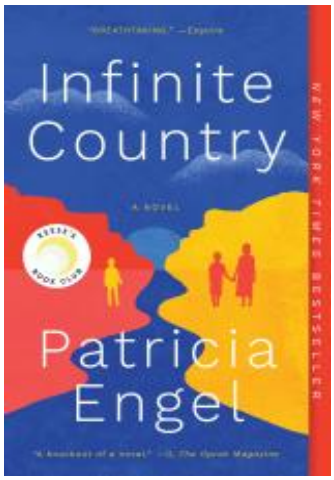
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Infinite Country

by Patricia Engel



About the Book

For readers of Valeria Luiselli and Edwidge Danticat, an urgent and lyrical novel about a Colombian family fractured by deportation, offering an intimate perspective on an experience that so many have endured --- and are enduring right now.

Talia is being held at a correctional facility for adolescent girls in the forested mountains of Colombia after committing an impulsive act of violence that may or may not have been warranted. She urgently needs to get out and get back home to Bogotá, where her father and a plane ticket to the United States are waiting for her. If she misses her flight, she also might miss her chance to finally be reunited with her family in the north.

How this family came to occupy two different countries, two different worlds, comes into focus like twists of a kaleidoscope. We see Talia?s parents, Mauro and Elena, fall in love in a market stall as teenagers against a backdrop of civil war and social unrest. We see them leave Bogotá with their firstborn, Karina, in pursuit of safety and opportunity in the United States on a temporary visa, and we see the births of two more children, Nando and Talia, on American soil. We witness the decisions and indecisions that lead to Mauro?s deportation and the family?s splintering --- the costs they?ve all been living with ever since.

Award-winning, internationally acclaimed author Patricia Engel, herself a dual citizen and the daughter of Colombian immigrants, gives voice to all five family members as they navigate the particulars of their respective circumstances. And all the while, the metronome ticks: Will Talia make it to Bogotá in time? And if she does, can she bring herself to trade the solid facts of her father and life in Colombia for the distant vision of her mother and siblings in America?

Rich with Bogotá urban life, steeped in Andean myth and tense with the daily reality of the undocumented in America, INFINITE COUNTRY is the story of two countries and one mixed-status family --- for whom every triumph is stitched with regret, and every dream pursued bears the weight of a dream deferred.

Discussion Guide

1. INFINITE COUNTRY begins with Talia?s restraint of a prison school nun, her time at the correctional facility a punishment for committing an even more viscerally violent attack. Think about Talia?s decision to throw hot oil on the man who killed the cat and how this choice surfaces at various points. Reflect also on the sentence, ?Talia considered how people who do horrible things can be victims, and how victims can be people who do horrible things? (page 8). What role does moral ambivalence play in the novel?

2. For Mauro and Elena?s family of five, the concept of ?home? is a fluid one, distinct to each character and dependent on time and place. Choose a character and chart their relationship to Colombia and to the United States. Does it change, and if so, what affects this shift?

3. Although the settings of INFINITE COUNTRY are primarily urban, Engel writes of lush Colombian landscapes brimming with beasts and allegories, stories in which Mauro finds a particular sense of pride. How do descriptions of North American cities compare, and what emotions can be gleaned from both kinds of imagery?

4. At the end of chapter five, Elena watches airplanes crash into the World Trade Center on September 11 and wonders ?if she was hallucinating? (page 37). In what ways might feelings of uncanniness and displacement be heightened for Elena, Mauro and other members of diaspora?

5. Talia is named after Talia Shire, the actress who plays Adrian Pennino-Balboa of the *Rocky* franchise. Elena thinks Adrian is ?much tougher than the boxer. Only women knew the strength it took to love men through their evolution to who they thought they were supposed to be? (page 44). How does Mauro and Elena?s relationship demonstrate this dynamic? At the beginning of the novel, who does Mauro think he is supposed to be, and who does he end up becoming?

6. As she hitchhikes back to her father in Bogotá, Talia meets three men who agree to help her home. What insights do they share with her about her impending journey north? What does each encounter say about Talia?s character and the way she moves about the world?

7. In her nightmares, Elena finds herself in the midst of the Nevado del Ruiz eruption. Although she usually dreams that she is either trying to pull Omayra Sánchez to safety or she becomes Omayra herself, Elena dreams that she is ?a bird or a cloud watching from above? after Mauro is deported (page 85). What does this passage disclose about Elena?s psyche during this difficult period in her life?

8. Between Elena, Perla, Tracy and the women with whom Elena forms a community in New Jersey, mothers are omnipresent in INFINITE COUNTRY. How do these maternal energies manifest within Engel?s network of characters?

9. Karina reveals herself to be ?the author of these pages? in chapter 19 (page 127). What impact did this revelation have on your reading of the novel? How did Karina and Nando?s palpable anger affect you?

10. Sometimes, after Mauro would leave his and Elena?s bed at Perla?s to smoke a cigarette on the roof, Elena would follow him and watch. ?When she did say his name,? Engel writes, ?he met her with an indecipherable expression? (page 166). Imagine what emotions a young Mauro might have been experiencing looking out at the ?veined mountain lights? (page 166). Why is his connection to his homeland so fraught?

11. Once Talia lands in the United States, she is happy but overwhelmed by her new life in New Jersey, preoccupied by the sense that she is ?waiting for something.... Another departure? Another arrival?? (page 179). What function does Talia?s plotline have in the context of so many threads of experience, even if she is ?no longer sure where her journey began or where it should end? (page 179)?

12. At INFINITE COUNTRY's end, the entire family has been reunited, though the threat of separation still looms in an all-too-possible future. If Karina was to continue writing this ?book of our lives? past the novel?s conclusion, what are some everyday struggles and triumphs she might portray (page 190)?

Author Bio

Patricia Engel is the author of INFINITE COUNTRY, a *New York Times* bestseller and Reese?s Book Club selection; THE VEINS OF THE OCEAN, winner of the Dayton Literary Peace Prize; IT'S NOT LOVE, IT'S JUST PARIS, winner of the International Latino Book Award; and VIDA, a finalist for the Pen/Hemingway and Young Lions Fiction Awards, *New York Times* Notable Book, and winner of Colombia?s national book award, the Premio Biblioteca de Narrativa Colombiana.

She is a recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. Her stories appear in *The Best American Short Stories*, *The Best American Mystery Stories*, *The O. Henry Prize Stories* and elsewhere. Born to Colombian parents, and herself a dual citizen, Patricia is an associate professor of creative writing at the University of Miami.

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