Arts & Humanities

Sigrid Nunez Takes a Walk

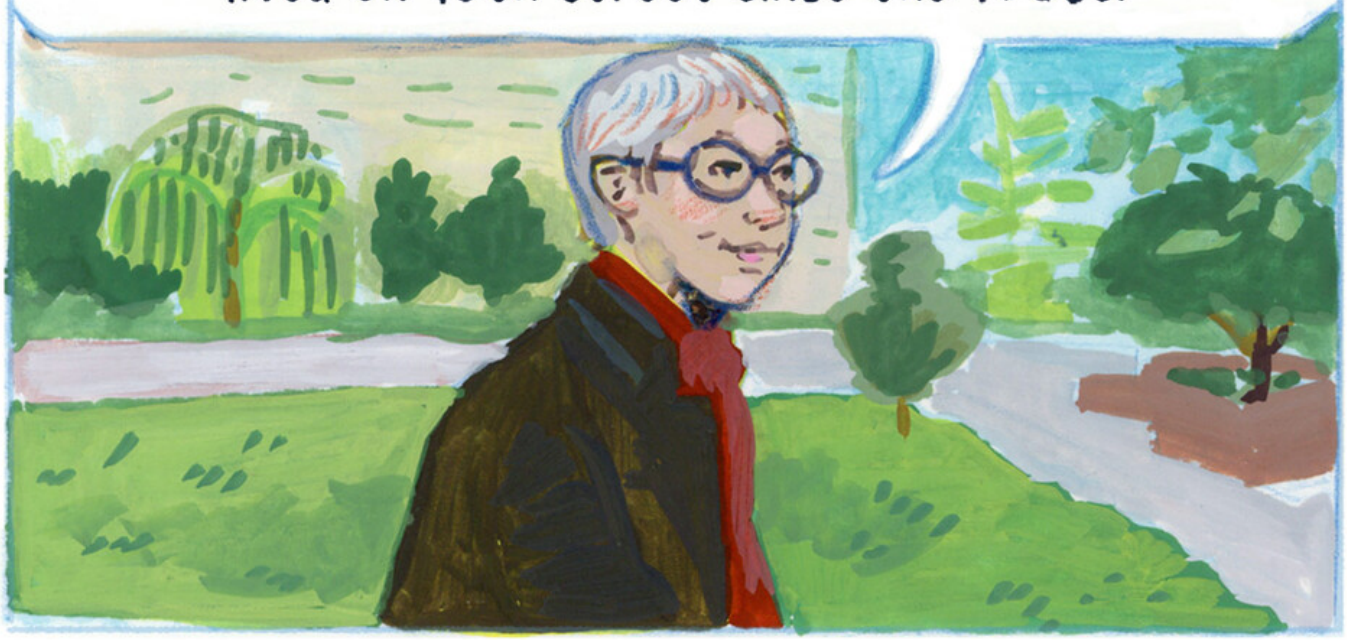
By
Jess Ruliffson
|
Fall 2025



After publishing nine novels over the last three decades, she's just seen two of her books adapted into films. Pedro Almodóvar's English-language debut *The Room Next Door*, based on Nunez's 2020 book *What Are You Going Through*, was released last December. *The Friend*, based on her 2018 National Book Award-winning novel, opened in March.

A lifelong New Yorker, Nunez says she draws inspiration from her frequent walks around the city. She invited us to join her for one of them.

