

# SHE WRITES PRESS

## Press Kit

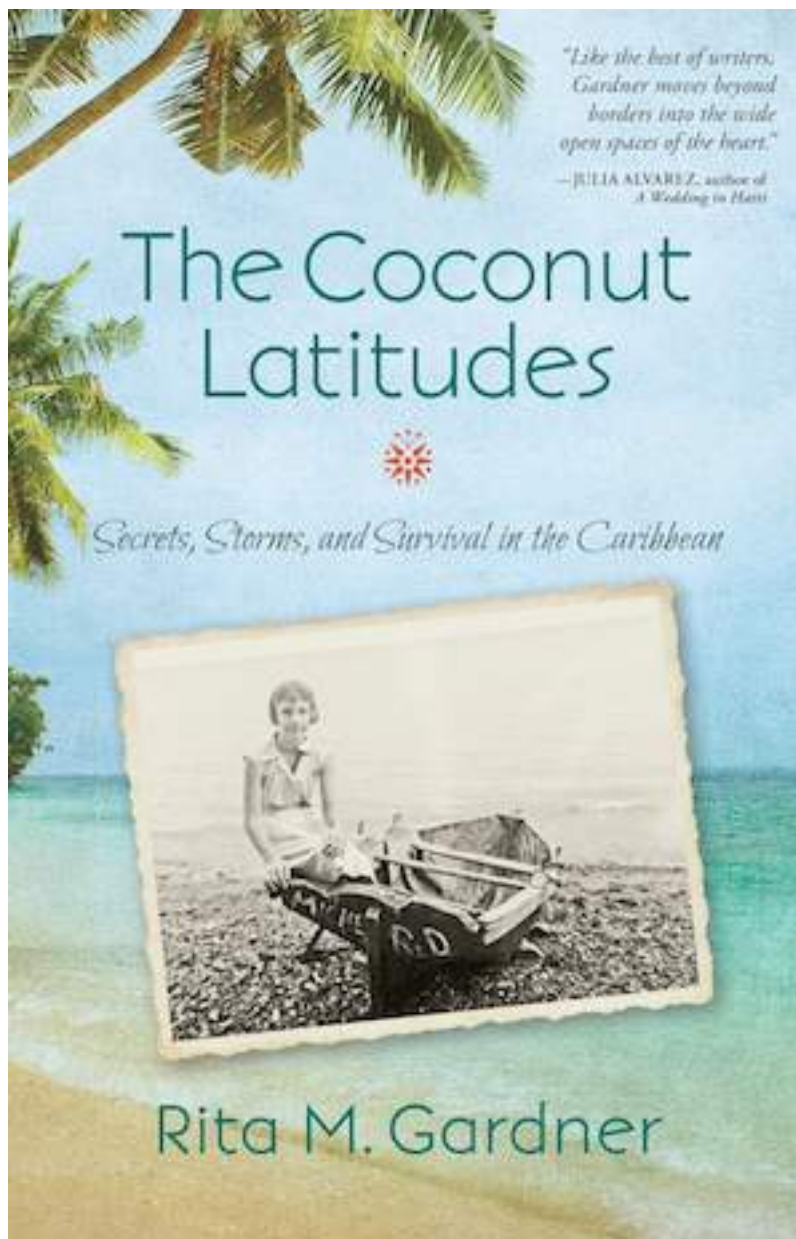
### *The Coconut Latitudes*

*Secrets, Storms, and Survival in the Caribbean*

**A Memoir by Rita M. Gardner**

She Writes Press • September 2014 • \$16.95

ISBN: 978-1631529016



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### Advanced Praise for *The Coconut Latitudes*

“Another fine writer we can embrace as ours: an honorary Dominicana, who moves beyond borders into the wide open spaces of the heart.”

—**JULIA ALVAREZ**, author of *A Wedding in Haiti*,  
*Recipient, 2013 National Medal of Arts*

“In this riveting coming-of-age story, Gardner paints an exquisite portrait of her family's rupture in paradise.”

—**JULIA SCHEERES**, author of *Jesus Land* and *A Thousand Lives*

“...[A] rich, haunting book that vividly captures her childhood and makes everyday turmoil vital through precise and honest prose.”

