



# Next Door but Far Away

## Literature of Modern Cuba

BY JESSICA TEISCH

**C**UBA IS A LAND OF CONTRADICTIONS. No more than 90 miles from Key West, Florida, the country has been shrouded in mystery—one just starting to lift—since the Communist revolution. Beautiful colonial architecture coexists with crumbling buildings. Buicks made in the 1950s drive side by side with late-model Japanese vehicles. State-run businesses compete with fledgling micro-entrepreneurs, the country operates on two currencies, and the average worker subsists on a state salary of \$20 per month. Music and visual art are everywhere, but books by the country's popular writers are scarce.

Yet Cuba's rich literature, pollinated by diverse cultural elements over the centuries, has survived despite centuries of political and economic upheaval. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, Fidel Castro's regime banned or destroyed literature that did not promote "real values"; many exiled writers found publishers abroad. Even today, Havana's government-run bookstores are stacked with thick tomes on socialism, Castro, and Che Guevara instead of popular novels, which tend to sell out the fastest because of limited print runs made more expensive by the demise of Soviet funding in the 1990s. Some popular works, especially by writer-critics in exile, are still banned in Cuba. Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's acclaimed *Dirty Havana Trilogy*, for

example, has been published in 22 languages, but Cuban editors cannot touch it.

Times are slowly changing, with more of Cuba's publishing houses supporting their own writers, those authors pushing the boundaries of what they write about, international book festivals drawing thousands of visitors annually, and Cuban and foreign publishers collaborating on literary output. Today, Cuban literature is just beginning to be better known inside of the country than outside of it.

"No-one in Cuba has a safety net, there's always an element of risk when you have a critical vision," acclaimed writer Leonardo Padura (who was awarded Cuba's 2012 National Prize for Literature despite work highlighting social issues still off-limits to the state-run press) lamented at Havana's 2013 International Book Fair. "But three or four years ago all the talk was about homogeneity and unity. Now, it's that other views should exist. I think that understanding is making a different kind of art possible. After so many difficult years, when so many things were banned and denied us, people here deserve to live better, to have a bit more freedom."

We highlight some fiction and nonfiction below—a list that, instead of being comprehensive, will help readers gain understanding of the culture, history, idiosyncrasies, and

imaginative life of the Cuban people and their country. (The second year in parentheses indicates the year the book was first translated into English.)

## Novels out of and about Cuba

### A Corner of the World

By Mylene Fernández-Pintado (2011; 2014)

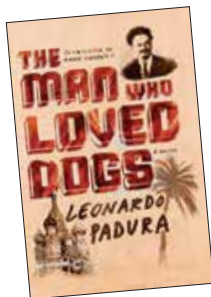
Exploring the question ever-present in contemporary Havana, “Do I stay or do I go?”, Fernández-Pintado—born in 1963 in Havana, trained as a lawyer, and best known in Cuba for her award-winning novels and short stories—crafts a love story of today’s Havana and the Faustian bargain faced by so many of its denizens. A reticent professor, Marian, falls in love with a younger man. Soon, their love affair leads her to question the choices she has made and the opportunities that may yet await. Fernández-Pintado, who wrote *A Corner of the World* after the economic crisis triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union, describes the novel in an interview with *Three Percent* as, above all, “an homage to Havana ... told with humor, melancholy, irony, in the voices and actions of its residents, very human characters with their doubts and questions, their dreams, their daily struggle in the gap between what one wants and what one can do.”



### The Man Who Loved Dogs

By Leonardo Padura (2009; 2014)

Havana-born Padura (1955–), one of Cuba’s greatest novelists and known for his widely translated detective thrillers set in Havana, “made his entrance to the Latin American Modernist canon by writing a Russian novel” (*New York Times*)—noteworthy for its length, historical detail, and exploration of its characters’ moral lives. The novel’s three strands involve Leon Trotsky, founder of the Red Army, who was assassinated in Mexico in 1940; Ramón Mercader, a KGB-trained killer from Barcelona; and a frustrated, subversive Cuban writer who, in 1976, meets an exiled Spaniard who may be Mercader and, from him, learns of the horrors of the Stalinist era. In this monumental novel, “Padura attempts nothing less than an inquest into how revolutionary utopias devolve into totalitarian dystopias” (*Washington Post*). In 2012, Padura



earned Cuba’s highest national literary award, the National Prize for Literature.

