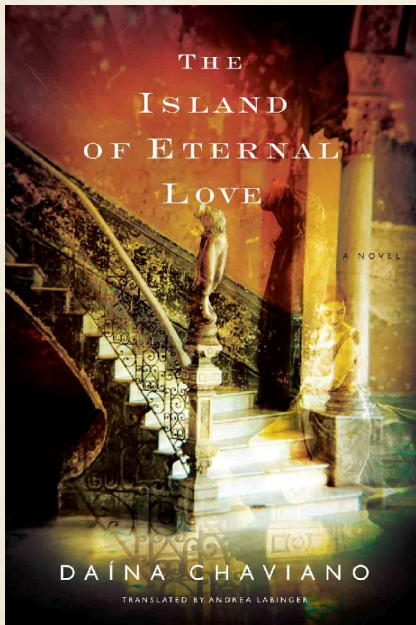




The Island Of Eternal Love: A Rich, Moving, Musical Novel

by Gary K. Wolfe

Originally published in [Locus Magazine](#), June 2008 (pp. 17 & 58)



Last year, in discussing James and Kathryn Morrow's SFWA European Hall of Fame, we were noting how little non-English SF or fantasy ever makes it into translation, and how the usual reason given by publishers and editors is that the added costs of translation together with the limited market for mostly unfamiliar names simply makes it a bad business deal. The glaring exception to this, for decades now, has been that odd district of the fantastic known as Magic Realism, a term originally coined by German art critics and then adapted by a small circle of Latin American literary theorists—until the label got attached to Nobel Prize winners like Miguel Angel Asturias and Gabriel Garcia Marquez or bestsellers like Isabel Allende or Laura Esquivel. Suddenly there was a huge market, but for the most part it was an import market, like Italian grappa or Belgian chocolate—you can make it here in the States, but aficionados will be quick to tell you it's not the same. (They'll also tell you that Magic Realism isn't at all like fantasy, and by the way that stuff that Doris Lessing or Jeanette Winterson wrote isn't science fiction, either.) There may be some good reasons for this (one argument I've seen is that it's essentially a third-world literature, since it characteristically adopts the viewpoints of communities or cultural traditions that accept a magical worldview), but apart from excluding most English-language writers from the dining room, it's had an odd corollary effect as well: non-English writers who choose to write more



directly in the traditions of fantasy or SF face the translation problems mentioned above, but once they move into Magic Realism territory, the invitation's in the mail.

A case in point is Daína Chaviano, who for nearly two decades has been Cuba's leading writer of fantasy and science fiction (though she's lived in Miami since 1991), winning numerous awards, becoming perhaps the most translated Cuban writer ever, and gaining a strong enough international reputation to be invited as guest of honor at the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts in 2004. Yet except for a single story included in the 2003 Wesleyan University Press anthology [Cosmos Latinos](#), her work has remained all but invisible to English readers until now. The *Island of Eternal Love* (La isla de los amores infinitos in its original 2006 edition) is the fourth in a series of novels that Chaviano has collectively called *The Occult Side of Havana*, and while it comes to us deservedly bearing the mantle of Magic Realism, it's also clearly the work of an author who's comfortable with fantasy, and not afraid to drop allusions to Tolkien or Lovecraft. A house with ghostly inhabitants mysteriously appears and disappears, apparently at random, in various neighborhoods in 1980s Miami; a family is haunted for generations by a mischievous and destructive goblin named Martinico; a young girl meets a fairy and the god Pan (who worries about being abandoned like the other older gods); the women in a family have the gift of speaking to the dead. At the same time the novel is fully grounded in the realities of the last century of Cuban history, with guest appearances by such figures as the father of Anaïs Nin, the composer Ernesto Lecuona, and the legendary singer Rita Montaner (the novel is drenched in music, with even chapter titles taken from various boleros).

The central character, Cecilia, is a Cuban working as a journalist in late 1990s Miami who, while investigating rumors of that disappearing house, meets an old woman in a bar in Little Havana. The woman, Amalia, begins to tell her the histories of three families who emigrated to Cuba in the late 19th century from--a Chinese family fleeing a war after a relative had reported opportunities for wealth, a Spanish family whose local livelihood had been ruined by that pesky goblin, and an Africa family who originally arrived as slaves, but later became successful importers. These three traditions Chaviano sees as most central to the development of Cuban culture. Chaviano develops these multigenerational family sagas with remarkable economy--the novel could easily have been twice its length--while at the same time playing out the mystery of the house (which Cecilia eventually realizes appears only on anniversaries of critical events in Cuban history) and the larger puzzle of how these various family tales will eventually intertwine, who the mysterious Amalia really is, and how all this connects to Cecilia herself. Along the



way Chaviano paints vivid portraits of Cuban society at various points in its modern history, from the growth of the music and recording industry to the mobsters to the Batista coup and later Castro's revolution. She also shows how these various nationalities gradually developed their own Cuban identities—the Chinese boy Pag Li eventually becomes Pablo—while facing the inevitable racial tensions (when Pablo and the young Amalia fall in love, both families try to quash the romance). Still, the fantastic is never far from the surface, and when the true nature of the house—and of Amalia—become apparent in the end, it's a resolution that should satisfy readers of literate fantasy while co-opting those who might try to argue that Magic Realism isn't really fantasy. It's a rich, moving, musical novel, which has already won the Best Spanish Language Book prize in the 2007 Florida Book Awards, and that only makes you wonder where the English versions are of the rest of Chaviano's works.

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Cover of [Locus Magazine](#) where this review was published (June 2008, pp. 17, 58)

