Stories, The O. Henry Prize Stories and elsewhere. Born to Colombian parents, Patricia teaches creative writing at the University of Miami. So without further ado, here's my conversation with Patricia Engel.

[00:05:30] **Kendra** Well, welcome to the podcast, Patricia. I'm just so thrilled to have you on.

[00:05:36] **Patricia** Thank you so much for inviting me to join you. I'm excited to be here.

[00:05:40] **Kendra** We were chatting a little bit before we started recording. And I mentioned I read THE VEINS OF THE OCEAN when it came out in, I think, around 2016. Is that correct?

[00:05:51] **Patricia** Yes.

[00:05:51] **Kendra** And it just . . . it was just so beautiful. And my co-host at the time, Autumn, and I could not stop talking about it. We shared it with every single person. And also, it had an amazing cover. And so it was just a beautiful package. So huge fans.

[00:06:09] **Patricia** Oh, thank you so much.

[00:06:10] **Kendra** So I was so thrilled that your next book is finally out into the world. But I mean, it has to be a very different book-publishing experience than previously now that we're in a global pandemic and book releases are a bit different now.

[00:06:29] **Patricia** Yeah, this is my first pandemic book. The book sold in January of 2020. So just before things started to signal that life would be different. And it's funny, when we first started talking about when the book would come out, we thought that people would be going to in-person events by then. But of course everything has proven otherwise. So it's going to be an interesting experience.

[00:07:01] **Kendra** Yeah, and it was. . . . Was it pushed back a little bit as well?

[00:07:05] **Patricia** No, it wasn't.

[00:07:06] **Kendra** Oh, okay. Well, and that was nice. Even though you had to do all your edits during a pandemic, at least you had more of a set time. . .

[00:07:15] **Patricia** Yes.

[00:07:15] **Kendra** . . . than having to rework everything around that. So this book is very different in a lot of ways from your previous book. And you feature an entire range of characters this time, like an entire family. When you go into a new project, do you have a general idea of what kind of characters that you might be featuring? Or does the story come first? What's your process on that?

[00:07:43] **Patricia** It's different from every book, but usually it begins with an original voice, a single character's voice. In the case of INFINITE COUNTRY, I knew that it would. . . . It might have a single voice, but it would be about the whole family and that they would have a way to express their own story in their own words. So it took me some time to figure out how to do that, to give them each the opportunity to take over the book in some ways, but not in an obvious way. The first character that probably came to me was the character of Talia, who is the youngest daughter of this family where there's three children. She's fifteen years old. So she began as a character. But as you find out—and I don't think I'm giving away too much in saying so—the book, the great storyteller of the family—and I think a lot of families have a storyteller, kind of the witness that chronicles the family's story, even if just for themselves—and in this case, in the case of INFINITE COUNTRY, it's her older sister, Karina, who's really the one compiling the whole family story. And the story comes mostly through her.

[00:08:54] **Kendra** I really love the use of storytelling throughout the book, and it comes in so many different forms and manifestations. One of the things that you start really early on is people telling stories amongst themselves, between themselves—even starting when the parents first meet and fall in love. And they tell the stories. . . . They tell each other the story of their future that they are planning and different things. Did that recurring theme of storytelling appear early on in the book? Or was it something that you discovered that the characters were kind of doing amongst themselves as you were writing the book?

[00:09:37] **Patricia** Well, in the book, there's the stories the characters tell one another. But there's also the stories that they don't tell. And there's the stories they keep to themselves and their own internal narratives, even if they repeat them often to themselves. But this is something that I think is really common. People are the sum of the stories that they've been told about who they are, about their origins, or their . . . the lack of stories that they've been told. And that's how countries and cultures come to define themselves is through the stories that they maintain and repeat. And this is also how we came to understand how the world came to be. And we have creation stories and stories that explain how we conduct ourselves in society. So story is fundamental, I think, to the human experience. But in the case of this family, you see how some stories become more important than others. And what you share with the people closest to you, your most intimate stories, also become vital as a way to survive.

