

Daína Chaviano: First Came Fantasy...

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At just nine years of age, Daína Chaviano wrote her first stories. Now this woman has become the author of the most widely-translated novel in Cuban literature: *La isla de los amores infinitos* (*The Island of Eternal Love*, Riverhead-Penguin 2008).

I had the privilege of being the first reporter to interview her, and a much greater privilege as well: to know and admire her since the time she was just a very strange girl (crazy, in fact, to most mortals) who, as a calling to extraterrestrials, painted signs on the roof of her house on 68th Street in Miramar and wrote erotic poems proclaiming the death of love (I still have a typed copy on timeworn, yellow ledger paper).

One day Daína decided not to return from a trip to Ecuador and established residence in the U.S., where she worked as a journalist, translator, and finally as a full-time writer. Sixteen years later, in February 2006, she passed through Havana on a quick, two week visit to a sick relative. Two lucky passersby recognized her as she stealthily made her way through the streets of Old Havana.

I have many questions for her. I hope the ones I now send her through the divine intervention of the Internet (something no science fiction writer was able to foresee) will be of interest to all her readers:

When you were living in Cuba, you wrote about distant times and places. Now that you're in exile, the island's present takes on a greater role in your texts, especially since the publication of *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* (*Man, Woman, and Hunger*, 1988) and later in the



works that make up the series “La Habana Oculta” (The Occult Side of Havana). Can you explain?

I began by writing fantasy and science fiction because it was my natural mode of expression and because I’ve never viewed the world solely through the prism of earthly things. Later I started to sense a lack of spirituality in the environment and understood that I could make up for this lack through stories where physical or biological laws gave rise to magical and paranormal phenomena. That allowed me to breathe on a personal and creative level.

After I left the island, I didn’t want anything more to do with it. I’d grown tired of hearing about invasions that never happened and enemies that never attacked me. Time and distance allowed me to realize that I had confused my country with an ideology. Then I began to miss my city, its people... In an attempt to recapture them, I found books that described facts I’d never heard about or that I knew only in altered versions. I discovered a different past and began to come to terms with the history of my homeland.

“The Occult Side of Havana” series was born of that search and discovery. It’s a literary attempt to rescue a past that was slipping through my fingers. Nevertheless, in spite of the historical-social background, the basis of those novels is the spiritual universe. It’s no accident that *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* is dedicated to Hildegard von Bingen, a visionary nun who lived almost one thousand years ago. Without letting go of the fantastic element throughout the series, I resolved to describe the soul of a city that often remains hidden, including to its inhabitants – something that also happened to me when I lived there.

For that reason, and appearances to the contrary, there’s no breach between the literature I wrote on the island and what I’ve written since I left. For example, the first novel in the series is *Gata encerrada*). Anyone who’s read it will realize that the plot lies somewhere halfway between fantasy and reality. The novel plays with that dichotomy. What is real? What is fantastic? Where does one end and the other begin? These are all questions that challenge the reader throughout the book.

My association with fantasy, magic, and parapsychology persists in each and every one of the novels in the series, from first to last. The novels of “The Occult Side of Havana” were a study in exorcism and healing that my spirit needed. In none of these works did I ever abandon my first and only literary love: fantasy.

How much of your work is autobiographical?



There are autobiographical elements in nearly all my books. In general they take the form of anecdotes about things that have happened to me, which I somehow insert into the stories. Several autobiographical episodes that might seem unbelievable to many people are in those books. But I don't overdo it. I only include them insofar as they can be adapted to the plot or to the characters' psychology. They never appear gratuitously.

In *The Island of Eternal Love* you introduce something that might be called “anthropological fiction.” How did you come up with that direction?

The truth is I've never really known how to define what I write. Other people have suggested various classifications, but no one seems to agree. I think my novels are hybrids. Ever since I began writing, I've experimented with crossing borders between genres. I studied the characteristics of fantasy literature and science fiction in order to be able to break down those barriers and devise plots where the division between genres would become nebulous and imprecise. Later, when I wrote the novels of “The Occult Side of Havana” series, I experimented again by fusing elements of conventional literature with fantastic elements.

Now, in *The Island of Eternal Love* I tried to create a portrait of Cuban society in which the spiritual, magical, and paranormal elements would allow me to describe a reality I wanted to explore from another perspective. Much of Cuban literature has investigated our history following the same old pattern. The same themes are repeated, using the same codes. I wanted to break away from that orthodoxy. So I decided to use tools from other genres in order to draw a different portrait of my city and my country. I had no idea where the experiment might lead. I was afraid the novel would be difficult to follow, that many publishers would reject it because it didn't follow the conventional norms of classification that the market has established – something all publishers look for. Many of them have a predetermined notion of what a “Cuban” novel should be like.

