

Ruth Behar is available for interviews, conversations, lectures, and other public events. Please direct all press inquiries to ruthbeharaauthor@gmail.com.

RUTH BEHAR ONE-LINE BIO

Ruth Behar is a Cuban American author exploring the human fragility we all share.

RUTH BEHAR SHORT BIO

As a storyteller, poet, teacher, and public speaker, Ruth Behar is acclaimed for the compassion she brings to her quest to understand the depth of the human experience. She made her fiction debut with the Pura Belpré Award-winning *Lucky Broken Girl*, a novel for young readers about how the worst of wounds can teach a child a lesson about the fragile, precious beauty of life. Born in Havana, Cuba, she grew up in New York, and has also lived in Spain and Mexico. Her memoirs, *An Island Called Home* and *Traveling Heavy*, explore her return journeys to Cuba and her search for home as an immigrant and a traveler. She was the first Latina to win a MacArthur “Genius” Grant, and her honors also include a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, a Distinguished Alumna Award from Wesleyan University, an honorary doctorate in Humane Letters from the Hebrew Union College, and being named a “Great Immigrant” by the Carnegie Corporation. She is an anthropology professor at the University of Michigan and lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Her second middle-grade novel, *Letters from Cuba*, is inspired by her maternal grandmother’s escape from Poland to Cuba on the eve of WWII. Her newest book, a picture book, *Tía Fortuna’s New Home*, published by Knopf, explores the Sephardic Cuban heritage on the paternal side of her family.

RUTH BEHAR LONG BIO

Ruth Behar was born in Havana, Cuba to parents also born in Cuba who came from vastly different Jewish backgrounds. Her maternal grandparents were from Poland and Russia and spoke Yiddish, while her paternal grandparents were from Turkey and descended from Sephardic Jews who spoke an ancient Spanish known as Ladino. The union of her parents, a *polaca* and a *turco*, was considered a “mixed marriage” in the Jewish Cuban community of 1956. Ruth grew up aware that she comes from a long line of wanderers who converged in Cuba and found a beloved home that they regretted having to leave.

Ruth was five and a half when the family immigrated to New York seeking the American Dream. Setting out to remake their lives in a new language and a new culture, she and her parents and younger brother went to live in Queens, the most diverse borough in the city. She attended public schools and came into contact with other children displaced from homes all over the world. The family spoke Spanish with nostalgia and that so impressed Ruth she never forgot her mother tongue. Growing up as an immigrant child, she struggled to learn English, but her determination won out, and she acted as a translator for her parents, who took longer to learn the language. Those early experiences taught her to be a messenger between languages and cultures, skills she carried into her adult life, becoming a cultural anthropologist, writer, and builder of cultural bridges between Cuba and the United States.

Being bedridden in a body cast for close to a year at the age of nine changed her life. After she came out of the cast, slowly learning to walk again, she became a nerdy girl who enjoyed nothing better than sitting still and reading a book. She liked to write and jotted down poems and stories in a diary and kept notes of the books that she read. She never went anywhere without a book, to the irritation of her gregarious salsa-dancing family who thought she was too serious and dreamy-eyed. Her desire to be a thinker and a writer was inconceivable to those closest to her. Everyone in her Cuban-Jewish community was struggling to make ends meet, selling fabric, lace, cash registers, belts, and shoes. No woman in that circle was college-educated. Ruth credits an inspiring high school teacher, Mercedes Rodríguez, who is also Cuban-born, for instilling in her a devotion to learning and literacy, and encouraging her to go to college and become an educated woman and a writer.

Ruth was fortunate to win a scholarship to Wesleyan University, where she studied Spanish literature and finished her B.A. in three years. She longed to travel and learn about life in other places. In her last semester, she wandered into a class in cultural anthropology and felt she had found her calling. She went straight on to graduate school at Princeton University. She received her Ph.D. in Anthropology at the age of twenty-six. Seeking to deepen her understanding of the Spanish-speaking world, she embarked upon a life of travels to Spain, Mexico, and Cuba, forming close relationships with the people who opened their lives to her, allowing her to tell their stories to the world. She became a professional confidante as she listened to the heartbreaks and hopes that people entrusted her with. She learned to

cultivate the empathy and vulnerability she had first come to experience as she mended from her devastating childhood wound and became aware of the fragile, precious beauty of life.