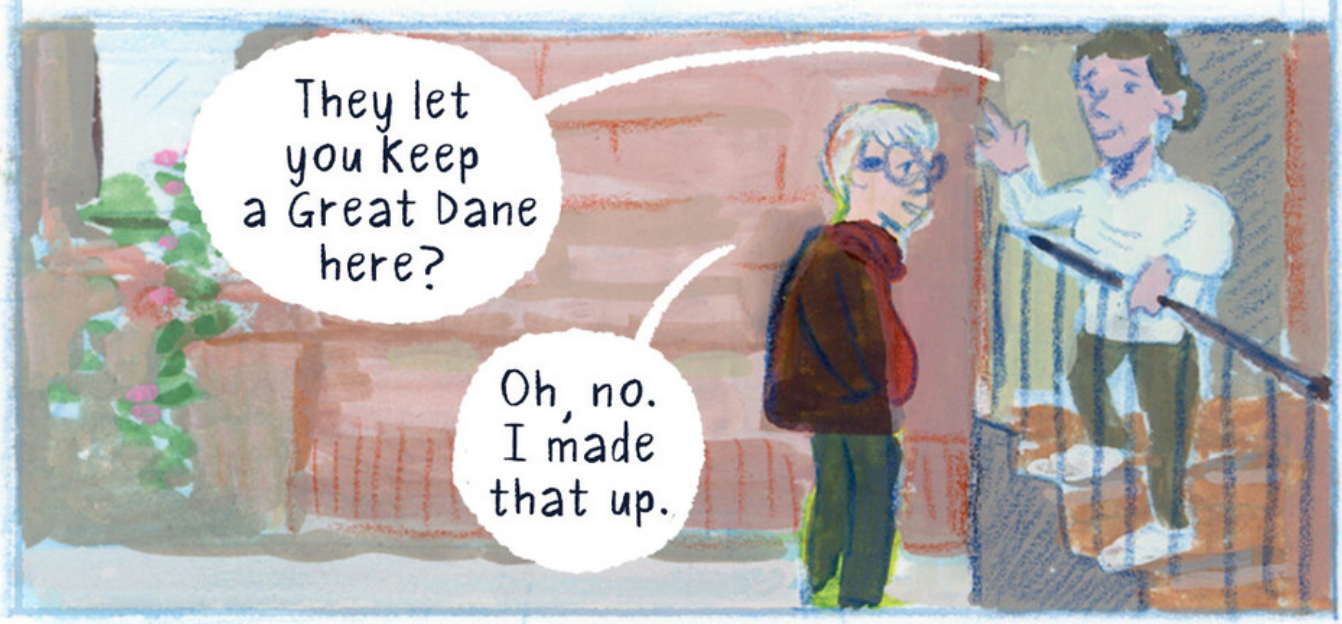
I grew up on Staten Island, spent college and graduate school in Morningside Heights, and have lived on 13th Street since the 1980s.



I'm not sure there's any advantage to staying in the same place, but I do think there are advantages to being in New York City.



