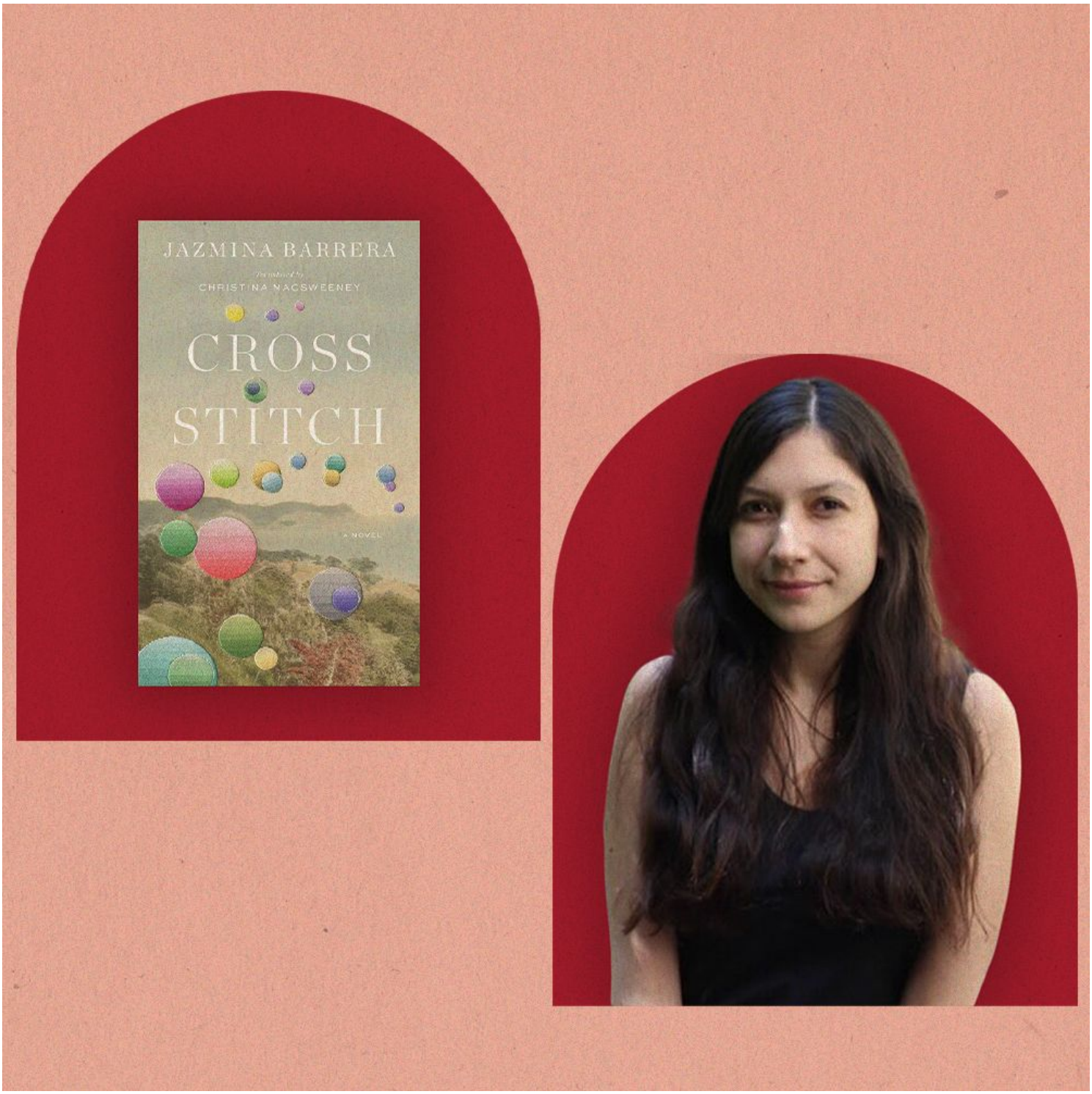


SHONDALAND

Embroidery Is at the Center of This Coming-of-Age Tale

In “Cross-Stitch,” Jazmina Barrera captures a friendship between three women through this ancient art form.

BY SHELBI POLK PUBLISHED: NOV 8, 2023

To write her latest novel, Jazmina Barrera dug up everything from old tomes on embroidery to notes she and her friends passed back in high school. She loved the process of interrogating herself, her relationships, and an ancient art form that developed in slightly different ways all over the world. She also reveled in reclaiming the old craft. “So many women, including my own grandmother, hate to embroider and just had to learn how to do it,” Barrera said on a recent Zoom call from Mexico City. “But there were also many [women] that found, in embroidery, a tool to subvert oppression, to denounce, to create, to build collectivity, to bond with other women, to protest.”

