

A NOVEL



INFINITE



COUNTRY

PATRICIA



ENGEL

READING GROUP GUIDE

INFINITE COUNTRY

Patricia Engel

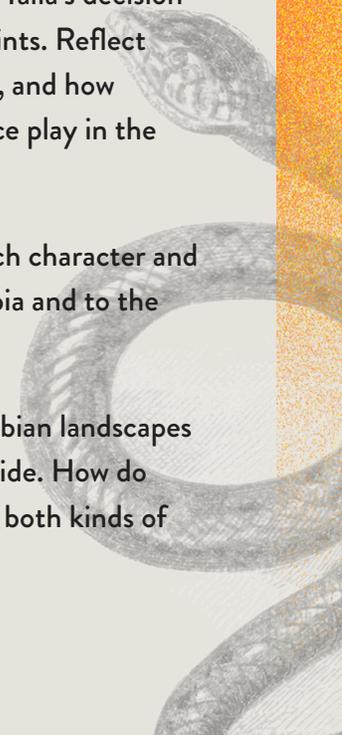
*This reading group guide for **Infinite Country** includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author **Patricia Engel**. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

Introduction

At the dawn of the new millennium, Colombia is a country devastated by half a century of violence. Only teenagers, Elena and Mauro fall in love against a backdrop of paramilitary and guerilla warfare. A few years later, brutalities continue to ravage their homeland, but the couple now has a young daughter to protect. Their economic prospects grim, they bargain on the American Dream and travel to Houston to send wages back to Elena's mother, all the while weighing whether to risk overstaying their visas or to return to Bogotá. The decision to ignore their exit dates plunges the expanding family into the precariousness of undocumented status, the threat of discovery menacing a life already strained with struggle. When deportation forces Mauro back to Colombia, Elena sends infant Talia on a plane back to her daughter's grandmother, splintering the family into two worlds with no certain hope of reunion. Encompassing continents and generations, *Infinite Country* knits together the accounts of five family members as they struggle to keep themselves whole in the face of the hostile landscapes and forces that threaten to drive them apart.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. The novel *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 nineteen (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)?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. As a group, pull up a map of the United States and Colombia and trace the routes that lead each character to New Jersey by the final pages of the book. Identify important moments in the novel and attach them to physical locations—you can split up into smaller groups by character or country. When everyone has finished, come back together to discuss how this exercise expands your understanding of how geography influences the emotional inflection points of *Infinite Country*.
2. Before they leave for Texas, Mauro, Elena, and Karina visit Lake Guatavita, the birthplace of all human life for the Muisca people, in order to “conjure their deepest desire” (page 80). Come up with a list of minor characters in *Infinite Country* (for example, Tiberio, Aguja, Mister and Madame) and divide yourself into that many groups. Within these smaller clusters, invent a life for these characters beyond the book, and imagine what they might have wished for at Lake Guatavita. Try writing a short passage, or simply come back together into the bigger group to have a larger conversation.
3. Brainstorm a list of other novels wherein immigration figures prominently and discuss how these selections differ from or are similar to *Infinite Country*. How do style and content affect your emotional reaction? What did you appreciate about Engel’s approach? You can also include other art forms. Would it be difficult to adapt *Infinite Country* into another medium?

A Conversation with Patricia Engel

As a dual citizen of the United States and Colombia, the daughter of Colombian immigrants, and an award-winning author of the Latin America diaspora, you are intimately familiar with the in-betweenness of the lives you depict in *Infinite Country*. Did this sense of liminality affect your writing?

The idea of belonging or not belonging is so tied to the idea of country and borders. Very early in my life I was made to feel both excluded and embraced by the two countries and cultures that formed me, and there were others, still, who had no idea what to do with me. Many people feel an urge to define and to categorize in order to understand. I soon realized that who I am does not need to fit into neat boxes and that my essence extends far beyond the parameters of geography and language. This is what I’m always exploring in my work, and how transdiaspora can amplify ancestral connections while diminishing those imposed by one’s dominant surroundings.

You sow the pages of *Infinite Country* with Andean myths, and they often appear as a point of comparison for dilemmas that the characters encounter in the real world. How did you first learn about the legends you reference in the novel, and do you have a favorite?