In fact, for more than a year, several publishers turned it down. My previous agent, who liked the novel very much, gave up on it. He told me he was releasing me from our contract because he didn't know what else to do. Months later, a North American literary agent put me in contact with her co-agent in Spain, who said she was going to read my book because a colleague had recommended it to her, although she really wasn't accepting new clients. I prepared myself for a three month wait, which is the usual time agents take to reply. Three days later I got a



message from the agent. She told me she couldn't put the novel down: "It's your fault I didn't get any rest last weekend," she joked, saying she would love to work with me. Two years later, defying all predictions, the novel's rights have been sold in nearly 25 languages.

So it's possible to succeed without selling out, without even betraying yourself?

Absolutely. Everything I've written has gone against what I was expected to do. The truth is that I've spent all my time swimming upstream. Each new book is a challenge. Right now, for example, I'm involved in a project that's even more daring than the last one. Several times it's crossed my mind that I might be going too far, that neither my readers nor the publishers will understand any of it. But in the end I convince myself it doesn't matter, that this is the story I want to tell. I'll keep on writing what my heart dictates.

In *The Island of Eternal Love* you depict the city of Miami very differently from that cheesy, *kitsch*-ridden, consumer-driven cultural wasteland that we Cubans on the island hear about. Could you elaborate on this?

Miami tends to have a bad image because, even though it's a center of political polemic where a great diversity of opinions abounds, unfortunately the press – including in the city itself – usually emphasizes only the negative. But in Miami there's a little of everything, like anywhere else in this world.

Many readers – Miamians or otherwise – have been surprised to discover a city in my novel that's quite different from the one described in those news articles and tourist brochures. And yet, it's not an invented Miami. It really exists, and it's there for those who want to see it. That "occult" Miami serves as counterweight and complement to the "occult" Havana of the series. What the reader will see in this novel is the esoteric face of Miami, at least according to the way I've perceived it through personal experience.

The main difference between Miami and Havana – not counting the obvious economic and sociopolitical facts we're all aware of – is that Havana is five times older than Miami, and those centuries make an appreciable difference in marking the Cuban capital as a superior urban entity. Although Havana is practically in



ruins, its architectural and historical foundation results in a much more “human” use of its environmental spaces. Besides, Miami is a city that has been formed largely by immigrants who have to start their lives again from scratch. Many – including those who have been living there for several decades – are just passing through. However, it’s also a place that offers interesting cultural reference points, like its annual film festivals and its theatre, its growing importance in the plastic arts, which have turned it into a mecca for North American and European collectors, and its Book Fair, the largest in the U.S., in which Spanish and English-speaking writers from all parts of the world participate.

Did you ever feel the need to write in order to please your readers or a sector of them?

As egotistical as it may sound, I must confess that I write only to please myself.

If right now some Cuban publisher were to attempt to publish the novels you’ve written outside Cuban, would you authorize those editions? Is there some legal aspect that prevents you from doing so?

Do you really think these novels could be freely published and sold in Cuba now? Or are you asking about sometime in the more-or-less near future?

This July marks 29 years since I first interviewed you for *El Caimán Barbudo* (number 140, published in August 1979). At that time you told me you would have rather been an astro-archaeologist, but historical obstacles stood in your way. Would you still want that job?

I’d love it, but the way things are going in the world, I think that particular dream needs to be deferred till my next life.

Of all the work that’s been published under your name, is there anything you wish you could make disappear from library shelves and from your readers’ memory?



Each text reflects a different moment, a different stage, a different level of experience. There are several tales I wouldn't publish today, but I have no regrets about doing so when I did.

Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of our country, and why?

I'm not exactly optimistic, although I'd like to be. Cuba has the right to be happy and free, but that would require a collective effort on the part of all Cubans. If we manage to learn from our errors and act according to the dictates of reason and of our hearts, instead of being guided by our guts or our hormones as we've historically done, perhaps we'll succeed.

Are you planning another visit to Havana?

A physical visit, no. But I travel there in spirit almost every day.

If someday things change in Cuba, in the necessary direction and with the required depth, would you go back to live in Havana?

That's my dream. I was born in Havana, and I'd like to die there.

What's your next literary or extra-literary project?

I'd rather not discuss it in detail. I'll just tell you that it's a very complex novel. When I completed *The Island of Eternal Love*, I swore I'd never again get involved in a complicated project. But you know the saying – "Never say never."

As an exercise in fantasy, what would have become of Daína Chaviano if she had stayed in Cuba?

Without a doubt, she would have kept writing.



When are you going to reveal your true identity: extraterrestrial, sorceress, time traveler, fairy, reincarnation of God-knows-whom?

As soon as I find out, I'll let you know. But I suspect I contain a little bit of all those things.

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