



## LA DOLCE VIDA

**WRITER VENDELA VIDA HAS A TALENT FOR GETTING INTO THE MINDS OF HER SUBJECTS. IN HER DEBUT NOVEL, *AND NOW YOU CAN GO*, SHE TAKES THE HEAD OF ONE YOUNG WOMAN AND HOLDS A GUN TO IT**

New York is a dangerous place, especially for writers. On the one hand, they have to build believable characters in a town full of crazies and slave away at deadening jobs until they finally manage a book deal. On the other, they have to resist the temptation to glamorize New York as an endless parade of parties, celebrities, and lonely rich kids immersed in crypto-nihilistic leisure-time life crises (the favorite subject matter of a previous generation). Thankfully, there is a new crop of writers who possess both a swift, intelligent writing style and the ability to glean an infinitely more honest and intricate version of the world. Vendela Vida is one of them.

Vida published her first book, *Girls on the Verge*, at age 27. The collection of essays focused on various rituals that young women in America go through as they move into adulthood, from debutante balls and sorority rushes to Wiccan ceremonies and gang initiations—much of which the author witnessed firsthand. Now 31, Vida is no longer the struggling post-grad writer living in New York and typing after-hours. Having returned to her native San Francisco, she stands as the representative of a new kind of writer's life. She teaches at a nonprofit writing lab for kids ages 8 to 18, called 826 Valencia. She is a cofounder and editor of a new hot and headstrong monthly literary journal, *The Believer*. And at the end of August Vida sees the publication of her debut novel, *And Now You Can Go* (Knopf). It is the story of Ellis, a young art-history grad student who strolls through a New York City park only to spend a few critical minutes held at gunpoint by a stranger. She escapes physically unharmed, but the encounter stirs the pot for a young woman who's been holding herself hostage for many years. Vida knows what people will do and what they won't do and what they find themselves doing anyway pretty damn well. What she's up to is just as interesting. **Christopher Bollen**

**CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN** The first scene in your novel is pretty intense. A woman is walking in the park, and right away a man pulls a gun on her. Other writers might have made the scene into a rape or a shooting, but you have this act that is threatening, on the edge of death, but never completed.

**VENDELA VIDA** It's interesting that you use the word *act*, because one of my favorite things to read are plays—Strindberg, Shakespeare, Ibsen. I love the way plays begin at the last possible moment, with the very last things you need to know. That's why, in some ways, this book reads like a play. Everything is set in motion by the first encounter, when things fall apart, and after that it's about how things fall back into order. **CB** Unlike in your book of essays, the main character of the novel is someone who doesn't seem to belong anywhere. She's untethered, a loner...

**W** I'm definitely more drawn to characters who don't belong to a group. I think that's why I was interested in the subject of those essays—the rituals girls go through and the lengths they go to in order to belong. I've always been fascinated by people who want their identities formed by others. I started a book club last year, and that's the first club I've ever been a part of.

**CB** Even though this is fiction, you've created a character you have a lot in common with. The first scene is at Riverside Park, by Columbia University. Ellis is a grad student there, and so were you. She's from San Francisco, and so are you.

**W** I don't believe you should write about what you know. In fact, I sometimes think that is the worst thing possible. But for a starting point, I wanted to set the novel somewhere I really knew and could revisit when I needed more details. I think research is just as important in fiction as in nonfiction. I went to Lapland last summer—that's in the northern part of Finland—because my next novel is set there. I hung out with some Sami people [the indigenous people of Lapland] and got to eat reindeer meat. I came home with reindeer antlers, and I didn't quite know what to do with them, so I hung them on my wall.

**CB** There are a lot of authors out there who didn't get a writing M.F.A. and who are pretty vocal about hating grad-school writing programs. They think that all they do is teach people to write the same way. I remember the poet Kenneth Koch saying that everyone who comes out of the Iowa writing program ends up with a story about their grandfather dying of a heart attack in the driveway. Are you glad you went through Columbia's program?

**W** I think I would have been a writer no matter what. I went there

because I was 21 and was working at the *Paris Review* as an intern and I didn't know what else to do. At the *Review*, I was surrounded by the work of all these writers I'd never heard of before, and all I knew was I wanted to write. Getting my M.F.A. was a good experience, although I'm not sure I would have gone if I were older.