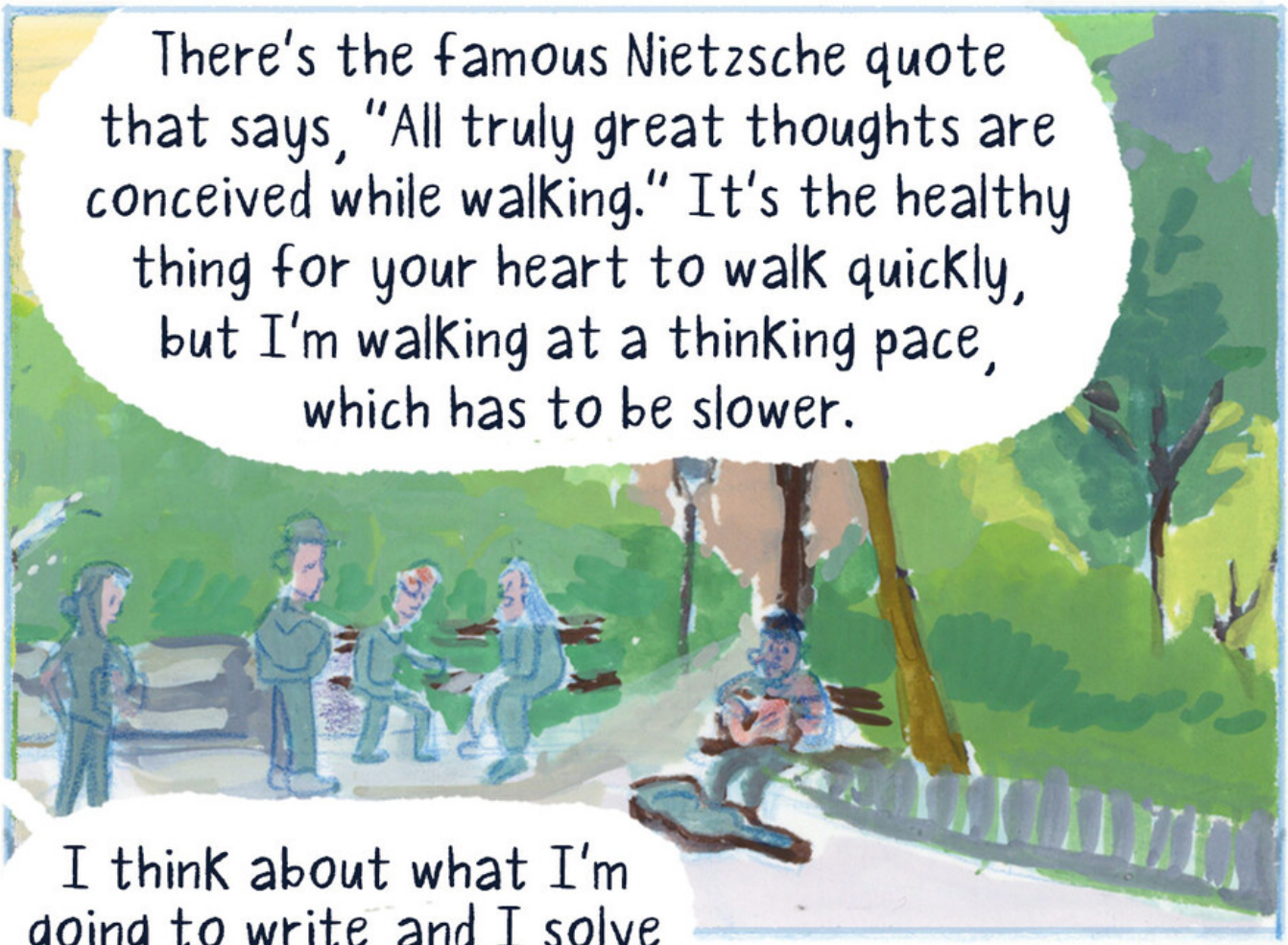
People love walking in the city precisely because, as the writer Vivian Gornick once told me, "There's always some drama happening." Vivian is my neighbor and one of my best friends.



A certain amount of my work is autobiographical. The narrator of *The Friend* — who takes in her mentor's Great Dane after the mentor dies — is about my age and my gender, teaches writing, and reads a lot. But she's not me.




I want people to know that I have an imagination and I made this story up. I don't want people to think that I'm just transcribing from my life.


There's the famous Nietzsche quote that says, "All truly great thoughts are conceived while walking." It's the healthy thing for your heart to walk quickly, but I'm walking at a thinking pace, which has to be slower.
I think about what I'm going to write, and I solve



In my latest novel, *The Vulnerables*, the narrator is asked to take care of a bird because the bird's owner gets stuck on the West Coast during the pandemic, and macaws are social creatures that need attention.

You know what they say: when you're depressed, which she certainly is, find someone who needs your help. It just so happens that there isn't any human who particularly needs her help, but the bird — who is beautiful and entertaining — becomes a lifeline.



I like bringing animals into my books as characters, because these books are about some heavy things: aging, dying, suicide, cancer. When you introduce an animal, you have the opportunity for warmth and humor and lightness.




This is where they shot a scene from The Room Next Door.

