

# Report on a Reading at the 25th International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts

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© Excerpt reporting on Daína Chaviano's reading at the 25th IAFA convention.

I want to turn my own personal story and Cuba as I move back in time to New Years 1958-1959 and Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution, and how it intersected with my life. Castro had just taken Havana. I was as a rebellious fourteen years old who had just flunked four high subjects at Madison Eastside High School, so you might say I was a bit outside the American Dream, I liked Castro and what he stood for. More than that I despised Batista for what he was and the methods he used. That has not changed so much in forty five years, but my eyes have been opened by a speech made by the guest of honor Daína Chaviano, who spoke and wrote about her life in Cuba, and by a section she read from one of her works in progress.

But before I do that let me tell you a bit about her. As I do this I will do her the favor of not lumping her in with catch-all class that Americans have come to refer to as fantastic realists, as they apply it to Latin writers. That was the first thing I liked about her. She has what I would call a concise and intense use of the English Language; her diction has a refreshing quality to it. So, when she positions herself with the 19th Century Gothic Tradition I think she knows what she is talking about.

This is a bit of her biography from the conference book: Daína Chaviano was born in Cuba and graduated from the University of Havana with a degree in English Language Studies. She is now a U.S. Citizen living in Miami. She published her first book while still a student, after winning Cuba's first science fiction writing competition. In Cuba, she published a variety of science fiction and fantasy works, becoming the biggest best-selling author in both genres in the island nation's history. She also publishes in mainstream literature. The third novel in her current



series, earned the 1998 Azorín Award for Best Novel in Spain. Her novel, ***Fables for an Extraterrestrial Grandmother*** is considered one of the classics of Latin American Science Fiction.

As she read her two stories she had my full attention. I was looking hard for polemic, cliché, and for that matter sentimentality. Instead a got range fire and beauty, love for freedom all wrapped up in a little story about a wizard who gives life to a dragon from the first smile a joyless child has had in six months, and then sends the dragon off into the world knowing he can not own it. I consider a writer important when they can make me like the sort of story that I usually do not. And when they can speak to what I love also then I want more of her.

The second thing she read from was a novel which will soon appear in English and when it does I will give you its full publication information because I intend to follow this writer, because I think great things will come of her in English language fantasy world as her works become more accessible.

The part she read to us was what I would call the establishment narrative which deals with a young highly educated woman who works in a Museum in Havana and is filled with anger loss and terror as she watches everything she loves in her culture being sold off. The selling off has been going on for a generation as it started with personal and family treasures which are sold to survive but now has spread to what is essential in the Cuban culture. Perhaps it would be like an American watching the Statue of Liberty being sold of to a mainland Chinese scrap metal dealer, or perhaps the Book of Kells from library in Trinity College in London. The thing is gripping about her narrative is the non-Latin reader learns the material and spiritual value of things just as they are being lost. What a way to learn about a culture.

Much of the action of the story takes place at what is between a flee market or a bazaar, depending on what one might call it. The narrative thread is a round what I would refer as a huckster's table. Since I have sold books in situations since 1979 and talk to women across similar tables her text spoke to me. But as interesting as her use of the fantastic is her use of the human is what drew me to her. In a simple lunch date the huckster and the museum girl find that they share a secret and the must reach past their fear to trust each other. As I tell you this you must remember that I only heard her read a small part of her novel and a wonderful little short story and I await more.



Has what I have seen of her made me reconsider what I think about Castro's Cuba? In a way of course it has, but in way it also makes me say that the things that she abhors about her native Cuba are some of the same things I abhor about my United States. It is not the same thing in way America that I know and love and may still be the last best hope of the world, here what I am saying is we all must hope and fight so that America does not become like the Cuba for which she feels such great anger and loss. I will say as Americans we may have a better chance and a greater responsibility.

