

The St. John Story Behind The Newly Translated Vieques Novel!

St. Johnian author, Gerry Singer, talks about his publishing company's latest book

The next step for writer Gerald Singer is a novel: his own novel.

"I would like to try my hand at it, like to try and develop characters," said Gerry recently, as he pushed his young son Jacob at the playground in Cruz Bay. Jacob is a real swinger...he likes to swing for a half hour at a time.

We had come to talk with Gerry about the novel "Usmail", reviewed by Martha Hills in this issue. It is a novel about our sister island Vieques, and Gerry was the person behind the novel's publication in English.

Gerry is one of those guys with endless curiosity, and stories, and things he's up to. So first we spoke about his new project: a web site he's working on developing with Andy Clausen of Savant Media called seest.john.com.

"The new web site I envision as a radio station, a television station, with multi-media clips," said Gerry, and the key word there is 'envision'. He is looking forward to a time when "the TV is the Web and the Web is TV" and admits the new cutting-edge web site is an experiment. "What do they say: if you build it they will come?" he added.

Gerry already has a web site based on his locally best-selling book "The St. John Beach Guide". That web site has hundreds of pages of information about the island, and all that information was gathered because Gerry, years ago, used to write an ad for a supermarket on St. John (now long gone) called Marina Market.

The ad was full of information Gerry had gathered and written up about St. John.

There are a number of people who have

come to St. John and, due to an innate disposition (or an awakened disposition) have found pleasure in researching the island's intricacies of history, culture and language. Lito Valls, Chuck Pishko, Ken Wild, John Anderson (author of "Night of the Silent Drums"), Peter Mulenburg, Doris Jadan, Ron Walker: to name just a few, besides the staff at the Sun Times of course.

Gerry is just such one of these rare human beings who gets excited by a person, or a place, or a topic, and keeps asking questions out of the joy of learning and discovery. He is a perennial student, building a life around his interests.

So as Jacob swung back and forth, we swung the conversation, for the purposes of this article, back to the novel "Usmail" and the origins of his interest in it.

"I guess it started when my wife and partner Habiba and I went to Vieques to see Biobay," said Gerry, referring to the eco-attractive luminescent waters to be found on the little island.

And, by now, you might have the idea that when Gerry lands in a new place, he doesn't sit in a marble hotel lobby with a margarita.

"I met this guy, Biff Browning, who was working with the local people involved in the class-action lawsuit going on against the US Navy because of the pollutants in the Navy's bombing range on Vieques, and Biff was a guy who knew all about the off the beaten track trails of the island," he said.

Hanging with Biff, Gerry got bit by the Vieques bug, in the same way he had been bit on St. John.

"I became interested in everything about the island," said Gerry. "He took

me to the magazines where the Navy used to store their bombs, and introduced me to the people in the resistance movement against the Navy, and also to people in the American community.

"I just found it a really, really interesting island," said Gerry. "Almost everything that has happened in history in the last hundred years has a Vieques connection. Even when the British Navy went to reclaim the Falkland islands, the Brits stopped in Vieques and rented the bombing range for some practice before heading on."

That stopped us for a moment, the idea that the US Navy had a 'rent-a-bombing-range'.

"You could try out weapons," said Gerry. "I've been out to the bombing range (now closed thanks to the resistance movement), and you see all these bombed out trucks and vehicles, with all these unexploded bombs around. The reefs are just destroyed at the bombing range. I think the range was run by Halliburton, by the way."

Gerry enjoys the odd, unknown but hidden facts of history. Like that a 'nuclear device' was lost in the sea by the US navy between Vieques and Puerto Rico, and that when Puerto Rican journalists tried to broadcast the story, the Navy threatened to have the FCC pull their licenses.

"And the bomb was recovered by divers and dolphins," he said.

We all remember not so long ago that you could hear the Navy's bombs exploding on tiny Vieques day and night

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Gerald Singer and Habiba Hussein

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Unknown to many people on St. John, the Viequense people were slowly gathering the strength to fight the US Navy.

"I was a fisherman when I first came to St. John in the 1960s," said Gerry. "And it was the fishermen of Vieques who started running their boats into the bombing range as a protest. It was called the 'Fishermen's War'. They'd get chased by the Navy and try to lead the navy boats onto the reefs."

Gerry said this resistance movement fascinated him. "It is the story of the little guy going up against the US Navy." And Gerry also simply found the existence of two separate communities (besides the Navy) on the island fascinating.

