In Bulletproof Vest, your first book, you write about your family, especially your father, who led a very tumultuous and violent life. How did you decide to write about him? Was it difficult to take on such a personal subject?

My father used to be my best-kept secret. For years I never talk about him, or the past. When I was a child, he seemed to be larger than life, indestructible, but when I finally returned to Mexico to visit him after having been estranged for 14 years, he seemed deflated, somehow. On the day I was to return to New York, he drove me to the bus station, and when we hugged goodbye his chin started quivering. I thought he'd drive me to the station, we'd say goodbye, and that would be the end of it, but his sudden display of emotions caused something to shift within me. Over the next several years I continued to visit him during the holidays and summers, and he began sharing stories about his past—when he was seven years old and was being bullied at school, his mother handed him a carving knife and told him to go eff those kids up; after shooting a man for the first time when he was 12 years old, his mother never lost an opportunity to brag about her son and how brave he was. Perhaps sharing these stories was his way of explaining to me why he had lived such a violent and self-destructive life. I felt compelled to write about him, to try and make sense of how he was wired. It was through the writing that I developed empathy for him, and came to embrace him for who he was.

To answer your second question, there is that old saying: Write what scares you. I never thought I'd be writing about my past—especially not my father. To write about the past is to relive it, and even though that was extremely painful, it was also cathartic.

Even though the book is very close to your own life, it is by no means a conventional memoir. The writing inhabits a space between fiction and nonfiction. Could you talk about why you adopted this unusual approach?

When I initially started to write the book, my main goal was to write a work of non-fiction that would read like a novel. Not only did the material really lend itself to a more 'novelistic' approach, but this also made the writing process more challenging and engaging for me. A lot of the scenes I was fleshing out were very heavy and emotionally complex, so I decided that if I was going to put myself through hell, I was going to at least try to have fun with it—play with different crafting techniques. I knew early on that I didn't want to write an expository, first-person narrative, and so I came at the material from several different angles. For example, initially I had written the opening scene in which my father is ambushed with two machine guns in first person, so that the story was being revealed to the reader via the dialogue, the way it had come to me, but that particular format really killed the urgency of the scene. It wasn't until I wrote the ambush scene in third person, from my father's perspective, that it fell into place. Writing the scene from his perspective enabled me to put the reader in the truck with him, so that they, too, were seeing the bugs hit the windshield, catching the whiff of a decomposing animal on the side of the road, and then hearing the sound of machine guns as his truck was lit up in a hail of bullets. Once I wrote that scene from his perspective, I knew I had the structure for the book—the weaving between first person and third person, between his perspective and my own.

I like to think of the book as a hybrid—a merging of fiction and non-fiction. Though I took creative license in fleshing out some of the scenes, that doesn't mean I didn't take great care to get the facts as close to the truth as possible. My father was very organized, and after he passed away, inside a steel
trunk in his bedroom, I found newspaper clippings, court documents, birth and death certificates, letters, and land deeds dating back to the 1800s—it was like finding a treasure trove. Everything I found inside that trunk was invaluable for finishing the book.

Your father's story was constantly changing as you were writing the book. Your reconciliation with him, after many years of estrangement, was a touchstone for the book when you began working on it. In the middle of the writing, however, he died under very difficult circumstances. Did his death change your approach to the book?

Losing my father midway through writing the book was probably the most difficult thing I've ever had to deal with. Not only had I lost him for the second and final time, but I also knew that no matter how painful, I had to see the project through. Writing about my father while he was still alive often felt as though I was trying to capture a snapshot of a moving target. I wasn't certain of exactly what end I was writing toward, though it made sense that the book could simply be about a reconciliation between a father and daughter. The story could have ended with my initial visit, or any subsequent visit to him. It's ironic, but when I started to write about my father, my initial instinct was to write a book-length corrido about his life. This particular genre was problematic, as corridos are traditionally written to commemorate a life after the person has passed away. It's only then that the lyricists and musicians are hired to recount the story of how that life came to an end. After my father died, at least I knew what end I was writing toward.

In Bulletproof Vest, you write about the corrido, a kind of Mexican folksong that often tells the story of a heroic life. How did this form influence your writing?

I think corridos may have everything to do with why I became a writer. I didn't grow up reading, or dreaming of becoming a writer someday. When I was a child, the only book we kept in the house was a Bible, and maybe an incomplete set of encyclopedias, and the random picture book that was never returned to the library. Corridos were my father's music, and often, after a night of drinking, he'd come home with a friend or two in tow and as I lay in bed, I could already hear that first note, long before it came booming through my bedroom door. One after another, the corridos came blaring and I listened to the stories they told. There were ballads of love and betrayal, tales of men placing bets at the horse races and cockfights, stories of men highjacking trains, men who had saddled their horse and set off across the desert without stopping until they reached the border, men who had driven contraband to the other side—only to find that someone had already put the finger on them. There were men who had taken the gamble, had taken the law into their own hands—few won, others lost, some lost it all. The one thread that all of these corridos had in common was the violent undercurrent, and the inevitable tragic end. This was my father's music, and he very much lived and died by the same code as the heroes in those ballads. What I didn't realize all those years ago, as I lay under the blankets listening to his music, was that some day, it would fall on me to write his corrido.

Finally, I have to ask: How does it feel to be publishing your first book?

It's exciting and a bit scary. I feel as though I’ve placed my baby inside a reed basket and sent it off down the river. There's nothing left to do but hope that the reeds will hold.