

Book Review: Waiting for Snow in Havana (Confessions of a Cuban Boy)

“Have mercy on me Lord, I am Cuban,” is the sarcastic appeal uttered throughout the autobiographical novel by Carlos Eire, one of fourteen thousand children who migrated unescorted to the United States following the revolution that placed Fidel Castro firmly in control of Cuba, and who even in adulthood remains bitterly disappointed at the disappearance of his dreams.

Waiting for Snow in Havana is a touching story told through the author’s vivid memories of his childhood. Eire nostalgically recounts tales of boyhood mischief, interspersed with cynical musings about misdeeds and injustices perpetrated upon him, and bittersweet references to the life that was removed from him following Castro’s rise to power. His tale chronicles his journey from his privileged childhood in Cuba to his deprived, sometimes tortured existence in Chicago, USA, a place whose name he had ironically made fun of as child because of its semblance to an unappealing word in Spanish.

Waiting for Snow in Havana presents a child’s wondrous view of life in pre-revolution Cuba. Eire paints vivid pictures of the turquoise ocean surrounding his beloved island, and the lush green vegetation that provides a home for his dreaded enemy, the garden lizard.

Lizards have frequent presence in young Eire’s life. He spends much time observing them, running from them, and in what he describes as the ‘first, last and only Cuban space program’, Eire even tries to launch a large chameleon into space.

He and his adolescent partners in crime tape the lizard to a tin can, light a huge firecracker underneath and wait a short distance away to witness what they’re sure will be a significant piece of history. The subsequent explosion and demise of the lizard prove to be hilarious to the young rocket scientists, and it is a significantly older and wiser Eire who years later remarks incredulously that it was a miracle that none of them were seriously wounded.

Eire, indeed, seems to have led a charmed childhood, frequently escaping injury during many of his daring escapades. He illustrates many normal games with his friends, although at times he depicts some fanciful tales that would make even the most blasé mothers cringe. From racing huge waves on the seashore in a car driven by his adventurous father, to a terrifying experience on the beach when his head becomes buried in sand, under constantly crashing surf, to almost losing a hand while holding an exploding firecracker. Young Eire tells a story that is sometimes so amazing that the reader has to constantly be reminded that the narrative isn’t fiction.

Eire’s parents figure prominently in the story, as the two main authority figures in his life. He refers to them as Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, the late European monarchs, due to his father’s fervent belief in reincarnation and his assurance that he clearly remembers his past life as the French king.

Eire's relationship with his mother remains constant. She cuddles him from birth, and continues to do so years later when they find themselves penniless immigrants in Chicago. His mother's over-protectiveness annoys him greatly. As do most children, Eire sees her constant worrying and her extravagant horror stories of what could happen if he doesn't listen to her as her attempt to control his life, and frequently uses this as motivation to act out. He later remarks that with the birth of his own children, he is finally able to identify with her, and goes so far as to thank her for her dedication.

His relationship with his father is quite different. It begins as a close bond, but the bond degenerates as his father's values begin to change. Eire mourns the loss of intimacy as his father, a judge, begins to become more interested in his valuable collectibles and less interested in time with his children. Eire recounts one particularly merciless beating following the accidental destruction of one of his father's priceless artefacts, remarking bitterly that Louis XVI never even gave him the opportunity to profess his innocence. The final straw however, is his father's choice to adopt an orphan, a decision he makes without consulting anyone in his family. The adopted son, whom Eire despises, proves to be the greatest dividing factor, driving a wedge between the parents, and between Eire and his father. His father's refusal to join them in America is the ultimate betrayal. His comments are bitterly sarcastic, and one gets the impression that even though many years have passed, Eire has not yet forgiven his late father.

The Cuban revolution at first seems like a dream come true to Eire. Being out of school indefinitely is a fantasy fulfilled, and it's a delight to become part of the type of wartime atmosphere he had previously seen only in movies. He is enchanted with the sounds of bombing and gunfire, and at times wishes the fighting would be closer to his home. His opinion changes abruptly when his wishes are granted through a series of near death experiences. More than once he finds himself dodging bullets and cowering under his bed as bombs explode nearby. The most heartbreaking tragedy however, is the prohibition of minors at the cinemas showing his favourite movie. It is only then that Eire begins to grasp the concept of the loss of freedom.

Eire's confusion and distress following the change in his lifestyle, mirror the anxiety experienced by the adults around him who wake up one morning to find that their bank accounts have been emptied and their property redistributed by the radical man who has assumed control of their tiny island. Eire goes from being a spoilt, pampered boy who never had to lift a finger to help himself or anyone else, to a lost soul wandering the streets of Chicago, taking menial jobs in order to survive.

Waiting for Snow in Havana is a poignant, remarkable story that is sure to touch the heart of any reader.

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