The resulting book, *Cross-Stitch*, follows three friends, Mila, Dalia, and Citlali, across three different timelines. In the present day, Mila learns of Citlali’s death in Africa, which sends her off into detailed memories of the beginnings of the trio’s friendship in high school and a trip to Europe that marked the end of that equilibrium. Stories of embroidery in history, mythology, and art are beaded throughout this tale.

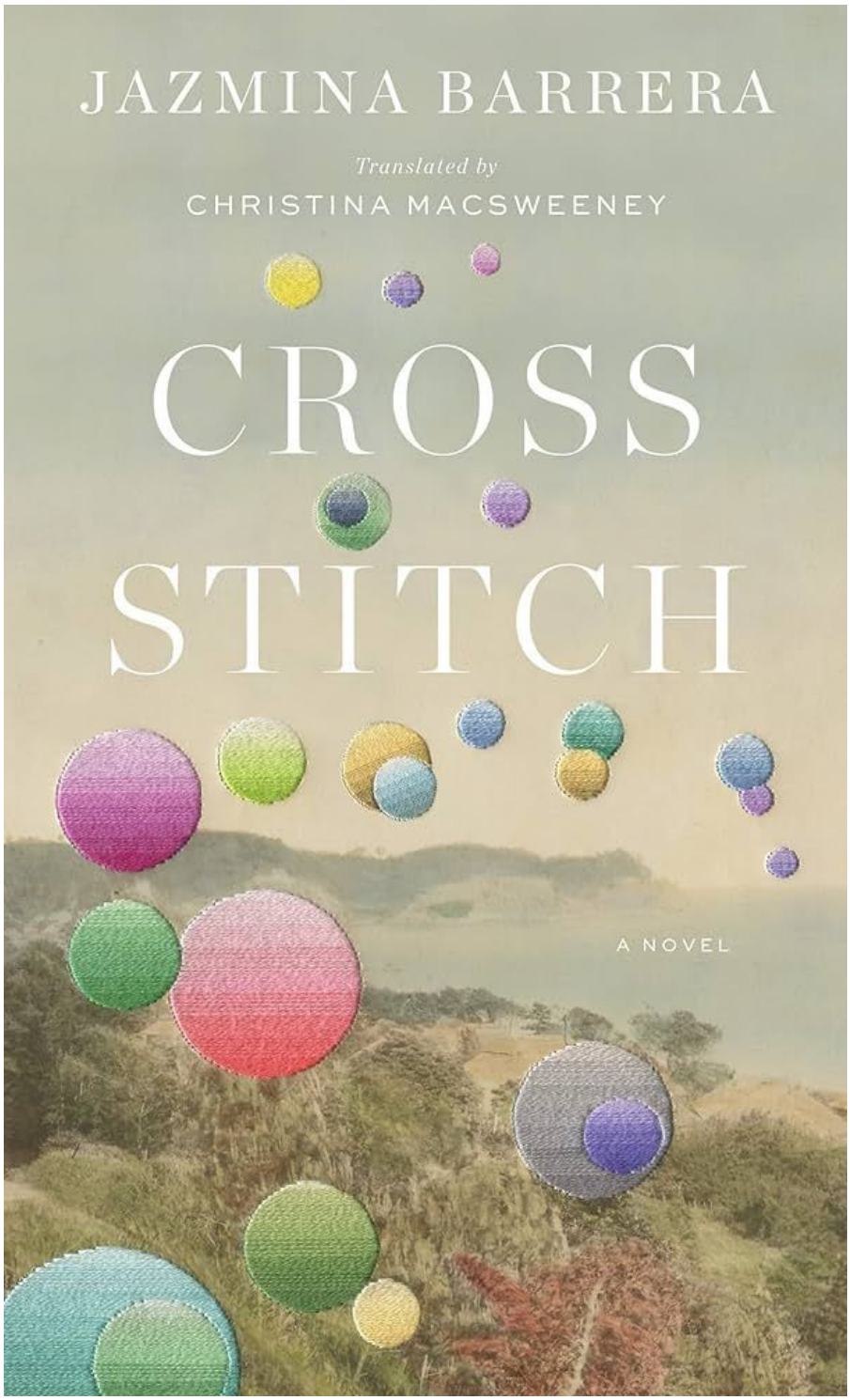
Two of Barrera’s memoirs, *Linea Nigra: An Essay on Pregnancy and Earthquakes* and *On Lighthouses*, similarly mix her own history with her research, but neither is as fully fictional as *Cross-Stitch*. Shondaland talked to Barrera about reconciling with her past, discovering global symbolism in embroidery, and the shifting nature of friendship itself.