[00:10:47] **Kendra** I really appreciate how the different family members kind of kept the memories alive of telling the children the stories of the parent that was missing. And I really. . . . You know, you could feel that throughout the book. In addition to those stories, you also have a lot of . . . you also have a lot of mythology and folklore that's included, the stories of society and culture that come into play in that. And there's some beautiful moments where I remember Talia wishes that the protagonist of one of her favorite stories would come and heal her grandmother. And that was one of her favorite stories that her grandmother would tell her. And it created a lot of beautiful moments and some really intricate parallels there.

[00:11:35] **Patricia** Yeah, those are stories that some people might consider legends or myths or just imagined fantastical tales, but other people would consider them truth and a part of ancestral knowledge and traditional knowledge that's passed on and as valid as anything else that we know to be true. And these are stories that help people get through very difficult times and explain so many things that otherwise might be more difficult to explain.

[00:12:09] **Kendra** Did you research a lot of these stories? Or is this just something that is also something that's part of your family that you felt natural to include in the story?

[00:12:20] **Patricia** My parents are both Colombian, and I'm a dual citizen. And I spent a lot of time in Colombia. So a lot of these stories were stories that I grew up with or I'd heard in a limited capacity. And then over time, I heard more of them. But I'm also a very curious person. So when I'm just exploring things for my own curiosity, one thing leads to another, and that becomes a form of research as well. So it's hard to say which stories arrived first in my consciousness. Many I feel like I've always known. There are some stories that are more specific to different regions in Colombia. And those I came across . . . people told them to me, shared them with me, or through just reading and research. So they came in a variety of ways.

[00:13:12] **Kendra** I found there was also an interesting parallel with the stories that you could see migrants telling each other about what we might call the American dream and how migrating to America might give them better opportunities. And that plays a huge role in this family, which has a mixed status as some members are undocumented, and some were born in America and have citizenship. And there's just a lot of back-and-forth storytelling, which I feel like creates a beautiful almost chorus-type of voice in the novel of these different cultures communicating back and forth with each other through these stories. And it was just something that was a joy to sit with and think about. It gives you a lot to discover in the book.

[00:14:02] **Patricia** Thank you. Yeah, a lot of these characters, their decisions are motivated often by what they have been told, what they have been told are their choices and what they have been told are the risks and rewards by taking those steps in their lives. And of course, sometimes they find out that it's very different from what they expected, but it also speaks to how community . . . our communities are filtered through the individuals. So we're never just a single voice in our own minds. We carry so many voices within us that are guiding our own actions as well.

[00:14:40] **Kendra** So this book, like we've mentioned, uses story in such a great way. And it also has a beautiful structure to the book. And you go back and forth between Talia's perspective and kind of the story of her parents falling in love and migrating to America. And I really loved how you did that with structure. I'm a bit of a structure nerd. I used to be a book doctor. And so that was something that I always really enjoyed with books. Did you ever think of telling the story in a linear fashion? Or is this the structure that you gravitated towards from the beginning?

[00:15:16] **Patricia** It's hard to say because the book takes on many lives when you're writing it and revising it, but I never really think of structure being linear or nonlinear. To me, everything is linear in that the characters are themselves participating in different moments in time at any given moment. So the book, the way, yes, it's constructed, it opens with Talia in the present in Colombia, breaking out of a juvenile detention facility. And then the next thing, the next moment in the book is you understand the story of her parents and

how they came to meet, and the story of this family assembles itself. So I knew that it would cover, you know, fifteen or twenty or so years. The question was, how do you do that in a way that doesn't make it feel like you're shuffling the deck or just flipping a switch to go back and forth and back and forth, but in a way that makes these moments feel connected and very immediate to the present story? So I had to tinker with it a bit, of course, but I knew that the origins of this family—these two young sweethearts who become lovers; they become a young couple; they become parents together—how they began is just as important as where the family is now when you meet them.