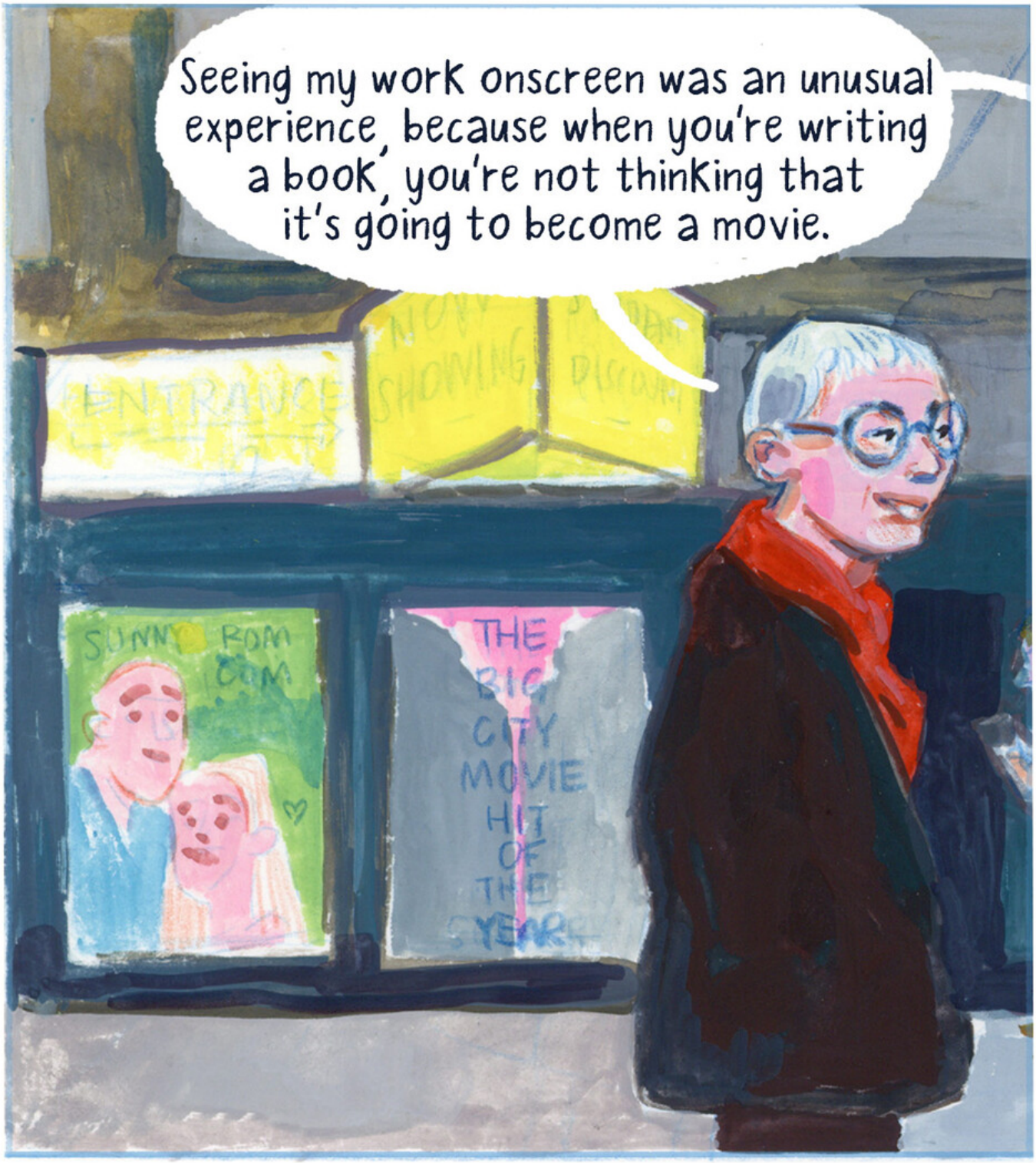

That's where Tilda Swinton and Julianne Moore were sitting discussing Dora Carrington and Virginia Woolf.
The lead role is played by Julianne Moore, who is 64. Naomi Watts, the lead actress in *The Friend*, is 56. They can be very glamorous, of course, but they were perfectly willing to make themselves look tired and older for these roles.

That wouldn't have happened years ago.
So I think that's a sign of progress.