### Three Trapped Tigers (1967; 2015)

By Guillermo Cabrera Infante

Compared to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, *Three Trapped Tigers* is the playful, witty, experimental, and thoroughly modern novel that created a colloquial literary language for Havana. Narrated by four friends, the novel explores several young characters in 1950s Havana, their passions and miseries, and the city’s nightlife and music. Infante (1929–2005), who was born in Cuba and was a one-time supporter of Castro before he left for London in 1966, became the most prominent Cuban writer living in exile; he wrote about pre-Revolutionary Cuba in many of his screenplays and fiction. In 1997, Infante was honored with the Miguel de Cervantes Prize, Spain’s most esteemed honor for Spanish-language literature. See also *Mea Cuba* (1994), the author’s collection of essays and speeches describing the plight of the Cuban nation over the last half century.



### A Simple Habana Melody (From When the

World Was Good)

By Oscar Hijuelos (2002)

Hijuelos (1951–2013), who was born in New York to Cuban immigrants, takes a smaller, more microcosmic but no-less-powerful view of Cuba and its history here than he did in the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (see below). In his story of Israel Levis, a devout Cuban Catholic composer (based on the real-life composer Moses Simons) whose 1928 Rumba composition takes Europe and America by storm, Hijuelos paints a complicated portrait of a man dedicated to his music. The novel, however, is also a love story and a search for identity set against the backdrop of early 20th-century Havana, 1930s Paris (where Levis follows his love), and the Buchenwald concentration camp (where he is mistaken for a Jew).



### Paradiso

By José Lezama Lima (1966; 1970)

*Paradiso*, Cuban poet Lima’s (1910–1976) only novel to be published to his lifetime, is generally considered to be one of the influential novels in the Spanish language—but it’s not for the faint-of-heart reader who values a story over the

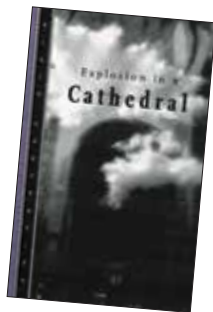
way a story is told. Nominally, the novel features a pre-Castro Havana boy's coming-of-age, his homosexuality and political ambivalence, and the death of his father. But in the digressions and anecdotes, written in a baroque style and taking place in wildly different eras, the somewhat autobiographical novel takes on philosophical and mythical significance that can be read as a family chronicle or a history of Cuba.



## Explosion in a Cathedral

By Alejo Carpentier (1962; 1963)

Carpentier (1904–1980), a prominent Latin American “boom” period writer, musicologist, and political theorist and revolutionary, was born in Switzerland but grew up in Havana and identified as Cuban his entire life. This historical masterpiece about the French Revolution in the Caribbean follows two wealthy Creole orphans from Havana and Victor Hugues, a roguish, opportunistic soldier (and real-life figure), who become involved in the tumultuous adventures of the late 18th century. This erudite novel, rich in artistic, philosophical, and literary references, contains elements of magical realism and existentialism and is rich in Caribbean history.



## Telex from Cuba

By Rachel Kushner (2008)

◆ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

Two American enclaves in Cuba remain blissfully unaware of the political instability and poverty outside their walls in the 1950s, before Castro revolts against President Batista. The teenage daughter of a nickel mine executive and the son of the United Fruit Company manager share stories of their privileged lives and their parents' growing ignorance, just as insurgency infiltrates their communities. Kushner (1968–) (*The Flamethrowers* 2013), though born in Oregon, traces her ancestry to Cuba: her mother lived there as a child, but she left her home in the former American colony in north-eastern Oriente Province before the revolution. (★★★★ **SELECTION** Sept/Oct 2008)