[00:16:50] **Kendra** And I really loved the way that, later in the book, the oldest sister you mentioned, Karina, is telling the story. And her brother kind of interrupts her, and there's just this back and forth. And that structure to me was really surprising when you realized who the narrator was and just came . . . it came forward, and just all pulled it together in the end. And it was just a beautiful moment that I mean, you made it look really easy. I'm sure it was very difficult to pull all these threads together, but that was just something that stuck out to me.

[00:17:33] **Patricia** Oh, thanks. Yeah, I wanted those two siblings, Karina and Nando, they are very close. They've grown up together in the United States, while their sister has grown up apart from them in Colombia for fifteen years. So in pairing those two narratives together, I wanted to also be able to show that how they really depend on one another and protect one another. And they're . . . it's almost as if one of their narratives could not exist without the other.

[00:18:06] **Kendra** It's a beautiful way to put it. As I was reading the story, you've become very attached to the characters. And when I think about this book, I think about how vibrant and well rounded the characters are. But this book is under two hundred pages. And so you are able to tell the story and also create these really . . . I feel like I know these characters now in such a short amount of space. When you were working on this book, was that something that was particularly challenging? Because I didn't even notice that it was just two hundred pages. I felt like it was a much longer book.

[00:18:44] **Patricia** It was a challenge that I set for myself. And in a way that I wanted almost the art of this book to imitate life and that you don't always need to know people for years and years and years to really understand them deeply or connect with them deeply. Sometimes you can feel all that in a very short time for a person or a family. So I wanted the book to feel like a very intimate and intense encounter with this family, to feel expansive, yet intimate and be economical and really so that every word in every line felt essential.

[00:19:31] **Kendra** It definitely did, and there are just so many moments to pause. And, you know, Talia will say something. And it's . . . you just sit with that line, and you think about just her perspective on the world. And how you're able to create that connection between the character and the reader so quickly in the book was just something that I've always loved about your characters. But in this book, there are just so many characters that you kind of weave together, and it's almost like you're juggling a lot of different things at the same time. But it really works. My spouse and I, who also read the book, talked about the characters for a very long time after. And we will probably still be talking about them tonight when he gets home from work just because they're that impactful, I think.

[00:20:15] **Patricia** Thank you. That's really the goal of any writer is to create characters that resonate and that reverberate for long after when you close the book. And for me as a

reader, that's what I love the most. A lot of my most favorite books are very compact, very short books that still were very intense experiences to read. So I was trying . . . I was trying for that, to be honest. It's just a little simple goal of mine.

[00:20:50] **Kendra** The book starts out a little before the year 2000, so maybe mid-'90s? Maybe you say when we first meet the parents?

[00:20:59] **Patricia** Yeah, '90s.

[00:21:00] **Kendra** So it covers a very specific time in history. Was there a particular thing that drew you to writing about this particular moment in history? I guess it does bring it to the present, but was there something that you wanted to make sure to cover or a time period that you wanted to feature in this family's lives as they're migrating to the US and having their experiences there?

[00:21:25] **Patricia** Well, the Colombian diaspora is one of the largest in the world. There's something like five million Colombians living outside of Colombia. So it was not unusual for me to set it during this time period because the late '90s were such a violent and chaotic time in Colombian history. It was a time when a lot of people left. And also the parents, Elena and Mauro, are of the generation who grew up as witnesses to some of the most violent decades in the Colombian history, or at least of the last half century. So it begins with them there. But also I think that what was so interesting about that time period, beginning in the late '90s, up until about 2018 when the book ends, is that even in the United States, that was a very transitional period with the turn of the millennium and the year 2000 and, of course, September 11th, which happened in 2001—and all the changes that that brought in how the United States views foreigners, with the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, which gave way to ICE, which then became a heavily policing force. And this all is not how it was before that. So I wanted to really show how through the eyes of immigrants, how they have been perceived has changed radically over the last twenty or so years.