**CB** Did you move back to San Francisco right after?

**W** I finished the M.F.A. program in 1995 and stayed in New York until 2000. I had a lot of bad jobs while in New York. I was 25 when I sold my first book and quickly spent the advance because a) it wasn't much, and b) I was repaying school debts. I supplemented my income by working at this restaurant in Soho called Veruka. I was a cocktail waitress for over a year. Then I had another job working for Tampax, interviewing girls about what they wanted from tampon packaging and tampon websites. They hired me because of my experience interviewing girls in my first book. The interviews were really about the girls' lifestyles, even though I'd have to show them packaging. They'd end up telling you about how their boyfriends had gone to strip clubs or something, and suddenly you're like, *Hey, this isn't about tampons anymore*. But I saved money up from that and eventually ended up in San Francisco.

**CB** So how did *And Now You Can Go* come about?

**W** I had a draft of this book that was entirely different. It was about 450 pages, and that initial scene in the park was just one part of it. I spent two years writing that book, and it took one week to realize that it wasn't right. But I kept going over that one scene in the park when Ellis is held up. I chucked the rest of the book but saved the description of that at-gunpoint encounter and used that as a starting point. I wrote pretty fast, writing for whole days at a time, afraid that if I stopped, I'd lose the story.

**CB** In both of your books you have a Philip Larkin poem at the beginning.

**W** I love Larkin. When my dad read my first book, he saw on the first page that line of Larkin's I quote, "They fuck you up, your mum and dad," and he asked me if it was necessary to have the *f* word on the first page. I think he thought I could just change Larkin's words.

**CB** Ellis is a woman who suffers from a traumatic event, but she's already someone who is pretty shattered. Her father leaves and comes back; she donates eggs to a couple and is always looking for her child. There are all these figures that have gone missing, and some of them have come back.

**W** I was conscious of the fact that what happens to her in the park makes her realize there's a part of her that's been missing for a while. When she eventually goes to the Philippines to work with doctors to restore blindness, it's not that she finds herself entirely, but... Please save me from making some awful allusions to losing sight and regaining it.

**CB** Did you do any research on the traumatic stress that follows such events?

**W** Without being too coy, I'll just say that if you live in New York long enough and take enough walks in the park—especially pre-Giuliani—chances are you might have an experience or two.

**CB** Are you a better writer in San Francisco than in New York?

**W** I'm not so tied to locations. I usually write about somewhere I'm not. I wrote about teenage girls while I was in my 20s; I wrote about a 21-year-old in New York when I was 30 and living in California. Now, in California, I'm writing that novel that takes place in a very cold place where reindeer outnumber people.

**CB** And you're coediting a new magazine called *The Believer*.

**W** Yeah. It's a magazine of long book reviews and interviews. We named it *The Believer* and then later found out that Garth Brooks had a magazine with that name. We thought that was pretty funny. I edit the interviews primarily. In the next issue we're running a six-thousand-word interview with Pat Benatar, because we love that she does whatever she wants to do. Last month I interviewed the novelist Mary Robison, whose work just kills me, especially her novel *Why Did I Ever*.

**CB** You have a pretty strong writing community in San Francisco, don't you?

**W** I like talking to writers, and I have a lot of writer friends. But I think it's more important to be around readers. Having friends who are readers makes you feel like someone's on the other end of what you're doing. And I love teaching my high school kids at 826 Valencia, because they have such a pure and fresh approach to writing. They take risks in their work that they don't even realize are risks because no one's told them "You can't do that." Those risks inspire me.

**CB** A lot of writers have a secret jealousy that someone's going to take their spotlight, their particular territory on the map.

**W** I encourage all my students to become writers. I've never understood going on about how writing is hard, that it's a bad life. Not to say working as a cocktail waitress when I'd already gone to grad school and written a book wasn't a kind of suffering. But there are worse things in life.

**Vendela Vida in Battery Park, NYC, 2003**

**Photography David Armstrong**

*And Now You Can Go* is out in August from Knopf