## Further Reading

**HAVANA RED** | LEONARDO PADURA (1997; 2005)

**THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA** | ERNEST HEMINGWAY (1952)

**CUBA LIBRE** | ELMORE LEONARD (1998)

**THE WOMAN SHE WAS** | ROSA JORDAN (2012)

**CUBA AND THE NIGHT** | PICO IYER (1995)

**EVERYONE LEAVES** | WENDY GUERRA (2012)

**VITAL SIGNS** | PEDRO DE JESÚS (2014; ◆ PREMIO CARPENTIER)

**DIRTY HAVANA TRILOGY** | PEDRO JUAN GUTIÉRREZ (2001)

**COBRA AND MAITREYA** | SEVERO SARDUY (1972, 1978; 1995)

**THE SECRET OF THE BULLS** | JOSÉ RAÚL BERNARDO (1997)

**CASTRO'S CURVEBALL** | TIM WENDEL (1998)

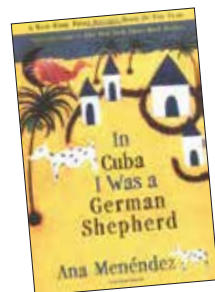
## Novels of Exile (and Return)

### In Cuba I Was a German Shepherd

By Ana Menéndez (2001)

◆ NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK OF THE YEAR

Born to Cuban exile parents who fled to Los Angeles in 1964, Menéndez (1970–) and her family eventually moved to Miami. A journalist by training (she covered Miami's Little Havana), she started her creative writing career in the mid-1990s. In these 11 linked short stories, Menéndez explores ethnic ties and the feelings of optimism and frustration that accompany assimilation into American society. “Here in America, I may be a short, insignificant mutt, but in Cuba I was a German shepherd,” says one domino-playing man; another story features a Cuban American announcing his engagement to his American girlfriend. “Menéndez suggests the quality of what is neither entirely migration nor entirely exile,” writes the *New York Times's* Richard Eder, and in this collection, each story contributes to a portrait of a community always in psychological flux.



### The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love

By Óscar Hijuelos (1989)

◆ PULITZER PRIZE

An international success, this nostalgic portrait of Cuba and a rich, sorrowful immigrant story plays into many of the stereotypical images of Cubans: the music, the dancing, the passion, the rebellious spirit. In 1950s New York City, Cuban brothers Cesar and Nestor Castillo seek—and achieve—fame and fortune as musicians at the height of America's mambo craze. As an aged Cesar looks back on his life from a seedy hotel room, the formerly dashing and extravagant musician reflects on his frail, melancholy brother's lost love; his own many lovers; and the disappearance of the



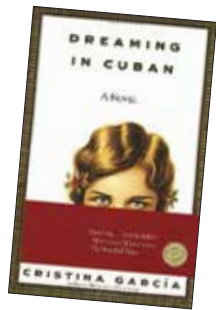
old Cuban way of life after Castro's insurrection. "Oscar Hijuelos's remarkable new novel is another kind of American story—an immigrant story of lost opportunities and squandered hopes," wrote Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times*. See also *Beautiful Maria of My Soul* (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2012), which reexamines the story of the celebrated brothers through the eyes of Nestor's long-lost love, Maria.

## Dreaming in Cuban

By Cristina García (1992)

♦ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

García (1958–), a Cuban-born American novelist and journalist, chronicles three generations of women in one family and explores how staying in, or fleeing, Cuba affects their lives. Moving between Cuba and the United States (with the Cuban Revolution central, of course, to the narrative), *Dreaming in Cuba* toggles between characters and eras as it explores the meaning of family, politics, memory, and geographical divides through the lives of aging, clairvoyant matriarch Celia, still faithful to Castro; her two daughters; and her psychic granddaughter. Michio Kakutani of the *New York Times* wrote that the novel "possesses both the intimacy of a Chekhov story and the hallucinatory magic of a novel by Gabriel García Márquez." See also *Monkey Hunting* (2003), which follows four generations of a family from China to Cuba to America, and *King of Cuba* (2013), a satirical novel fictionalizing the life of Castro.



## The Halfway House

By Guillermo Rosales (1987; 2009)

Born in Havana, Rosales (1946–1993) both wrote against Castro's totalitarian regime and criticized the plight of Cuban American exiles. A journalist and writer suffering from schizophrenia, he fled Cuba in 1979 for Miami, where he ended up in halfway houses. That time inspired his most famous novella, *The Halfway House*, which has been compared to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and tells a story in opposition to the American dream. Living in a home for mentally unstable indigents in Miami, "my tomb," the exiled writer William Figueras goes mad after the Cuban government bans his first novel. Now, instead of living the American dream, Figueras finds himself trapped in a cycle of cruelty and exploitation, dreaming of Havana and unable to create his own habitable world. Rosales committed suicide in Miami, at 47, after destroying much of his work.