"There are the Viequense, the local people," said Gerry. "And the North American ex-pat community. And they both have a distinct language and culture, yet they are really two different worlds. You can go into a bar and talk about a subject and then go into another bar with locals and talk about the same subject and you'd think you were on two different islands." It is these two separate communities on Vieques, and their points of view, that hold Gerry's interest.

Gerry said the North Americans see an unspoiled island with no mega-hotels, little development, and now with the Navy gone, a huge area (the former bombing range) set aside as a "National Wildlife Preserve".

But Gerry finds even the "Preserve" full of interesting contradictions. "It is the largest in the Caribbean, sure, it is," said Gerry. "But it is polluted and most of it is gated off: you can't go there."

You can't go there, but Gerry has. "I did go to the bombing ground. I wanted to see it. They are cleaning it up, dealing with the unexploded bombs (by exploding them), but the local people say that the clean-up itself is putting them at risk, putting new pollutants into the environment.

"The local people who are and have been so involved in the struggle for the island have sort of lost a sense of the beauty of the island, and the gringos, the ex-pats, are totally oblivious to the sad story of the place, to how the local people

have suffered throughout their history," said Gerry.

Briefly, Gerry sketched out some of the key points in the more recent history of the island: "It was sugar plantations through the 1800's," said Gerry. "And when the US Navy came they expropriated the land, and the local people who lived on the estates were sometimes given just twenty-four hours to move to a new plot of land in the middle of the island. For a time there were jobs, because when WWII came there was a big plan to make a giant sea wall from Vieques to Puerto Rico. It was to be a place of refuge for the entire British navy if the Germans took England. They worked on this wall day and night. People who died were just rolled over into the cement. But then when Pearl Harbor happened, the idea of having a Navy all in one place was seen as not too bright, and the wall just stopped."

Without the jobs from the sea wall project,

separated from their vegetable gardens on the former plantations, the people of Vieques were left without the means to subsist.

"There was nothing," said Gerry. "And many of the people had to leave: to St. Croix, St. Thomas, Puerto Rico. There was a big exodus."

And out of Gerry's time in Vieques, out of his endless questions and hundreds of hours of research, came a wonderful coffee-table book about the island: "Vieques: a Photographically Illustrated Guide to the Island, Its History and Its Culture" available on Amazon.com.

And out of the research for that book came the first English translation of "Usmail".

"As I did my research for 'Vieques' I read every book I could find about the island, mostly in Spanish,"

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said Gerry. "A lot of the books I found at the Fort Museum. They have incredible archives there, with photographs and accounts of events. And it was there I found the novel *Usmail*, by Pedro Juan Soto."

And why did the book strike Gerry so deeply that he fought to bring it out in English?

"*Usmail* brings it all home," said Gerry. "Everything about Vieques, it captures the soul and the heart of the island since the Navy came in all these different voices."

The novel was translated into English by the husband and wife team of Charlie Connelly and Myrna Pagan. Charlie used to own the *Vieques Times*.

"Charlie was one of the first people I met on the island," said Gerry. "He was a very helpful storyteller, and his family was tied to the resistance movement."

The anti-Navy resistance movement was galvanized when a local worker was accidentally killed on the bombing range. "A lot of

people went out to the range to protest, but only one stayed the night: a guy named Tito Kayak," said Gerry. "But once he spent the night, the next day Charlie and Myrna's son Pablo went with some others to join him, and eventually there were several protest camps. So you can see my translators have a deep tie to recent island history, as their son was part of it."

When Gerry mentioned one day to Charlie that he liked "*Usmail*" and that it would be great to see it in English, Charlie said he knew the author, Pedro Juan Soto, while he was alive, and that he knew his widow, who owned the rights to the book.

When rights were secured, Charlie and Myrna went to work on the translation.

"These are quality people," said Gerry. "And they were so passionate about getting it just right. In many cases there was no English equivalent to a word or phrase, and so it was really an act of love to struggle to get it right. It took a year to get the translation

done."

The Navy left in 2002, but the island's Conservation Trust has refused to carry "*Usmail*" in English at their shop.

"The battle continues," said Gerry. "The Trust is full of pro-Navy people, and Myrna used to be on their board until she asked them to support an end to the bombing. She said: 'What is more pro-conservation than stopping bombing?'"

But also, the novel portrays the US Navy's occupation in all its complications, from multiple points of view, with a main character who is the son of an American and a local Vieques woman.

"It is a very unusual novel by one of the great Puerto Rican novelists of the 20th century," said Gerry. "It is an extraordinary work, that captures a Caribbean island's history in a way that reveals what is going on right now, in the present moment."

Google "*Usmail*" to get to Sombrero Bookstore or go to Book & Bean.