[00:23:09] **Kendra** That's definitely something through their eyes that you can feel that shift. There's this moment when Elena is on her own—that her husband has been deported—and she's sitting there, trying to figure out what she's going to do and try to pick up the pieces. And it reminded me of a moment when they first arrived, and they were trying to figure out what to do as a family. And for this moment, she is on her own versus when she had that support of a spouse and that hopeful kind of future. And things had changed so much, you know, that what might have been possible earlier was no longer possible. And she came faced with a very difficult decision of how she was going to, you know, whether she was going to try to keep her family together and move back to Columbia or stay United States and what that might look like. And you could definitely feel that through the pages.

[00:24:07] **Patricia** Yeah, it's challenging in the sense that in the years and decades before the year 2000, there were so many opportunities for amnesty for immigrants to come to the United States. And a lot of those opportunities have all gone away. So things have changed in major ways for immigrants. But also, I wanted to combat the idea that a lot of people seem to have that immigrating is just like walking in through this door to this new life, and you don't really look back. You're just so happy and grateful to be here. When in reality—for the immigrants that I know, that I've been raised around, that are part of my community—it's much more nuanced and much more full of doubt and regret and wondering whether or not you made the right choice, weighing the sacrifices versus what

you're gaining. And it's often a daily battle just to decide whether you're going to stay or you're going to go home where people know you, to your homeland, to the land and the community that made you who you are, as opposed to being perceived as a foreigner every single day in a country that is often very actively reminding you that you are not welcome here.

[00:25:28] **Kendra** And as the family travels throughout the United States, you can see the different shifts in different perspectives, depending on where they happen to be at that time. But there's a lot of logistical things, I think, especially that Elena talks about, like figuring out whether or not she's going to return. And I feel like every few years, she kind of reassesses and thinks about these things. And you lay it out very clearly in the book, of like logistical challenges that she faces. You did a lot of excellent technical writing to clearly lay out these different things. Was that something that I'm sure you've heard of in your community moving from Colombia to United States? But was there also any particular research or particular stories that you may have seen that you wanted to make sure to cover in this book to give a very clear picture of what women like Elena face?

[00:26:23] **Patricia** Well, the experience of this family in INFINITE COUNTRY is an extremely common one. It's more typical than I could even describe. I know so many people who've lived an aspect of this family's experience. Many, many immigrants do not cross the border. They arrive here with visas, and they overstay often for reasons that are hard to define or that are beyond their control. And what's interesting to me is that this is a family that's going through it now. Right? You're seeing the active process of diaspora, of the decision and the journey of migration. You're watching how it happens and how it changes who one generation is in the parents and how that affects the next generation in the children.

[00:27:17] **Patricia** However, the large majority of people in this country, in the United States, for example, who have been here longer than one generation or two, are largely disconnected from the fact that there was somebody in their ancestral line who went through the exact same thing, who either by choice or by force, was the person who left the homeland to come to the new country and very likely was full of the same homesickness and sorrow and doubt and longing for the place that they left and the uncertainty of the new land. So this story. . . . Not only is this the story of the immigrants who are living this experience now and in current times, this family story is the story of almost everybody in this country in one way or another. So I guess part of me also hopes that some people can see that and maybe will start to wonder about the person in their family's history. Who was the disruptor in the family tree? Who made that big leap from the older country to the newer country?

[00:28:36] **Patricia** And there's something else that's different about this moment, which we didn't see coming, of course. And I certainly couldn't have seen it when I was writing the book, is that we are living in a time of separation because of the pandemic. And there are a lot of people who haven't been able to see their loved ones in a long time, in as long as a year—even family members in the same city or the same state because of the pandemic and the risks or even the laws and the rules. And so maybe in some small way, people are getting a taste, a small taste of what it's like to be separated from the people that you love for reasons that are totally out of your control and where you have no idea when is the next time that you're going to see them or if you're going to see them safely. And what does that do to a family? Does it make you less of a family because you're separated? So this book also explores what defines a family, whether it's proximity or if it's love, and if that can be sustained over time and over distance.

[00:29:43] **Kendra** You know, there was a review that I read, while prepping for this interview, and it called this book "a book about the all-American family." I thought that worked really well with the book because of what you said, just that the majority of us are . . . have come to this country at some point, or our ancestors have come at this point. And so this is the story of migration, of moving to this different country. And most of our descendants, unless you're a Native person, have done that. And that's very beautifully put.