## Raining Backwards

Roberto G. Fernández (1988)

Fernández (1951–), a novelist and short story writer whose family emigrated to Florida from Cuba when he was 10, casts Cuban Americans in a satirical light as he explores the connections between history, exile, and identity. This novel depicts the Cuban community in Miami in crisis, a generation caught between two similarly alienating, foreign worlds. Following the life of Cuban immigrants in Miami's Little Havana, many of whom remain ambivalent about their new lives and try to maintain their culture as they struggle with American ways, this novel of linked stories features a motley group of characters—from a lovesick girl aspiring to be a cheerleader for the Miami Dolphins to another who starts a guerrilla war to separate Florida from the Union.



## Days of Awe

By Achy Obejas (2001)

A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist born in Cuba now living in Oakland, California, Obejas (1956–) reflects on nationality, sexuality, and identity in her fiction. "In the U.S., I'm Cuban," she told the *Windy City Times*, "Cuban-American, Latina by virtue of being Cuban, a Cuban journalist, a Cuban writer, somebody's Cuban lover, a Cuban dyke, a Cuban girl on a bus, a Cuban exploring Sephardic roots, always and endlessly Cuban. I'm more Cuban here than I am in Cuba, by sheer contrast and repetition." *Days of Awe* touches on both the fluidity and rigidity of identity through the character of Alejandra San José, born in Havana on the day Castro rises to power. As an adult living in Chicago, she returns to her homeland to make sense of her past, including her Jewish heritage. See also *Ruins* (2009), about a man living in 1994 Havana who still adheres to Cuba's Communist mission.



## Caracol Beach

By Eliseo Alberto (1998)

♦ ALFAGUARA PRIZE

Alberto (1951–2011), a Cuban-born Mexican novelist, journalist, poet, and screenwriter (he cowrote the screenplay for the film *Guantanamo*), fled Cuba in 1990, when the government began to persecute writers and intellectuals; Alberto, who became a Mexican citizen a decade later, de-



scribes exile as his homeland. *Caracol Beach*, his best-known work, follows a Cuban veteran of the Angolan War who remains haunted by visions of a winged Bengal tiger. He is also trying to bring about his own death to escape his hallucinations via a shootout in a Florida resort town, despite the efforts of a constable to save him. This whimsical novel, filled with magical realism and the plot of a thriller, explores the madness inherent in different cultures.

### Further Reading

- CRAZY LOVE** | ELÍAS MIGUEL MUÑOZ (1988)  
**I GAVE YOU ALL I HAD** | ZOE VALDES (2000; ♦ PLANETA PRIZE)  
**A WAKE IN YBOR CITY** | RAFAEL YGLESÍAS (1963)  
**THE SUGAR ISLAND** | IVONNE LAMAZARES (2014)  
**BACK TO BLOOD** | TOM WOLFE (★ ★ Jan/Feb 2013)  
**NIGHT WATCH** | REINALDO BRAGADO BRETANA (1999; 2003)

## And a Few Memoirs

### Waiting for Snow in Havana

#### Confessions of a Cuban Boy

By Carlos Eire (2003)

♦ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

In 1962, three years after Fidel Castro ousted President Batista, Eire (1950–), then 11, became one of 14,000 unaccompanied children airlifted out of Cuba for Miami during Operation Pedro Pan. Eire, a professor of history and religion at Yale, recounts his life in Cuba before Castro: a magical, aristocratic childhood of birthday parties, movies, Lionel train trans-



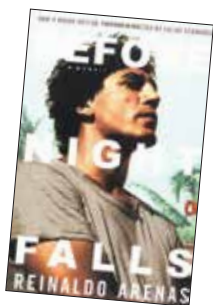
formers, and Roman Catholic masses, and then a tragic coming-of-age that destroys everything he holds dear (including Christmas) as Castro seizes power. Eire was inspired to write this emotionally wrenching memoir that explores “what’s precious in childhood and how that can be corrupted and blown up and destroyed by political circumstances” after the political storm surrounding Elián González’s custody battle in 2000. *Learning to Die in Miami: Confessions of a Refugee Boy* (2003) continues Eire’s story, opening as the plane lands in Miami and he embarks on his new life.