Realizing she couldn't examine the human spirit and condition at an emotional distance, as the profession of anthropology required, she called herself a "vulnerable observer," declaring that anthropology that didn't break your heart wasn't worth doing. Although many criticized her, she stuck to her vision. Seeking to nurture her spirit, she pursued creative forms of writing, mixing her travel tales with memoir and poetry, and branching out into fiction. She became a leading scholar-artist whose books are widely read and taught, and whose methods and creativity are emulated by a younger generation. An anthropology professor at the University of Michigan for over thirty years, she has worked with many brilliant students and served as a teacher and mentor, sharing her passion for learning, research, and writing, as well as for a deep human communication across cultural borders.

Becoming a mother was a pivotal event in Ruth's life. She and her son Gabriel became especially close after he suffered a knee injury while playing soccer. Gabriel was a star athlete at the age of eleven and Ruth took great pride in his physical prowess. It was heartbreaking to her as a mother when Gabriel required two surgeries and afterwards could no longer participate in competitive sports. Just as her life changed course as a child, so Gabriel turned from sports to filmmaking and photography, and works in that field today in New York.

Her years of travel as a cultural anthropologist led Ruth to constantly think about belonging and the meaning of home. The dreams of our youth never leave us, and that may be why she created a poetic anthropology, unveiling the poetry of the anthropological quest for home in a world of homelessness and homesickness. Returning to Cuba, immersing herself in the place where she was born and reclaiming the rumba-inflected Spanish of her childhood, made her want to bring poetry and fiction back into her life. Being in Cuba was so moving, so heart wrenching, so beautiful and so painful at the same time, that she needed to find a language to express who she had become through her journeys as a woman of the Cuban diaspora. Writing intimate poems in both English and Spanish, and publishing them in Cuba, many of them in handmade books produced by the Cuban artist Rolando Estévez, was the key that opened her artistic soul and eventually allowed her to take the risk of writing fiction.

Moving from an autobiographic experience to a fictional recreation, she found a way to tell her story in *Lucky Broken Girl*, a time in her life when she had to accept the new person she had become after she healed and came out of her body cast. Ruthie, her childhood self, had been aching to speak for half a century, but the grown-up Ruth had been too busy traveling around the world to pay her any attention. Finally, there was a moment of quiet. The girl's voice grew so loud she could no longer ignore it.

In order to write *Lucky Broken Girl*, Ruth had to sit still and listen to what Ruthie had to say. After a lifetime of listening to other people's stories, she had become a very good listener. She listened to the story of the girl she had been and wrote down what she could hear. What she couldn't hear, because too many years had passed and the distance between now and then is so great, she imagined and tried to make beautiful, so Ruthie's wouldn't be a sad story. The world has enough sad stories. Pure and loving writing emerged, filled with

optimism and hope—a gift to the child Ruth was once, a gift to all the children who have yet to grow up.

In her new novel, *Letters from Cuba*, Ruth takes inspiration from her maternal grandmother Esther's story, a Jewish refugee from Poland who sailed to Cuba on the eve of WWII in search of a new after the door to the United States had closed. This work of historical fiction allowed Ruth to envision what it was like not only for her grandmother but for thousands of other Jews to begin new lives in Cuba, a place of tremendous diversity where cultures and religions intersect. Throughout the writing, Ruth felt supported by her grandmother's spirit, and this gave her strength to tell a story that celebrates refugees and immigrants who have bravely made journeys across oceans and deserts, dreaming of a better tomorrow for themselves and their families and communities.

Ruth's latest book is a picture book, *Tía Fortuna's New Home*, published simultaneously in Spanish as *El nuevo hogar de Tía Fortuna*. This book about Cuban Sephardic heritage celebrates tradition, togetherness, and the meaning of home as a loving niece named Estrella helps her Tía say goodbye to her beloved Miami apartment and begin a new life in an assisted living center.

Ruth is currently at work on a new middle-grade novel focusing on daughters from four generations of a family – from 15th century Spain to 20th century Turkey and Cuba, ending in 21st century Miami – seeking freedom during revolutionary times.

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