

Daína Chaviano: Adventures of the Spirit

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As I look at her, I think that had she wanted to, she might have been a model or an actress: she's just as talented as she is beautiful. But she chose to become a writer.

Daína Chaviano, author of ***Casa de Juegos*** and other novels, was born in Havana, and has lived in Miami since 1991. When still a student of English Language and Literature at the University of Havana, she won a national prize for her science-fiction book, ***Los mundos que amo***. Her popularity grew with other books published in Cuba, such as ***Amoroso planeta***, ***Historias de hadas para adultos*** and ***El abrevadero de los dinosaurios***. She entered the international scene when she won the important Azorín Prize in Spain for her novel ***El hombre, la hembra y el hambre***.

"I wrote my first stories when I was eight or nine years old", she recalls. "They were fairy tales." That inclination toward fantasy has never left her, and the paranormal is an ever-present element in her books, even those dealing with subjects that are part of today's reality.

"I believe there are laws and phenomena we can't apprehend in a conscious manner, but still they're there and exert an influence over us," she explains. "Science-fiction and fantasy are ways of accessing this plane of the unusual. For me, it's a more complete way of explaining the universe."

Despite the fact her name has been included in the so-called "boom" of feminine Latin American literature, Daína does not recognize the existence of such a phenomenon. "Is there such a thing as a masculine literature?" she jokes "One would have to exist to allow for the other's existence. To me, at least, there's only one literature. The rest are just labels applied by the market."



As a writer, what does Daína Chaviano require of a novel?

“First it has to be entertaining. Then, it must make me see the world in a different light. I don’t mean I want the author to convince me of a specific thesis or idea. Many books I’ve liked set forth theses that are entirely different –even contrary– to my esthetic or moral sense. But I’m able to enjoy a book if it can make me feel I’m inside someone else’s skin. I try to do the same with my writing.”

When she was younger, Chaviano acted in several short films and some made for TV, directed by Tomás Piard. The renowned Cuban art-film director turned her into his “muse” in productions such as *La barrera* (The Barrier), *En la noche* (At night) and *Adorable fantasma* (Lovely Ghost). Did she ever consider trading writing for acting?

“Filming was a wonderful experience,” she muses. “Sometimes I’ve wondered what it would have been like if I had dedicated myself to acting. Although I can be extremely shy, I’d have liked to play several characters. Literature is a substitute for the possibility of getting inside a totally alien personality and attempting to explore its psyche. Understanding why that creature does what it does (which would always be something I myself would never do under similar circumstances) would be an adventure of the spirit’.”

For Daína Chaviano there are few things so reassuring as listening to the opinions of her readers. These can range from the curious to the hallucinatory. But she finds interviews and presentations boring, since she’s forced to discuss the difficulties implicit in writing this or that, things she’d rather just leave behind.

When asked about her favorite writers, several names immediately come up, like Tolkien and Shakespeare. Then Milan Kundera, Margaret Atwood, Edgar Allan Poe, Jorge Luis Borges, Anaïs Nin, Henry James, Mary Stewart... “The list would be endless” she apologizes, “and I run the risk of leaving out some of my great loves.”

Probably her next book to be published by Editorial Planeta will be ***Fábulas de una abuela extraterrestre***, a long novel combining elements of science fiction and fantasy.

“That one was only known in Cuba and in Germany, where it was published 10 years ago. It’ll soon become available in the entire Spanish-speaking world,” she tells us.

It’s the author’s favorite among all her books, “the only one I’d write again because of the mental ecstasy it brought me”, she points out.



Before concluding the interview, I ask Chaviano to mention three things she especially loves and three things she especially hates, and she doesn't hesitate:

"I love honesty, sincerity and refinement. I detest violence, irresponsibility and deceit. Of course I could add many to both lists, but you only asked for three..."

No question about it: The movies may have missed a pair of beautiful eyes; but literature ended up with a unique author.

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