

# The Last War

by Ana Menendez

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## About the Book

Photojournalist Flash chases conflicts around the globe with her war correspondent husband, Brando. Now Brando is in Iraq awaiting her arrival, but instead of racing to join him, Flash idles in Istanbul, vaguely aware that her marriage is faltering. Her malaise is compounded by the arrival of a mysterious letter revealing Brando's infidelity --- and by the sudden appearance of Alexandra, a fierce and captivating colleague who shared dangerous days with the couple in Afghanistan. As Flash spirals deeper into regret, anger, and indecision, she wonders if she and Brando were ever really happy --- as she's forced to confront long-buried secrets and hard truths about her world, her marriage, her husband, and herself.

## Discussion Guide

1. What does the title, **The Last War**, mean to you? Do you see human relationships as their own battle zone?
2. This novel is full of visual and sensuous details about Istanbul --- food, wine, colors. What did you feel like you gained from living in Flash's experience of Istanbul? Has this novel altered or enhanced your notions of that city?
3. What are your impressions of Flash and Brando? Describe their relationship as both professional partners and romantic partners.
4. How do you interpret the nicknames 'Tunes' and 'Wonderboy'? Do you feel they speak to an imbalance in the relationship?
5. What do you make of Flash and Brando's fixation on war? Can you imagine sharing their excitement for it, and missing it when it's gone?

- 6.** Flash and Brando have very different relationships to war. Flash captures images, while Brando's phone calls are full of news about bombs and explosions. Do you think gender influences how we comprehend violence? Brando always wanted to be a soldier; is that how you see him? What about Flash --- what aspirations did she have for herself?
- 7.** Most of the novel is spent with Flash waiting in Istanbul; what do you think she's waiting for?
- 8.** The couple's bad phone connection makes up a large part of their interaction throughout the novel. Can you chart the distance growing between Brando and Flash through their phone calls?
- 9.** Was the letter that Flash receives the main catalyst for the couple's marital problems? Why didn't Flash mention the letter to Brando? What would you have done?
- 10.** On p. 20 when dissecting the letter's words, Flash muses, "It had to be a woman, a woman full of unrealized desires and vague notions of romantic love. A man's taste for pain runs to its blunter forms." What is the meaning of her comment? Do you agree with her point of view? Do you think the letter was written by a woman?
- 11.** Memory is another of the novel's themes --- flashbacks to the past, Flash's mention of her memory problems, her job as a photographer preserving moments in time. How does memory play into history? Is there such a thing as one story or truth?
- 12.** What role does Alexandra play in the novel? What does she add to the plot and to Flash's character?
- 13.** What do you think about Alexandra's decision to wear an abaya? Do you agree with Flash's statement on p. 65, "Isn't being a woman invisibility enough?" Do you think being female equates with being invisible? Why?
- 14.** Do you agree with Alexandra that Flash is "surface living" (p. 182)? Do you consider Flash to be emotionally removed? Do you see her as lonely?
- 15.** Did your feelings about Brando change over the novel? If so, how? Do you agree with Flash that his obsession with war is boyish (p. 161)?
- 16.** Were you surprised by Flash's revelations about events in Afghanistan? Why did she choose to act as she did? Did her admission change your view of Flash and her marriage?
- 17.** On p. 196 Flash states, "I am a photographer. I make pictures from the moments people forget, the moments that are gone in an instant" (p. 196). What is the significance of her profession to this novel? Is this story a photograph of a marriage?
- 18.** O, The Oprah Magazine calls the book, "a seductive meditation on 'The end of desire. The terrible violence at the end of love.'" List the ways that Flash and Brando have hurt each other over the years.

**19.** Late in the novel Flash runs through Istanbul, chasing the sound of a bomb going off, "I shot wildly, by instinct, not seeing the image. Feeling it. Hunting it." (p. 202). What do you make of Flash not taking photos for most of the novel and then throwing herself into this scene? Is it therapy, or further removal from the world?

**20.** In an interview, the author explains, "Flash is a photographer who has made a life from peering into other people's suffering. Her camera reveals subtle insights. But she's never --- until perhaps the very end --- able to turn that probing lens onto herself." Why is it difficult for people so skilled at seeing others to see themselves? What finally enabled Flash to admit the truth about herself, her husband, and her marriage?

**21.** At the novel's end, Alexandra offers a different portrait of Brando and his loyalty. Did you believe her? What were Flash and Brando's true natures? Did your feelings about the two characters change during the course of the novel?

## Author Bio

Ana Menendez, the daughter of Cuban exiles, was born in Los Angeles. She is the author of two books of fiction, the novel *LOVING CHE* and the short story collection *In Cuba I was a German Shepherd*, which was a 2001 *New York Times* Notable book of the year and the title story of which won a Pushcart Prize. Her second novel, *THE LAST WAR*, is scheduled to be published in May 2009 by HarperCollins.

Since 1991, Menendez has worked as a journalist in the United States and abroad, including the last three years as a prize-winning columnist for *The Miami Herald*. As a reporter, she has written about Cuba, Kashmir, Afghanistan, and India, where she was based for three years. Her work has appeared in a variety of publications, including *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, and *Gourmet* magazine, and has been included in several anthologies, including, *CUBANISIMO!*, edited by Cristina Garcia, and *AMERICAN FOOD WRITING*, a Library of America anthology edited by Molly O'Neill.

Menendez has a BA in English from Florida International University and an MFA from New York University. She is currently teaching at The American University in Cairo, Egypt, as a 2008-09 Fulbright Scholar.

## Critical Praise

"Speaks to Ana Menéndez's maturity --- as a woman and a writer? [It] evoke[s] the macabre merry-go-round of reporters who have whirled in and out of Iraq? A character study of those who have found their purpose in bearing witness to bloodshed."

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