



On my reading list...

HELENA CHRISTENSEN, the Danish supermodel and photographer, on the books she loves to read again and again

WHAT ARE YOU READING AT THE MOMENT? I'm rereading *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, one of my favorite writers ever. This book gives me the chills.

WHICH LITERARY HEROINE DO YOU MOST IDENTIFY WITH?

I don't exactly identify, but I had a feeling of knowing the female characters in *Bonjour Tristesse* by Françoise Sagan.

WHAT WAS THE LAST BOOK YOU RECOMMENDED? Poetry by Danish philosopher Piet Hein.

Everything he writes makes sense in the simplest way. I tell everyone to just read his books and they'll never be bothered by anything again.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE CHILDREN'S BOOK? *The Brothers Lionheart* by Astrid Lindgren – so sad and poetic, yet so beautiful and life-affirming.

WHICH BOOK MAKES YOU LAUGH? The dark humor in *She's Come Undone* by Wallis Lamb is right up my alley. But I'm a regular reader of *Mad* magazine as well, a perfect dose of chuckling.

THE WORLD'S SEXIEST BOOK IS... Anything by Henry Miller.

WHICH AUTHOR HAS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WRITING STYLE?

I love the way Hemingway wrote, so elegantly and gracefully.

THE GREATEST ENDING TO ANY NOVEL IS... It's not great in a wonderful way, it's so deeply sad it kills me every time: Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Match Girl*. You cannot believe he ends it like that. Why?



Coat by Burberry Prorsum, £1,695; necklace (worn as bracelet) by Munn, £8,800; ring by Melissa Joy Manning, £190; ring by Heana Makri, £990; earrings, Betancourt's own

Hostage to fortune

Former Colombian politician Ingrid Betancourt was kidnapped by guerillas and held captive in the jungle for over six years. She tells poet and writer *Fatima Bhutto* about her ordeal and how her debut novel charts the struggle to be a free soul

Photography by Amit Israeli

The Taoist philosopher Lao Tzu wrote, "Being loved deeply gives you strength. Loving deeply gives you courage." Former Colombian politician Ingrid Betancourt's life has been marked by both. During the darkest days of her six and a half years as a hostage of FARC (the armed guerrillas fighting a six decade-long war against the Colombian state), it was love that kept her alive – whether thinking of her children or catching her mother's voice on a radio show dedicated to Colombia's hostages.

Deprived of her freedom and family, Betancourt lived and died many lives while she was a prisoner. She endured physical and mental violence at the hands of her captors, her health suffered drastically and she lost her

beloved father, Gabriel, learning of his death by chance when she happened upon a photograph of his funeral in an old newspaper. Betancourt had been kidnapped in 2002, while she was campaigning for the presidency of her country, making her one of FARC's most valuable hostages. She attempted to escape several times and each time was punished brutally. After one attempt she was chained by her neck to a tree, and was kept like that for four years, freed from her shackles for only 30 minutes a day.

A daring rescue mission by the Colombian military, posing as a European Commission delegation, freed her in 2008 (the soldiers carried no guns, had taken acting lessons to inhabit their roles, spoke in Australian accents and wore Che Guevara T-shirts). Betancourt had been held hostage for 2,319 days. The rescue operation was over in less than 45 minutes. The world watched as she spoke to the press hours later, her face luminous with joy and a rosary, woven from rope, visible on her wrist. "It's like an antique now, I wore it so much. It's very fragile." Love kept her alive all those years, but faith did, too.

"I don't think I'm afraid of anything now, but I am frightened of things. My fear is more reactive, more instinctual. There are occasions when I catch myself being frightened of the dark, or of sounds. But when I process these reactions, they're very superficial." There is no trace of anger or bitterness in her voice, only compassion. And it is this voice that she has carried over to her writing.

Speaking from her home in Paris, Betancourt describes her debut novel *The Blue Line* as "a love story. It talks about what true happiness is and how you find it when you have a dark past." Prompting the inevitable question of whether any of it was inspired by her own experience, she replies, "Truly, it's not about me. Surviving something traumatic happens to so many people."

The novel came into being four years ago, after Betancourt enrolled at Oxford University to study for a doctorate in Liberation Theology. There, she read about Father Carlos Mugica, an Argentinian priest who fought for social justice during

Ingrid Betancourt hugs her mother, Yolanda Pulecio, in Bogotá, following her rescue by the Colombian armed forces on July 2, 2008



Styling: Helen Broadfoot. Hair: Norihide Takabayashi. Makeup: Anna Sadamon. Photograph © Eyevine. Illustrator: Tanya Ling

Argentina's military dictatorship. "I was fascinated and wanted to write a novel about this character and how human-rights violations have been justified by all kinds of ideologies. That is the problem with ideologies; that's why they are so dangerous."

Serendipity sealed her fate as a novelist. In 2010, she spoke at the Sydney Writers' Festival about her best-selling memoir, *Even Silence Has an End*, then stopped by the beach. "I went to unwind from the pressure of the book tour. A woman approached me and said my book had moved her. 'Do you have 10 minutes to listen to my story?' she asked." Coincidentally, the woman and her husband had been activists during Argentina's Dirty War and were kidnapped by the military and 'disappeared' (the term used for the thousands illegally taken by the state, most of whom were tortured and killed). She was raped and gave birth in a clandestine jail. After the woman was released and exiled to France, she began to search for her husband, who remained 'disappeared'. She never found him and concluded that he, like 30,000 other *desaparecidos*, had been killed. "Here was a living witness of the story I was thinking of,"

“We can choose to be a free soul even in things we cannot change. Freedom is about choosing happiness.”

Describing the struggle of *The Blue Line*'s two central characters, she says, "We can live a life filled with bitterness and a thirst for

revenge, but we can also choose – and it is a choice – to dignify our pain and to be a free soul even in things we cannot change. Freedom is about choosing happiness."

Betancourt's editor, Jean-Marie Laclavetine at Editions Gallimard, her French publisher, describes *The Blue Line* as "magnificent" and speaks of her journey as a writer with great admiration. Writing

fiction is challenging, Betancourt says, but also liberating. "It's a discipline that allows us to share in a profound and intimate way."

Betancourt has been back to Colombia several times since her liberation, but security is still a concern. "I am not comfortable getting back into the frenzy of bodyguards and armored vehicles." Home for her is where her loved ones are. She was born in Colombia but raised in France. "My roots are in France; it is the country where I feel protected and secure. But my vision is always on Colombia. I'm always trying to see what's happening and how I can help, if I can."

Every year, Betancourt marks the date of her liberation from captivity. "It is a rebirth for me," she explains. One of the things she has striven to do since her rescue is to smile at life. "It is a smile that has to come from your gut," she says. "It is not necessarily a smile on your face, but it is gratitude at being alive."

The Blue Line will be published by Penguin America in June 2015