SHELBI POLK: Where did this story come from?

JAZMINA BARRERA: I think one of the origins is an essay I wrote many years ago. I wrote a small, fragmentary essay on sewing and embroidery, which I really liked, and I thought it could grow. But then, it was printed in an anthology, and I just forgot about it. I started to write this novel about three friends, which was, at the beginning, very rooted in my own experiences during adolescence with my friends.

The characters began to acquire a personality of their own, and they were created by putting together many stories from different friends and from my own. So, everything is real, but it's not. I remembered how important embroidery had been for me and my friends, so I remembered that essay, and both things started to grow at the same time. I knew they had to go together, but I didn't quite know how. I decided to embroider the fragments of the essay with the fragments of the novel to create something that I imagined as a quilt.

Cross-Stitch



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The motivations are many and different. I was going through a process of transformation in my relationships with my friends, especially because I became a mother. I'm an only child. Ever since I was a very small child, friends were very important to me. I felt that I needed them in a way that maybe other children with

siblings didn't. I spent almost all of my afternoons with friends, and I imagined myself growing old with friends, not necessarily with family. And then with time, with profession, and with motherhood, everything started to change. Suddenly, I couldn't see my friends every week. I had to see them once every six months or once a year. And I realized that many of the friends which I thought would be always by my side weren't there anymore. And also, that many friends, who maybe in a different time wouldn't be my friends, were all my friends because of circumstances like swimming lessons. So, all the friendship landscapes started to change, and I really wanted to spend some time reflecting on those friendships that were everything. They were the most important relationships in my life, and they were as intense, as complex, as passionate as other kinds of relationships that we usually pay more attention to.

At the time I started really to think about writing this, there was something like a MeToo movement in my high school and in the college program where I had studied, and many of the teachers that had taught me were denounced. And so, I started to revisit my youth with different eyes and with the experience that I now had. I wanted to look closely at this period of my life and everything that was going on around me that maybe at the time I just couldn't process.

And then I just fell in love with embroidery. Of course, I loved it as an activity. But when I started to read about it, I realized just how widespread embroidery was in geography and in different time periods and how it connected women, without us knowing it, from all over the world and over time. That was so beautiful to me. I had to do something with that.

SP: I loved the way you dug into the history of embroidery. Is it a common pastime for teenagers where you grew up? I did embroidery growing up too, but I always felt like it was a weird thing to do.

JB: Yeah, we felt that too. I mean, I think it's more common now than it used to be because there's all of these arts and crafts movements going on. And during the pandemic, I saw a lot of embroidery workshops. And of course, with this book, I just

became aware of how common it started to be, not only embroidery but knitting and so many things like that. This book has had the fortune of being published in different countries in the world, and something I've found in common with many of these places is that there's a generation, or many generations, of women that were forced to embroider, right? And some of them maybe didn't even like to embroider. Then, there's usually a generation of women who just hate to embroider, like my mother, for example. They don't know how to do it, they hate doing it, and they want nothing to do with it. And with many of the tasks that were usually ascribed to women, like cooking or cleaning, I think there's now a generation of younger woman that are coming to all of these activities from a different place, from a place of freedom, of choice, and are really being able to reassess and value these tasks in a different way.

SP: Embroidery was rarely taken seriously as culture creation or as art. But your book digs into the ways it was radical in so many stories and cultures. You mention stories like Philomela from Greek mythology, where she got justice against a rapist by depicting the assault through needlework; Nüshu, a secret sewn language for Chinese women; and all the way through contemporary artists using embroidery. It really is so revolutionary and such an important connective tissue. I'm so glad it's coming back.

JB: Yes, and I feel maybe in some traditional cultures, embroidery has a different value. In many of them, it is also applied to women. But sometimes it is not a form of oppression but a form of expression and a form of continuing important traditions that have to do with myths, legends, and symbols. So, it is almost like a sacred task in many cultures and also something that creates bonds between generations, which is beautiful.

