

## When Sci-Fi Meets Sexy

by Michelle Herrera Mulligan

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Whether they're professors-turned-street vendors or multiwinged telepathic aliens, sci-fi-fantasy novelist Daina Chaviano's characters are always searching. And as they quest for self-discovery, their encounters with spirits, magic, and alternate realities always seem to lead them home. The Cuban exile's books are best described as wild experiments in genre-busting. It's as if Ray Bradbury married Michael Ende and frolicked occasionally with Anaïs Nin.

Best sellers in Latin America for 20 years, they're available in German, Czech, and Russian. Placed in fantastic settings and situations that can border on the surreal, the protagonists from her 13 books and numerous stories seem to share one goal: finding the means to survive no matter how monstrously weird the place or circumstances. Anything is possible in Chaviano's stories: A cosmonaut awakens Sleeping Beauty. Witches and vampires board spaceships. A space traveler and a unicorn find love.

And Chaviano is just as striking in her own contradictions: She's a shy, intellectual whom you'd picture spending Saturday nights at home with a book, yet she's beautiful enough to star on the silver screen. She hates being photographed and lauded for her looks, but when it comes to her literature, she loves getting in your face.



"Fantasy and sci-fi help us change our perspective about reality," says Chaviano from her Miami home. "But I'm not sure if these genres are responsible for the rebellious attitude of my characters and plots or if I have adopted them for their extreme possibilities and the need I have to go beyond so-called normal behavior. In my books, I return to nature because I believe that the universe is the most exciting and mysterious thing in our lives."

Unlocking these mysteries has kept readers hooked since 1979, when Chaviano won Cuba's prestigious David Science Fiction Award for her work *Los mundos que amo*. The contest was open to writers of all levels across the island, and Chaviano, then just a freshman in college, was the first woman to win the award. In 1980, a Cuban publisher decided to release her award-winning book that chronicled the contact between a girl and an extraterrestrial civilization.

"Daína is a lyrical writer and doesn't get bogged down in scientific terms or high-concept situations," says Marla Norman, director of U.S. sales at Planeta Publishing in Miami. Chaviano went on to write *Amoroso planeta* (Letras Cubanas, 1983), a collection of mythical space-traveler stories, which established her as part of the sci-fi new wave. The stories aimed to bring science fiction to the mainstream, and were more often concerned with literary and sociopolitical elements than science itself. The genre started in England in the 1960s, with Phillip K. Dick and Ursula K. LeGuin among its most popular practitioners. Chaviano followed *Amoroso planeta* with *Historias de hadas para adultos* (Letras Cubanas, 1986), and kept publishing her short stories internationally.

It was in 1988, however, that she published her first full-length novel, the defining *Fábulas de una abuela extraterrestre* (Letras Cubanas, 1988) in Cuba. The novel, which has garnered a small cult following, was reissued by Océano in 2002 and released for American audiences in the spring of 2003. In Mexico, it won the Goliardos International Fantasy Award given to artists who distinguish themselves in the fantasy genre. The story can be compared to an intergalactic *Amores Perros*: It takes place in three dimensions that ultimately collide. A college student feels more drawn to the odd rituals she's been performing with her best friend in the park than the parties her boyfriend invites her to. She is writing a novel about the Zhife, a telepathic alien race traveling through different worlds by means of interdimensional talismans. Ultimately, this seems more real to her than the everyday events at her college.

But at its core the book tells a moving story about the extent of a family's love and the universe's interconnectedness. The novel firmly established itself as a best seller in Cuba, and Chaviano soon became one of the few recognized science fiction



writers from Latin America. "I've known new immigrants from Cuba who have come in asking for that book," says Raquel Roque, CEO of Downtown Books in Miami. "They grew up with it, and now that it's been published in paperback from Océano, they are hand-selling it to older Cuban immigrants and friends."

### A GIRL FROM THE HIDDEN HAVANA

In the late 1980s, Chaviano found herself at a crossroads. Her stories were getting published in countries like Czechoslovakia and Germany, she was being recognized on the street and even appearing on international television and in films. Yet she could no longer manage the double life she led in Cuba. Chaviano decided to leave her hometown of Havana, settling in Miami in 1991. "I was suffocating from the lack of physical and spiritual liberty. It was more and more difficult to respond evasively to interview questions or to political demands," she says. However, after she settled in the United States, she struggled with an acute sense of loss, and she began to contemplate another departure, this time in her writing. "Havana is a mutant city that constantly changes. I'm consumed with the grief of having lost something that was part of me. I lived in a marvelous place, where the unexpected and magic are found at every corner, and I didn't realize what I had until I left."

Despite plenty of opportunities in the realms of acting and journalism (Chaviano appeared in three films and held executive positions at the Spanish-language editions of *Newsweek*, *Prevention*, and *Architectural Digest*), Chaviano remained devoted to writing novels. She conceived of a series called **La Habana Oculta**, or **The Occult Side of Havana**, that would take a realistic approach to describing the magical elements of the city she had left behind. "I had to change my narrative and learn another type of dialog and language, but I couldn't abandon the spiritual and magic atmosphere that my books have." The first book she wrote in the series, **Gata encerrada** (Planeta, 2001) explores a woman's attempts to reconcile a shadow that plagues her life with her slipping sense of reality.

**Casa de juegos** (Planeta, 1999) replaced Chaviano's mostly child-friendly style with intense eroticism. In it, Gaia, a young college student, loses her lover to a terminal illness and finds herself unable to respond sexually to anyone else for years. Despite her atheist beliefs, Gaia takes advice from a Santería priestess and embarks on an erotic adventure, often engaging in bizarre orgies with the Afro-Cuban gods themselves. The language entwines classic eroticism with surrealist



elements. Chaviano often uses euphemisms for sexual body parts, but describes hard-core sexual situations in a way that leaves readers wondering whether they're real or fantasy.

Chaviano has said she intended the story to expose a fantasy world inhabited by her characters that "begins to seem less surreal than the real-life political world in Cuba." The most recent book in the Occult Side of Havana series, ***El hombre, la hembra, y el hambre*** (Planeta, 1998) describes how four characters struggle with their double lives and sense of lost identity in modern-day Cuba. They begin to look to the paranormal for a new existence.

### A NEW WAVE OF SCI-FI FANS

Chaviano conceived and wrote the books without a publisher, but when she submitted *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* for the prestigious Azorín prize in Spain in 1998, her career took a different course. She won the prize and became the first Cuban exile to receive that honor. "It really opened the door for Cuban exiled authors," Planeta's Norman says. "It put them on the map for literary distinction."

"The younger wave of Cuban immigrants has really responded to the literary elements of her books," says Roque of *Downtown Books*. "That's the interesting thing about this community. They read, and not just the 'survival material' or 'how-to' books. They are looking for literature when they come to the bookstores, and they relate to the Havana Daína describes in her series. She's not an overtly political writer, which means she appeals to several other Latino communities as well. Ultimately, readers love her characters and the hopeful message in her books."

Chaviano intends to return to her science fiction–fairy tale roots after she completes her final entry in the Occult Side of Havana series. And her upcoming sci-fi book, she says, is set in a completely different time and atmosphere than the others. Regardless of what style she employs, her faithful fans are sure to remain devoted. Perhaps it's the mystery of her persona, like the mysterious and often impenetrable elements of her books, that keep them coming back for more. Chaviano says that despite her intense need for privacy, her fans will always remain precious. "I've had people come to my readings with beaten-up copies of my novels they brought with them from Cuba. I know what that journey is like, and it's



incredibly moving that my books are what they would choose to bring. It often brings me to tears."

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