—**Publishers Weekly**

“Gardner’s memoir is a detailed delight; it remains a constant surprise as her family life becomes an unfolding drama. A kind of ‘island-mindedness’ in her writing makes this a compelling read.”

—**ALASTAIR REID**, Correspondent for *The New Yorker*, author of *Inside Out*

#### About the Author:



Rita Gardner grew up on her expatriate family’s coconut farm in the Dominican Republic during the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. Living in a remote coastal village, she was home-schooled and began writing, reading and painting at an early age. She returned to the U.S. to finish school and later moved to Northern California where she follows her passions—writing, traveling, trail hiking, and photography. Her published essays, articles, poems, and photographs have appeared in literary journals, travel magazines, and newspapers. She has been awarded writing residencies at Hedgebrook (Washington) and Lit Camp (California.) She continues to dream in Spanish, dance the Dominican *merengue*, and gather inspiration from the ocean; her favorite color is Caribbean blue.

*The Coconut Latitudes* will be in bookstores September 16 and can be pre-ordered online at [Amazon](http://Amazon.com), [BN.com](http://BN.com) and from [IndieBound.org](http://IndieBound.org).

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***The Coconut Latitudes: Secrets, Storms, and Survival in the Caribbean***

A haunting and lyrical memoir of a childhood journey into unexpected misery and the twisted path to redemption and truth.

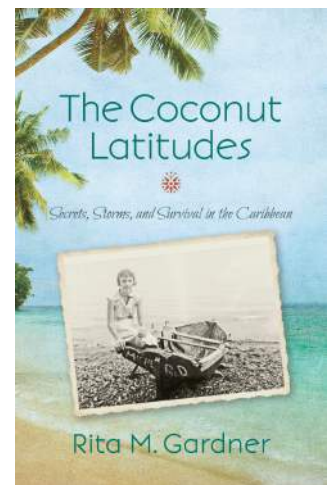
From a landscape of shimmering palms and kaleidoscope sunsets emerges a cross-cultural coming-of-age story. *The Coconut Latitudes* (She Writes Press / September 2014 / \$16.95) is told with candor and insight, balancing a child's wonder with an adult compassion. Rita Gardner's memoir looks back at her family's ill-fated sojourn in paradise from the edge of sorrow and joy. A reckoning of dreams and misfortune, Gardner's family determines to sustain love and reaffirm life, against all odds.

Rita is an infant when her father leaves a successful career in the U.S. to live in paradise. Near a seaside village in the Dominican Republic he buys a coconut farm, plants ten thousand seedlings, then transplants his wife and two little girls. He declares they are luckiest people alive—a *damn* happy family. But his fateful decision has them in the path of hurricanes both natural and political during the era of Caribbean dictators. Rita and her older sister come of age as the brutal regime of Rafael Trujillo tightens its grip.

As the country spirals into chaos, the shadows of political thugs and secret police reach the farm. Rita's father slides into alcoholism, bearing down on the family with volatile fury. The girls worry for their fragile mother who loses her bearings when a crisis shatters the family.

This haunting and lyrical story of surviving a reality far from the envisioned Eden reveals the terrible cost of keeping secrets. Against the backdrop of Caribbean culture and political storms, a family's turmoil steams. Gardner's candor is unsentimental and unflinching but always captivating.

For anyone who has staked a dream in a place too fragile to hold, Gardner's poignant memoir is an inspiring reflection about the power of truth to transform secrets and lies. *Coconut Latitudes* is a compelling and graceful journey walk along a path to resolve early sorrows with intelligence, humor and compassion.



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## Q&A with Rita M. Gardner, author of *The Coconut Latitudes*

**1.** Tell us a bit about *The Coconut Latitudes* and what inspired you to write this book?

**RMG:** It wasn't until I viewed my childhood with an adult's introspection, that I began to realize that it was unique and could have an appeal for others whose childhoods were in some way disrupted. I always wrote stories, but what propelled me to write this book was the death of my closest family members. My inheritance was truly the memory of my family's life in the Dominican Republic, and my father's desire to re-invent himself and his hope of finding an Eden for us. Realizing I was the sole keeper of our family secrets, I knew it was critical for me to examine and come to terms with the past in order to move on as the surviving adult.

