

## Ten Questions for Rebe Huntman <sup>[1]</sup>

2.18.25

This week's installment of Ten Questions features Rebe Huntman, whose debut memoir, *My Mother in Havana: A Memoir of Magic & Miracle*, is out today from Monkfish Book Publishing Company. In the book, Huntman embarks on a pilgrimage into the mysteries of the gods and saints of Cuba and their larger spiritual view of the Mother. Huntman offers a window into the world of Afro-Cuban gods and ghosts and the dances and rituals that evoke them. As she explores the memory of her own mother, Huntman leads readers into a world of séance and sacrifice, reverence and sacred dance, which resurrect her mother and bring Huntman face-to-face with a larger version of herself. Maggie Smith said, "I closed this book believing more than ever that the people we love, including the people we've been, never really leave us." Rebe Huntman is a memoirist, essayist, dancer, teacher, and poet who writes at the intersections of feminism, world religion, and spirituality. For over a decade she directed Chicago's award-winning Danza Viva Center for World Dance, Art, and Music, and its dance company, One World Dance Theater. Huntman has been featured in *Latina Magazine*, *Chicago Magazine*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. A Macondo fellow and recipient of an Ohio Individual Excellence Award, Huntman has received support from Ohio State University, Virginia Center for Creative Arts, Ragdale Foundation, PLAYA Residency, Hambidge Center, and Brush Creek Foundation. She lives in Delaware, Ohio, and San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

### **1. How long did it take you to write *My Mother in Havana: A Memoir of Magic & Miracle*?**

I wrote the first draft of *My Mother in Havana* in a fever. I'd just returned from Cuba and wanted to commit the experiences of my pilgrimage there as vividly and honestly as possible to the page. But it took six years to braid the interlocking themes and questions into that narrative. I scoured family archives and letters for backstory; puzzled over how and where to insert memories of my mother into the more linear narrative of my search to find her among the gods and ghosts and saints of Cuba. I devoured books about the mythology and

practices of Santería and the Afro-Cuban gods known as the oricha. And I made numerous return trips to Cuba to deepen my practice with the cultural and spiritual traditions that lie at the heart of this book.

The result is a love letter—to the nineteen-year-old version of myself who lost her mother, and to the fifty-year-old version who, after spending decades trying to move past that grief, found herself missing her mother more than ever.

*My Mother in Havana* is a love letter to Cuba, an island that reached out—inexplicably! insistently!—to mother me.

It's a love letter to anyone who longs to connect with their own lost beloved—chase those ancient rhythms of conga and shekere into a world of séance and pilgrimage, sacrifice and sacred dance; push past the five senses to claim a more mythic life.

*My Mother in Havana* is a love letter to anyone who's ready for a guide to show them the way: a wide-lapped mother both as real as the woman sitting next to you on the bus, and as mysterious and vast as the deepest river of your being; a feminine path to the divine that has been largely buried in today's rush toward materialism and consumption. A soft voice in your ear reassuring you that everything *is* going to be all right.

## **2. What was the most challenging thing about writing the book?**

For me, writing is an act of saying I am here. This is what I stand for. This is what I find beautiful. Worth paying attention to. But the process of writing toward those offerings is almost never a linear one. I have to lay down a lot of words before I find my way through them, and that initial mess can be very disconcerting. It can feel like I'll never find my way to a polished draft, and the only way to get to the other side is to keep moving. To trust that there is a beauty and a wisdom working its way through the mess, and that I'll emerge on the other side with something greater than what I could have planned for. Because the flip side of uncertainty is an invitation into mystery. And the reward for wading through mystery is transformation. I am not the same person who began writing *My Mother in Havana*. I have learned to view the world through the eyes of magic and miracle. I have learned to talk—unapologetically—with the spirits. And my hope is that, by bringing my reader along with me, they too will be transformed.

## **3. Where, when, and how often do you write?**

In *The Artist's Joy: A Guide to Getting Unstuck, Embracing Imperfection, and Loving Your*

*Creative Life* (Broadleaf Books, 2024), creativity coach Merideth Hite Estevez says that the first thing she asks her clients is what they've eaten for lunch. That's because it is easy to forget when we are creating that we are human beings with physical needs. That our minds and bodies are the instruments through which we create, and those instruments require care. And so, while the number of hours or words I write each day fluctuates, what remains constant is that I approach each month's calendar with the task of blocking out the hours I'll devote to writing and those I'll devote to caring for the human who does the writing. From there, everything else constellates around those first decisions.

#### **4. What are you reading right now?**

The books I loved as a child told of gods and children who passed through secret doors and wardrobes, and to this day, the stories I love best point to portals through which we might slip from one world to another. I've been rereading my favorites to remind me that this is the lineage I want to add to as a writer: books like Madeline Miller's *Circe* (Little, Brown, 2018), Kelly Barnhill's *When Women Were Dragons* (Doubleday, 2022), *The Night Circus* (Doubleday, 2011) by Erin Morgenstern, and *Beloved* (Knopf, 1987) by the great Toni Morrison.

