

Intralingo: Interview with Daína Chaviano

by Lisa Carter

Published in [Intralingo](#), a blog on translation by literary translator [Lisa Carter](#) on May 5, 2010, at <http://intralingo.com/interview-with-daina-chaviano-author/>. Access July 27th, 2013.

Daína Chaviano is the award-winning author of several novels published in Spanish. She won the acclaimed Azorín Award for Best Novel for ***El hombre, la hembra y el hambre. The Island of Eternal Love***, which is her most recent work, was the recipient of the 2006 Florida Book Awards' Gold Medal for Best Spanish-Language Book and has been translated into twenty-five languages. A Havana native, Chaviano has lived in Miami since 1991. Her official Website is www.dainachaviano.com

In 2006, I reviewed the recently released book ***La isla de los amores infinitos*** by Daína Chaviano for *Críticas* magazine. I was spellbound. Then, at the [ALTA](#) conference in 2009, I happened to see that [Andrea Labinger](#), one of the conference organizers, had translated the novel, published in English as *The Island of Eternal Love*. I was so happy this book had finally reached an English-speaking audience.

Then, not long ago, Daína found my website while surfing and got in touch about the review I had written all those years ago. A short e-mail conversation ensued and I had to see if she would be willing to do an interview about the novel; I also immediately wrote Andrea to see if she would be interested as well. To my delight, both agreed.

Here, then, the interview with Daína:

Lisa: Your first book to be translated into English, *The Island of Eternal Love* ([Andrea G. Labinger, translator](#)), came out in hardcover in 2008, and in paperback in 2009. Congratulations! Are there differences in the way it has been received by the original Spanish and now English audience?



Daína: Ever since it was published in Spanish (2006), the novel has been at the top of sales charts in Europe, the United States and Latin America, including online retailers like Amazon.com. While sales haven't been as good in English, the book has been well-received by critics and readers. Numerous letters have reached me through my Web site and [Facebook fan page](#). To be honest, I haven't noticed much difference in the way readers in both languages react to the story. The comments make me think the characters touch everyone equally. I even have a few bilingual readers who, after reading the novel in one language, bought it in the other because they wanted to "feel it" in both languages.

Lisa: The book is the most translated Cuban novel ever, in 25 languages – an incredible achievement given the wealth of literature that has come out of the island. What is it about this particular novel that has attracted such a global audience?

Daína: I think there's more than one reason to explain this global response. The novel covers over 150 years of history and travels across three continents. The main storylines include a ghost house that appears and disappears in a modern city, a curse that is handed down through generations of women in a particular family (they are the only ones who can see a mythical creature), a slave woman's journey in search of her freedom, the trials and tribulations of a Chinese family that escapes their homeland and has to find their way in a strange new world... The book appeals to a wide variety of interests. I think there's something for everyone: ghosts, love stories, adventure, mystery...

Lisa: Do you work directly with your translators? If yes, is this initiated by you? The translator? The publisher? How would you characterize the relationship?

Daína: I like to work directly with the translators of my books. I have asked my agent to include a clause in every one of my contracts that requires the publisher to send my e-mail to the translator, so he or she can get in touch and send me any queries. I have an excellent relationship with all of them. What's more, some beautiful friendships have resulted and I've been lucky enough to meet some of them in person.

Usually, I prepare a document ahead of time that includes phrases or concepts that are impossible to find in dictionaries, and I try to explain them. I often include



Internet links to videos, photos and sites. As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. Almost all of the translators have told me they've never had a working relationship like this with an author. Obviously they love it because it makes their work much easier and they also enjoy watching the videos, learning about new things.

Lisa: If you had to name the three most important qualities in a literary translator, what would they be?

Daína: Apart from the fact that they must have a deep understanding of the language they are translating from – an indispensable requirement –, a literary translator should be knowledgeable about the author's culture. This is vital in order to grasp the context around the phrases and the events the writer is describing. Finally, I think a literary translator should love literature in and of itself, be an indefatigable reader. And if he or she had a tendency to write, whether poems, stories, or other texts of a literary nature, all the better. This would allow the translator to experiment with the creative act – and we all know that literary translation involves a great deal of creativity.

Lisa: Would you agree there has to be a strong relationship of trust between an author and a translator? Is this even more essential when you, as an author, don't know the language your work is being translated into?

Daína: Absolutely. If a writer doesn't trust his or her translator, the working relationship that needs to exist between the two could become strained. However, if the author establishes a relationship of open cooperation with that translator, either through ongoing contact by e-mail, phone or some other method, this collaboration will go beyond that. In my case, this has always resulted in a friendship or at least a very close working relationship with the translator, which automatically leads to a feeling of confidence in his or her work.

Many of the translators who have worked on this novel (all of them women, by the way) wound up telling me anecdotes about their own lives with respect to certain topics in the novel, from paranormal experiences to how they became interested in Cuba – experiences that marked their lives in one way or another. I felt much calmer after these exchanges, knowing my book was in the hands of someone who



had enough sensitivity and intelligence to understand the essence of the story and the characters.

Lisa: How easy – or hard – is it for you to let your work go, let it live another life in a new language and culture?

Daína: It's hard, but you have to get used to the idea and to the reality. I imagine something similar happens to parents when it comes to their children. In the end, you know you have to let them spread their wings, trust they have the strength and ability to fly, but you never stop worrying, wondering how they're doing.

Lisa: You have said that you learned English in order to read works like Shakespeare in the original. What's your view of the adage "lost in translation"?

Daína: It's true that often not even the best translation can do justice to the original text. Now that you mention it, Shakespeare is one of those cases. I read the best Spanish translation of his Complete Works when I was 16 years old. I was captivated. Years later, when I read it in English, I realized there were many things missing from that wonderful translation, despite the intelligence and sensitivity of the translator. Every language has its own subtleties of poetry and the meaning of certain terms can be impossible to translate.

And yet, there are cases in which the translation can be as good as the original (at least from my view of English to Spanish translations). For example, I remember the Cuban editions of Ray Bradbury's work, particularly *The Martian Chronicles*, *Fahrenheit 451* and *Dandelion Wine*, and the one of J.D. Salinger's novel *Catcher in the Rye*. They are some of the best translations of classic novels I have ever read, to the extent that I can read them in one language or the other and not notice any difference in the tone, intention, or poetry of the texts.

Lisa: You have a long list of published works in Spanish. Are there plans for any of these to see the light of day in English or any other languages?

Daína: Not right now. Laura Dail, my agent in the US, is working with a translator who is preparing a sample of various chapters of a science fiction novel to present it



to a publisher, but the preliminary translation isn't finished yet. It's quite difficult to get a translation done in the United States because very few translators will offer to translate a few pages of a book for free so the agent can send them to an editor. They would be guaranteed the work if the book were acquired, but it's a risk not many translators are willing to take. And so, because all of my work is published in Spanish, it's unlikely an editor will ever even see it.

Lisa: It was a pleasure talking to you, Daína. Thanks for your insights into translation from an author's point of view!