**2.** You were born in New York, where your parents were from, but lived in the Dominican Republic until you came to the United States to finish high school, when you were 16. Did you experience culture shock?

**RMG:** After years of dreaming about becoming a real "American girl on American soil" the reality was a rude awakening. Having been home-schooled in the back yard with lizards to keep me company, I was shocked by having to wear shoes and nice clothes to fit in with the rest of the students. Only a few were expats like me; most everyone else seemed so worldly and sophisticated. I was socially awkward and bullied, but I made good friends who helped me transition away from my island sensibilities.

**3.** Your sister had come to the U.S. before you. Was it difficult to live so far away from each other?

**RMG:** I missed my sister when she left the Dominican Republic to go to a US high school. She had been my ally and support within our family. But I got used to her absence, and especially liked having the tiny bedroom to myself—all 70 square feet! I became more independent but looked forward to a time when she'd be coming home again to stay. We didn't know what was ahead.

**4.** Your father descends into alcoholism at a time when political unrest added to the uncertainty of life for expats in the Dominican Republic. Were you aware of any connection?

**RMG:** It was hard to know what my father's demons were, although the political instability didn't help matters. At the time, I wasn't connecting events. Now I think

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he lived with an inner darkness all his life, and I suspect he believed a complete change in career and an island location might help him. Sadly, as the saying goes, “No matter where you go, there you are.”

**5.** Your sister’s forced marriage and disappearance casts a dark shadow on your childhood. How did you approach writing about your family’s unsolved mystery?

**RMG:** Writing was therapeutic—it was cathartic to put words on paper. At first it was only for my benefit. I never thought about divulging her disappearance beyond just a few friends who knew about her situation. Writing for myself, there was no plan. I could just let tears flow, feel the anguish, and explore the painful secrets once they were on the page, in the open. As I continued writing and considering a memoir, I realized that even though I could never know the entire reason my sister disappeared, it was a traumatic event that marked a pivotal point in my family’s life, and in my own development. So it had to be in my memoir. It took decades before I could be at all objective enough to think about those events, let alone face the fear of writing about them. Most frightening was the idea of sharing my words. But as soon as I began to expose my story, a lot of fear went away. It occurred to me then that my book might also help others choose to shine a light on their own dark shadows.

**6.** The Coconut Latitudes is a story of transitions, grief, loss, love, and ultimately, a journey home. What was it like traveling back to the Dominican Republic with your sister after your time in the U.S.?

**RMG:** That first trip home was a quite a roller coaster ride for all of us, especially given my family’s propensity for keeping a tight lid on emotions and true feelings. To write about it, I needed to make it real on the page, see everything again in piercing detail, and then let metaphors express the emotional power of the journey. I’ve taken several trips back to our old home since that time, and each time I learn something new about the past when viewed from the lens of the present. For example, I can now appreciate the care that my father took in handcrafting a piece of furniture that even today is functional and perfect. It reminds me of all the things he built to make our lives better. It shows his love; something I couldn’t see decades ago. Of course it’s true we “can’t go home again” – but it’s also true we can gain new insights by taking our memories to a place where we experienced the most significant life events.

**7.** The book’s broad theme is about finding identity in the wake of loss. How did you decide what to explore from the child’s view of events, and then as an adult?

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**RMG:** I began by writing about everything I remembered. It made sense to write a part of the story from a child's viewpoint. This was easier to write, because thinking as a child, there was no thought of identity or loss. Only when I began to form the adult and child stories into a cohesive whole was the theme revealed—a search for identity.

**8.** How did the culture in Dominican Republic help you get through this difficult childhood?

**RMG:** I was blessed with very dear Dominican friends, and a culture of music and laughter and dancing, and love and acceptance. Even little children learn to dance and tell stories. It's not a culture of shyness, which helped me. Since families there are vast networks, extended relatives and friends are welcomed and without reservation. I was encouraged and included naturally. When bad things happened, there was a larger safety net with soft places to land. It helped me as a child to spend a lot of time with my friends and their families, which I did almost daily after school and on weekends.