## Before Night Falls

By Reinaldo Arenas (1992)

♦ NEW YORK TIMES BEST 10 BOOKS, 2003

In this visceral, heartrending memoir, Arenas, a Cuban poet, novelist, and playwright (1943–1990), writes about growing up, coming out, and rebelling in Havana. Imprisoned in 1974 for “ideological deviation,” Arenas escaped from prison but was rearrested. In 1980, as part of the Mariel boatlift, he fled to the United States. *Before Night Falls* (which was adapted into a film in 2000) captures the drama of escape on multiple levels—first from his neglect as a child, then from poverty, and finally from political, literary, and sexual persecution. Suffering from AIDS, Arenas blamed Castro for his life’s calamities and committed suicide in New York in 1990. *Before Night Falls* is “an absorbing book, with the fascination one finds in stories by survivors of death camps or in lives of the saints,” wrote Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria in the *New York Times*. See also Arenas’s *Pentagonia* series, semiautobiographical novels of which the best known is *Farewell to the Sea* (1987), set in a Cuban seaside resort just following the revolution.

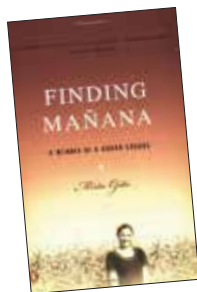


## Finding Mañana

A Memoir of a Cuban Exodus

By Mirta Ojito (2005)

Ojito (1964–), a Pulitzer–Prize winning journalist, was 16 when she arrived in the United States as part of the influx of Cuban refugees in 1980, part of the Mariel boatlift that brought 125,000 Cubans to the country. Inspired by her desire to find and thank the captain of the *Mañana*, the boat that had ferried her to the United States, this honest, at times painful, memoir explores Ojito’s journey “from red-beret wearing Communist pioneer to a soaking wet, filthy refugee stepping onto the docks of Key West, too young and bewildered to fully comprehend the events that had swept me ashore and given me new life.” Ojito explores the broad sweep of Cuban American politics and



her own family’s life in Havana, at once filled with joy, severe deprivation, and the persecution that came from dissidence, while righting the story of the much-maligned Mariel boatlift.

## Further Reading

**DANCING WITH CUBA: A MEMOIR OF THE REVOLUTION** | ALMA GUILLERMOPRIETO (2004)

**CUBA DIARIES: AN AMERICAN HOUSEWIFE IN HAVANA** | ISADORA TATTLIN (2002)

**MY LIFE, A SPOKEN AUTOBIOGRAPHY** | FIDEL CASTRO AND IGNACIO RAMONET (2006)

## General Nonfiction

**AN ISLAND CALLED HOME: RETURNING TO JEWISH CUBA** | RUTH BEHAR (2007)

**THE OTHER SIDE OF PARADISE: LIFE IN THE NEW CUBA** | JULIA COOKE (2014)

**THE DUKE OF HAVANA: BASEBALL, CUBA, AND THE SEARCH FOR THE AMERICAN DREAM** | STEVE FAINARU (2001)

**CUBA AND ITS MUSIC: FROM THE FIRST DRUMS TO THE MAMBO** | NED SUBLETTE (2007)

**CUBAN REVELATIONS: BEHIND THE SCENES IN HAVANA** | MARC FRANK (2013)



## Biography

**CHE GUEVARA: A REVOLUTIONARY LIFE** | JOHN LEE ANDERSON (1997)

**THE SUGAR KING OF HAVANA: THE RISE AND FALL OF JULIO LOBO, CUBA’S LAST TYCOON** | JOHN PAUL RATHBONE (2010)

## History

**BACK CHANNEL TO CUBA: THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN WASHINGTON AND**

**HAVANA** | WILLIAM M. LEOGRANDE AND PETER KORNBLUH (2014)

**HAVANA NOCTURNE: HOW THE MOB OWNED CUBA AND THEN LOST IT TO THE REVOLUTION** | T. J. ENGLISH (2007)

**CUBA CONFIDENTIAL: LOVE AND VENGEANCE IN MIAMI AND HAVANA** | ANN LOUISE BARDACH (2002) ■