The success of *The Friend* brought more attention to my writing, and it led to many foreign translations. Before 2018, my work had been published in seven countries; now it's around thirty-five and growing. That's how Almodóvar came across it.




Seeing my work onscreen was an unusual experience, because when you're writing a book, you're not thinking that it's going to become a movie.
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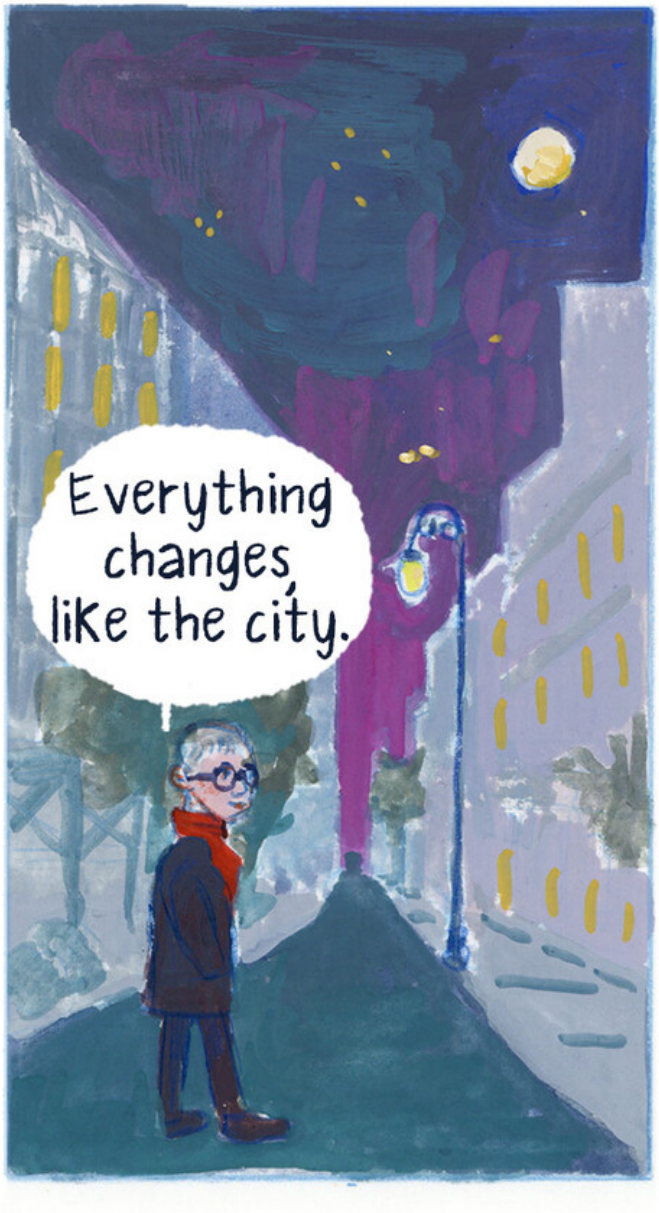

I'm a huge fan of Almodóvar's films. And those two actors, how they embody those characters, it was very familiar. There was a certain melancholy to it. It felt kind of natural to me.
You'd have to be very foolish to expect a movie to be a faithful adaptation of your work. It's been such a pleasure to see both of these movies, even though there were surprises when I saw them.
It never occurred to me that they'd be identical to the book. A faithful adaptation: who needs it?


I once heard someone say that watching someone close to you die is like falling in love. In *The Room Next Door*, you see that.


It's not about their shared past,
it's about that house and what's going on
between them there. When strangers are thrown
together because of some emergency,
they bond in very intense ways.
FDNY


I often get asked, Why are you so drawn to mortality? Or, Why are you so interested in death? At 74, I'd say it's more like, Why is death so interested in me now?


I was thinking about what time does to us: it takes so much away. As time passes, we lose parts of ourselves.
People die on us, but they also move away. We lose possessions all the time.
We lose dreams, too. With age, we lose our strength and our health and certain skills and abilities.
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