**9.** Your father encouraged your art; did that create a bond, and did it help you with the many life transitions?

**RMG:** I have to thank my father for his support and for teaching me about art because I have turned to it throughout my life, especially during major transitions. No matter what, I find solace in my paints, in photography and in writing, which I've always felt is "painting with words." I can always lose myself in the act of creating something. I think many people get through hard situations by finding something that engages their "true self," even if they don't recognize it at the time. In difficult times, we all need lifelines to pull us to safety, keep us grounded, and nourish our souls. So I'm very thankful.

**9.** What advice would you give someone about writing a childhood memoir?

**RMG:** Don't think about or worry about others. Pretend no one else exists. Just write for you. Say anything, say it all. Later, you can come back to it objectively; see the plot, the narrative arc and structure. But for the first draft, just sit yourself down, see what comes out, and keep going until you're out of words. You'll be surprised at the twists and turns your writing will take. It sometimes directs itself; so try not to be in control!



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**10.** What are some of your favorite authors and influences for writing?

**RMG:** Poets influence me a lot because poetry is where things are pared to the bone, to the essentials. I feel there's no escaping truth in good poetry. Some of my favorite poets are Billy Collins, David Whyte, Mary Oliver and Ellen Bass. To name just a few favorite authors, they tend to be worldly sorts, like Paul Theroux, or those who set their stories in unusual places, like Ann Patchett. Since memoir has always been my favorite genre, I gravitate towards authors like Peter Godwin and Alexandra Fuller, who both grew up in Africa, or Latin American writers like Mario Vargas Llosa, Julia Alvarez, Jamaica Kincaid, and of course Gabriel Garcia Marquez. For the record, I don't read in Spanish because I would miss the nuance, although I am fluent in conversation. Maybe one day!

**11.** Do you have another book in the works?

**RMG:** I am planning a fictional book set in the Caribbean, based on the lives of many people I've encountered. So another book is definitely in the future.

**Excerpt from *The Coconut Latitudes*, a Memoir by Rita M. Gardner**

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(1350 Word Introduction and Excerpt of Chapter 1.)

**Introduction**

**Before I am born**, my father, for reasons shrouded in mystery, abruptly leaves a successful engineering career in the United States. He buys two hundred and fifty acres of remote beachfront land on Samana Bay in the Dominican Republic. This small, Spanish-speaking nation occupies two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola and is ruled by the dictator Rafael Trujillo. Haiti occupies the rest of the landmass. Trade winds blow year-round all the way from the deserts in Africa, combing through palm groves and shaping the trunks into inverted commas. The island is also in the main path of hurricanes that storm through the Atlantic and Caribbean from June through November. In 1946, when I am six weeks old and my sister Berta is four, my father moves us into this instability. Our family lands—with a pile of suitcases, a box of books, and bright Fiesta dinnerware—years before there will be electric power or actual roads to Miches, the closest village.

At this time, access to our property is a four-hour boat trip from another town, or a daylong horseback ride over the Cordillera Oriental range. These mountains, my father says, will protect our land from the worst hurricanes. He hires a crew to plant ten thousand coconut seedlings and names the property Cocoloco Plantation. My father frequently says we are a damn happy family; we've arrived in paradise, and are the luckiest people in the world.

**Chapter 1: Miches**

**It's a sticky summer day** when we first bounce over the mountain in a ratty jeep driven by an old man with brown leather skin. The windshield is cracked and dust covers everything. Our suitcases are piled on top, strapped down by frayed ropes. We're not tied down by anything at all. We heave left and right as the jeep straddles the track that's barely a road. I'm used to these raggedy roads in the Dominican Republic—riding in a vehicle is always clattery and bumpy on this island.



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Daddy sits up front with the driver, and in the smelly backseat, Mama wedges in between my sister Berta and me, trying to hold on to us as we lurch up yet another switchback. Berta turns white, leans out the window, and throws up. Daddy mumbles something about how since she's nine, she should be used to this by now and not get sick. The vehicle stops and I get sick too. Daddy tries to distract us by showing us a waterfall off in the distance, but all I can see is the mess I've made of my clothes. We pile in again and rumble onward, slowing down behind a donkey cart piled high with bananas. When we crest the mountain, we stop where the air is cool. There's nothing left in our stomachs. The driver goes off in the bushes to pee, and Daddy climbs a rocky ledge. He waves his arms, motioning us to join him.