[00:30:16] **Patricia** Yeah, it's. . . . I think that's the function of either politics or the media or just collective thinking, is that it allows people to disassociate from their past in that way and their families' past, their ancestral past in order to see people who are going through this experience now as something different from them in a way that allows them to be criminalized or looked down upon. And that's really . . . that's really not the case at all. We—through our DNA, through our bones, through our lineage—we're all in the same position of this family at one point. As you said, except people who are Indigenous to this country.

[00:31:03] **Kendra** So the cover of your new book is absolutely beautiful. And again, my spouse is a huge fan. And he would just sit and hold the book and stare at it. And I was like, "No, honey, you actually need to read it to me." So is there anything you can tell me about the cover of, I mean, I feel like it's inspired by some of the stories that the family tells each other about their cultural past and different things. But is there any kind of origin story for it?

[00:31:31] **Patricia** Well, the original title for INFINITE COUNTRY was "The Jaguar, the Snake, and the Condor." So much of the story is rooted in the ancestral stories of the Andean region. And the animals—the jaguar, the snake, and the condor—figure very importantly into that history and into the land. So that was special for me. We worked on the cover for a long time in order to get it right. And when this one finally came up, I just loved it. Everybody loved it right away. And I felt it really spoke to the story as well. So I'm glad that you liked it too.

[00:32:17] **Kendra** I really did. And I feel like there are a few different threes in the book, like the three children, for example. And I feel like that also speaks to that. But maybe I just love seeing numbers repeated in books. That's also a thing.

[00:32:33] **Patricia** You are absolutely correct that each of the children in this family are identified with one of those creatures. And also in the book, it speaks to what each of these creatures represents, which is the upper world, the earth, and the lower world . . . and the different aspects of the universe and how all those things are connected.

[00:33:00] **Kendra** That's incredible. I don't know how designers get all of that meaning and depth on a book cover. I feel like they definitely should be treated as art, like high art, and have, you know, their own displays.

[00:33:16] **Patricia** Absolutely. It takes a lot of vision.

[00:33:19] **Kendra** Sometimes I really love a cover, and I just want to buy a print of it so I can put it in my office. And this is definitely one of them. So much praise to your book designer. Before I let you go, I did want to ask you, are there any book recommendations

that you like to share with our listeners, maybe something you've read recently or something in the last few months that you've especially enjoyed?

[00:33:45] **Patricia** Yes, so many. There's a wonderful book that's coming out soon. And it's called *WHAT'S MINE AND YOURS* by Naima Coster. And it's a beautiful book about families, about the tangled bonds and desires and sorrows that exist within families over time. And I'm also really excited about a book called *THE PRESIDENT AND THE FROG*, which is coming out in the summer by Carolina De Robertis, which is a short book, brilliant, and also speaks to the present moment in very powerful ways. And a book that I read also recently that I just adored—and I found it so thrilling to read for what it does with languages—*FIEBRE TROPICAL* by Juliana Delgado Lopera.

[00:34:39] **Kendra** I've heard so much love for that book.

[00:34:41] **Patricia** Yeah, it's a great read. It's a lot of fun.

[00:34:44] **Kendra** Well, thank you so much for coming on the podcast and chatting about your book. I hope you find a lot more readers and they love your book as much as I did.

[00:34:54] **Patricia** Thank you so much for having me with you. I enjoyed it so much.

[00:35:01] **Kendra** I'd like to thank Patricia Engel for coming on the podcast to talk with me about her novel *INFINITE COUNTRY*, which is out now from Avid Reader Press. You can find Patricia Engel on Twitter (@patricia_engel) and on her website, patriciaengel.com. Many thanks to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. This episode was produced and edited by me, Kendra Winchester. And our music is by Miki Saito with Isaac Greene. Reading Women is a member of Lit Hub Radio. And you can find us on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). Thank you so much for listening.