My family is full of storytellers, artists, and highly creative people. I loved hearing my grandmother's fantastical tales of life and people she knew in Colombia that she'd swear were true. For us, imagination and storytelling is a life force. I love the overlap of Traditional Knowledge and myth with what we know to be true in the world through science, and the spaces in between. The word "myth" doesn't convey the power that stories about the origin of the world and the logic of the universe really have. The stories in *Infinite Country* came at different moments of discovery in my life, some throughout my childhood from my family members and others while traveling in Colombia, or from research. My favorites are definitely those about the jaguar, the serpent, and the condor.

Though they are siblings, Karina, Nando, and Talia all have individual ties—both state-recognized and not—to the United States and Colombia. How did you decide Talia would be the propulsive focal point of the book? Are there passages about Karina and Nando that didn't make it into the final version of the manuscript?

It's hard to say when or how each character came to me. Somehow they announced themselves as a complete family. I knew they'd each be tested in different ways, and Talia's reunification with her mother and siblings would be at the center. A book goes through many incarnations, so there was a time when Karina's and Nando's voices occupied more written terrain. Even though their narratives are brief, they populate the entire novel the way one populates the lives of their loved ones even when apart, be it for hours or for years.

Some major events in the book—Mauro's deportation and eventual reentry into the United States, for example—occur in just a few paragraphs. How did you weigh which moments to omit and which to include?

I think the impact of an experience doesn't need to correlate to how much space it takes up in a book. I write impressionistically, in a way I hope imitates the interior life of a character, where trauma and memory often partner to create narrative omissions, reduce moments to their molecular parts rather than ruminate on things that would be otherwise painful. I think this is closer to how people truly tell their own stories. It's often the reader who expects dissection, even though a character is already being as vulnerable as they can possibly be. For Mauro, what happened to him while detained or deported or returning to the north is not as important as what those events cost him and what that means in the larger picture of his love for his family.

Your book comprises five main characters, two continents, and nearly two decades—all under two hundred pages. Did you have a process for keeping the coiling timelines and multiple settings of *Infinite Country* in order?

I keep notebooks for everything I write, and I rewrite each draft word by word from the beginning each time. This way the story always feels as fresh and alive as the very first draft and allows me to navigate the leaps in time and space with more freedom, fluidity, and control.

From Horacio to the Frenchman to Elena's restaurant boss, you populate the periphery of *Infinite Country* with a few minor characters who seem less than redeemable. Is there one of particular interest to you, one that you might explore further if you had the time? If so, why?

I don't really consider anyone irredeemable. In my own life, I forgive easily. I'm always interested in the dualities that exist in people, how nobody is all good or all bad, how we can become possessed by our impulses and then how we each have to reconcile who we really are with who we think we are. It's not always the same person.

As Talia tries to sleep next to Aguja by the river, she remembers something that Mauro said: "This land, with all its beauty, still manages to betray itself" (page 140). How do you think love and betrayal interact in the context of this family's immigrant experience?

Immigration does sometimes feel like a betrayal. Choosing to leave one's homeland, choosing another place to make your life and home, can fill a person with guilt and doubt over whether it was the right choice for years and the feeling often never dissipates. Just because you leave a place (or a person) doesn't mean you love it (or them) any less. At the same time, Colombia is such an extraordinarily beautiful country that has been subject to so much suffering often at its own hands, which brings one to another kind of mourning on behalf of the land and its people. But what Mauro said can be applied to any land, as well as to how we treat the planet.

Is there a moment, sentence, or section in *Infinite Country* that you find especially beautiful?

There are many moments that are special to me, but a scene that stands out is when Talia and Mauro say goodbye at the airport in Bogotá and she realizes that she doesn't want to leave. When she asks, "How will they know me?" A simple question that speaks to so much more.

As you were developing and writing *Infinite Country*, did you turn to any other books or media that inspire you? If so, what are they and how did they influence you?

With *Infinite Country*, I wanted to write a book that felt both epic and intimate. I love short novels that feel compressed, stormlike intoxications or fever dreams. A few favorites are *In the Beginning Was the Sea* by Tomás González, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* by Gabriel García Márquez, and *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras.

If you could guarantee that readers think more deeply about one idea or concept in your book, what would it be and why?

I hope readers find a place for themselves in the world of *Infinite Country*, and consider the ways that where we come from, and who we are told to be, determine how we understand or misunderstand humanity and love.