#### **5. Which author, in your opinion, deserves wider recognition?**

In today's increasingly polarized times, it feels vital to read the work of more poets. We need to sit with less certainty and more surprise, allow the tired pathways of our thinking to be undone and remade. Poets I've been holding close lately include Ada Limón and Ross Gay and Aracelis Girmay. And Richard Blanco, who writes in *How to Love a Country* (Beacon Press, 2019): "to know a country takes all we know of love:/ some days better than others, but never/ easy to keep our promise every morning of/ every year, of every century, and wake up,/ stumble downstairs with all our raging/ hope, sit down at the kitchen table again,/ still blurry-eyed, still tired, and say:/ Listen, we need to talk."

#### **6. What is the biggest impediment to your writing life?**

Learning to trust and champion the uniqueness of my voice and interests as a writer. One of the great challenges in writing *My Mother in Havana* was to trust that my passion for the spiritual traditions of Cuba, and the power of those traditions to help us heal our grief, would be of interest not just to me but to readers who were as hungry as I to receive that healing. The river goddess Ochún, a central figure of the book, is a great teacher, for she insists on being present and attentive—not to another's ideals, but to her own self. She teaches that we are powerful not because we measure up to someone else's ideals, but because we

measure up to our own. Because we remember to revel in our own way of moving through the world, to fulfill the promise of who and what only we can be.

### **7. What is one thing that your agent or editor told you during the process of publishing this book that stuck with you?**

As we were heading to press, my editor sent me a package with a miniature plastic pony and a card with a quote from Rilke: “Let everything happen to you/ Beauty and terror/ Just keep going/ No feeling is final.” In her handwritten note, she reminded me that amidst the frenzy of putting a book out into the world she hoped I’d take time to enjoy the ride. I keep my good luck pony near my writing chair, its mane and tail blowing in an invisible wind, a reminder of the winds that have shaped my creative life: the inexplicable tug to learn Spanish as a child, the early loss of my mother, the seeds for my becoming a Latin dancer and choreographer that she planted just as I was losing her. It’s only years later that I see the way losing my mother at such a young age pushed me to make something from that loss. Or how my career as a Latin dancer led me to Cuba, where I found a way to not only make sense of my grief but also to heal from it. Or the ways that writing my story invites the reader to shine new light on their own search for meaning and wholeness.

### **8. If you could go back in time and talk to the earlier you, before you started *My Mother in Havana*, what would you say?**

When my friends in Cuba say they are going to talk to their deceased mother, they don’t say, “I’m going to talk to the spirit of my mother.” They say, “I’m going to talk to my mother,” a custom that traces back to when the Yoruba of southwestern Nigeria buried their ancestors under the floorboards of the house. I wished I’d had that kind of understanding when I first lost my mother—that she was still with me, guiding and protecting me, whispering in my ear, like an inner voice. And that the way to keep her close was as simple as lighting a candle and speaking her name. In writing *My Mother in Havana*, I wanted to reach my hand both to my nineteen-year-old self and to any reader who longs to connect with their own lost beloved; to know themselves, not as solitary beings making their way alone in the world but as part of a web of ancestors who accompany us at every step of the way. To understand ourselves and the world—like the batá drums that call the gods and ancestors back to Earth—not as static but alive: teeming with the voices of those who’ve come before us and thrumming with miracle.

### **9. Outside of writing, what other forms of work were essential to the creation of *My Mother in Havana*?**

Repetitive activities like dance and running, sketching, and knitting support my general

writing practice because they give my mind a chance to wander constructively, to seek and make connections between the various threads I'm thinking about in my writing. And I'm devoted to keeping a journal—each symbol, each letter I lay across a once-blank page a declaration that I am here. Which is what writing is all about, and certainly what writing a memoir is about. The ability to say to our reader: Look! Here is something worth looking at. In the case of *My Mother in Havana*, I am saying: Look! I need you to see this mother who lived and died—as all our mothers do—both an ordinary and an extraordinary life.

### **10. What's the best piece of writing advice you've ever heard?**

Years ago, a poet I met at an artist residency encouraged me to write every first draft without worrying about who will read it. To put it all on the page. You can always scale back, which I'll sometimes do to protect the integrity of the piece or the vulnerability of the people I'm writing about. But as for my own openness? *My Mother in Havana* is a book about magic and miracle—about leaning into intuition and trusting that if we allow ourselves to be messy and vulnerable we will lean into our greatest strength. I hope my readers will feel that invitation. We are living in messy times, and we are grappling with big questions. And the first step to dealing with those big, messy questions is to cop to those places where we ourselves feel fragile and uncertain. Those places where our questions outpace our answers. And where we find ourselves reaching toward one another for wholeness and connection.

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