Embroidery from Oaxaca, Mexico.
VW PICS // GETTY IMAGES

SP: One of the things that struck me here is this interplay of the universal versus the specific. All cultures developed embroidery, but they did it in their own way. All women have a relationship to friendship, but it looks different for all of us. Near the end, you get into justice for women. Violence against women is universal, but the cases are so specific. One of the characters in this book brushes off the responsibility to help one of the other characters and focuses on cultural change, and that hits on such a challenging tension.

JB: It is. I've heard opinions on the novel, and a lot of people get angry at the end at the fact of not knowing what happened, for example. But for me, it was important to portray that, to portray the frustration of being so close to these people. You know them so well and still there is a wall which you cannot penetrate. There is always a part of us that is private, and it is only up to you to let other people in or not. And that can be so frustrating, not being able to help. I mean, you're there, you're willing,

you want to. But if the other person won't let you, there's really nothing you can do. And also we're talking about adolescence here, which is a period where bodies are changing, our identities are forming, and things that maybe in different times wouldn't hurt us the same way just get inside our skin. It's so difficult to deal with them afterwards. I think there are some things which we can do, and there are also some things which are beyond our grasp. It doesn't stop the hurting [when it comes to] these social justice issues. But sometimes, they're the only things we can do.

And when I looked at, again, that period of time of my life, it was difficult just to remember we didn't even have the words for many of these things. They were portrayed to us through a very different discourse. I mean, many of the abuses that are portrayed in this book were, to me, represented as sexual freedom. And it's so different to understand them.

SP: Absolutely. You really capture that balance between what you can do and what needs to be done in social justice, in environmentalism, et cetera. That requires attention in every aspect of our lives, doesn't it?

JB: Yes. And for me, that was a very important issue growing up. I mean, I look at my child. My child is 6 years old, and he's pure enthusiasm. He's the most optimistic, and for him nothing is impossible. Everything can be done. And one of the points for me about growing up was realizing, oh, no, you can have the best intentions, and you can have your will, but all you can do sometimes is very small. Especially when you do it alone. But working in collectivity is a real challenge. So, just understanding all of that was a very important part of becoming an adult for me.

SP: Definitely. In this book, you pull in things from so many different centuries and cultures and countries. Tell me about that research process.

JB: It was delicious. It's one of the parts I enjoyed the most about the process, and it just comes out of curiosity. I read everything I could find, which isn't that much really because embroidery, fabrics in general, have this quality of being perishable. They disappear. So, because of patriarchy, because of the materials, there isn't that much

about textiles in history. There's starting to be more. But still, there's like three or four very canonical, wonderful books about embroidery that everyone that researches embroidery reads, especially at a global level. Maybe you can go to academia and find small papers here and there about very specific forms of embroidery in communities or certain artists. But it's still a work in progress to rewrite history from the point of view of a woman, of course, and for something like fabrics, embroidery, and sewing. So, it was a challenge. But for example, I took a beautiful online workshop here in Mexico, during the pandemic, by this wonderful Chilean artist called Antonia Alarcón. And she thought a lot about the history of embroidery, so she gave me many wonderful references. And you usually can just follow the thread from one to another. Once I started accumulating the material, it was so much. It was just a universe of references. And then the work was really curating or deciding what elements were necessary for this specific story. I mean, for a while, I wanted to call it *Dechado*, which is like, what is the word in English? Sampler, is that [it]? Where you embroider small motifs or different stitches to remember them and to use them later on. I wanted to do something like a sampler of all of the different things that are related to embroidery. So, I wanted to use embroidery in relation to medicine, or in relation to art, in relation to feminism, in relation to biology, or to environmentalism. So many possibilities. I just wanted to take small samples of that to picture this very diverse universe.

SP: You've now had several books translated into several different languages. What's it like to encounter your own work in a different language?

JB: Well, it's beautiful. My books, I never have a lot of expectations of them. They are just things I need to do, I love to do, and I want to share. But how far they get away from me and into the eyes and hands of other people, it's definitely not up to me anymore. And it has to do a lot with the work of other people. If it wasn't for my agent, if it wasn't for my translators, this book wouldn't get much further from me. And it's so exciting and also mysterious. Because at least in English, I can read the translation, and I can even comment on it. But in other languages, you don't know what's happening there. You just put your faith in these people and hope for the best.

But I also translate sometimes, and I feel like it is a work of care, really. Because, you know, the other is putting her trust in you, and you take care of that. You try to find what is best for the text, what is best for the words. And that to me is beautiful.

Shelbi Polk is a Durham, North Carolina, based writer who just might read too much. Find her online at @shelbipolk on Twitter.

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