The hillsides spill all the way down to the bluest water I've ever seen, a bay of shimmering light so bright it makes me blink. Daddy smiles. "See—there's Miches town." He gestures toward the inner curve of the bay to a scattering of small buildings crouched along a rocky shoreline with a few streets spreading out like a broken spider web. I blink and imagine the little houses are insects trapped in the web and then I shudder and tell myself not to think like that. I squint again at a long snaky river at the edge of town and then, to the right of it, a long sweep of sandy beach that stretches out like a sliver of new moon. The beach sweeps out to a point of land and disappears on the other side in a white-gold haze. The shore is lined with green fringe, and a smaller patch of a light color stands out like a ragged square of carpet. Daddy waves his arm toward the pale green at the far end of the bay.

"There," he says as tears roll down his face. "That's Cocoloco Plantation. We'll always be able to pick it out from here."

"How come?" Berta asks.

"Because my plantings are young palms—all the other plantations have been here for decades and the fronds get dark green with age. So Cocoloco will always stand out."

The driver peers over the rocks to see what we're all looking at. He smiles and I can see he's missing most of his front teeth. "*Bonito, sí.*" He nods. Pretty. Daddy lets me go and jumps back to the road.

I'm left alone up on the rock and it's dizzying way up here. This island is all I've known. We've moved several times before, but this is going to be, as Mama says, permanent. Forever, whatever that means. I'm lightheaded and whimper when I look down the edge of the cliff. Daddy glares at me as if I shouldn't be afraid and

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pulls me down to the ground without a word. I figure he thinks I should just be able to jump down off the rock like it's nothing. We pack ourselves back into the car and the bay gets closer as we shudder downward.

We pull into the village of Miches, passing a church and small plaza. In a few minutes the jeep sputters to a stop next to a pasture. A bunch of cows amble up to a sagging barbed wire fence, swishing their tails. Daddy has bought a small lot at the edge of town, far away from the nearest house. The property fronts the bay and is bordered on one side by a *laguna* that used to drain out to the ocean but is now sealed up into a pond that keeps stray animals from entering our yard.

The village is mostly farmers, fishermen, and trades people. The public *guagua* bus rattles its way over the mountain three times a week. It weaves through town, picking up passengers, passing the butcher shop over by the river, the tiny post office, the police station with its two officers and a three-legged dog, a *clínica* with a part-time doctor, and two grocery stores.

Instead of a nice concrete home with tile floors and rooms for servants—like other plantation owners in bigger towns build—our home will be small, with no servants, and it will be made entirely of aluminum. A neighbor sniffs and rolls his eyes. “*Aluminio?*” Daddy assures the doubters it will be as solid as concrete, and hurricane-proof.

While we wait for the house sections to arrive, we rent a cottage owned by someone from the capital who only visits Miches a few times a year. Don Elpidio, a local farmer we meet soon after moving in, whispers to Daddy over rum one night that the owners are *mala gente*, bad people. He makes a gesture with his hand, mimicking a slash across his throat. Daddy laughs.

The next morning I overhear Daddy repeating what Don Elpidio had said the night before—that our rented house belongs to two brothers who work for *El Jefe*, Trujillo himself. The dictator's full title is His Excellency Generalísimo Doctor Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, Benefactor of the Republic, and he's ruled the Dominican Republic for twenty years. Mama and Daddy sit Berta and me down to tell us we are never, ever to speak badly about Trujillo or say anything at all about the government. But Don Elpidio says that the brothers who own our rented house are *asesinos*.

“I'm scared,” I whisper to Mama that night when she tucks me into bed.

“There's nothing to be scared of.”

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“But Berta says *asesino* means killer. Will they hurt us?”

“No, no.” Mama pats me on the head. “People like to talk about things they don’t understand. These men are more like special police, and I’m sure they don’t kill innocent people.” She pulls the mosquito netting closed. “Go to sleep now. Everything’s fine.” Berta, in her bunk, snorts under her breath as if she doesn’t believe Mama. I pull the web of netting around me and stare through my cocoon at the moonlight outside the window.



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