

## Cuba in Celtic Dream

by Xurxo Fernández

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Talking to Daína Chaviano is like being born again. The writer seems to radiate a strange light, as if she was from another world. The most curious thing about this Cuban writer with the penetrating gaze is her look: it's that of a Dante Gabriel Rossetti model. There's a certain air about her, perhaps from her Asturian and French ancestry, and she unabashedly declares she's closer to Anglo writers like Ray Bradbury, Shakespeare or Poe, than to fellow countrymen like Lezama Lima or Cabrera Infante.

**Your compatriots write about very specific subjects, just like –perhaps following?– Guillermo Cabrera Infante. I see you're different. You yourself have said you don't have that much to do with the Caribbean, and much more with the Anglo-Saxon world and Europe.**

Because of my origins, people always think I'm going to write about certain things... I started writing when I was 8 or 9 years old, science fiction or fairy tales. And I ended up mixing the two. I was always attracted by fairies and magic; and there they were: Arthur, Morgan LeFay, the Lady of the Lake.

Later I took up writing a kind of SF with a lot of mythology. Then I learned that the characters I liked so much were related to the Celtic world, and I went on to study those myths from the social, cultural and geographic points of view.

Well into those investigations, I was surprised to learn that one of my great-grandfathers was from the Spanish province of Asturias, and another one of my ancestors was French. I knew that all of that area of Western Europe, including Asturias and another Spanish region, Galicia, had a lot of Celtic settlements. I thought maybe my obsession had genetic origins. If physical characteristics can be passed on, why not certain inclinations, tastes or cultural affinities, no matter how far removed in time we may be from some of those ancestors? I imagine those traits



can surface and exert influence over us to determine in the end who we are. I don't know if this may sound awfully poetic to some, but I am always conscious of the fact that there are Celtic components in my blood through my Asturian and French ancestors. My literature is nourished by Celtic mythology, although I am also drawn strongly to the Greek.

Perhaps it's because of all of this that my literature is so different from that of other Cuban writers. When they ask me about my influences, people always expect me to say Carpentier, or Cabrera Infante, and they are surprised to hear me talk about Ray Bradbury, Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe or the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which I read over and over when I was very young, besides a good number of Anglo writers whose common characteristic was their having dedicated themselves to the fantastic, mythical or legendary.

In fact, the novel *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* is atypical. It's very "Cuban," and therefore, an exception within my work. I wrote it thinking I owed it to my own generation, and it's possibly the most realistic novel I'll end up having written. Yet, with all its realism, it contains visions, ghosts from the past and spiritual guides in the manner of Allan Kardec.

**You left some time ago, but you lived in Cuba for many years. Tell us about your childhood.**

My parents did not profess any particular religion, but they taught me an ethical creed that included respect for other people's beliefs.

The first things I read were fairy tales. Then came Jules Verne and Ray Bradbury. I studied the English language so I could read Bradbury and Shakespeare in their original language. And of course, Poe, who creates a unique atmosphere. I always felt enormous admiration for him, because of the way he can use a terrifying narrative and sustain one's interest.

**In your novel [Casa de Juegos](#), terror, or perhaps an indefinable fear, is a constant element accompanying Eros.**

Terror and uncertainty were elements used in the initiating rites of antiquity. I tried to construe the main character's experiences the way those ancestral rites were implemented, where experiences –erotic or not– that will lead to some final



knowledge may be ambiguous and carry a fear component. But there's also such a thing as a social reading of fear.

**Could it be that such a component exists because you grew up in a repressive environment?**

Of course, although not in my family life. My childhood and adolescence were very happy, except for that ghostly element, ever-present in a child with too much imagination. But my adult life got complicated when uncertainty and fear materialized for social reasons... In Cuba, we always said we lived in a surrealistic country. We had many questions, and few answers. There was a lot of social insecurity.

But I'd rather explore surrealism as a philosophical or stylistic format in order to create a dreamworld, search the unconscious and develop the most complex aspects of the psyche through some fantastic cosmogony. In *Casa de Juegos* I use surrealism consciously, because I think the existence of that dreamworld is a very useful tool to locate reality all the more easily.

