

Daína Chaviano: Her Passions and Fantasies

by Sarah Moreno

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These days Cuban writer Daína Chaviano is celebrating one of the high points of her career, the translation of her most recent novel, ***The Island of Eternal Love*** (*La isla de los amores infinitos*) into 25 languages. Her love of language, careful attention to detail, and desire to help her readers discover beauty in a world that sometimes offers too much unpleasantness, are the defining characteristics, not only of her work, but also of her personality.

“I would like my readers to levitate when they read the novel. I believe that there is too much violence and coarseness in the world, not just in books, but on television as well. People become degraded when they overuse these things. As I writer, I feel it is my challenge to come up with a phrase that can convey all the anguish a human being feels and to express it in a poetic way. Literature becomes simplistic when two out of every three words are vulgarisms. It requires no effort on the part of the creator or the reader,” says Chaviano, who began spinning tales at a very early age.

By age ten she was writing fairy tales and science fiction stories. Although at the time she didn’t know what the genre was, she was already talking about comets and planets. Her father, an accountant, and her mother (now deceased), who held two doctorates – one in Philosophy and Letters and the other in Psychology –, played a major role in her literary and musical formation.

“As a child, I used to steal books from my mother. At thirteen, I was reading works like *Sex and Taboo*, by Freud. I secretly read my mother’s whole psychology collection. Schizophrenia was always my favorite mental illness. It seemed very



romantic to me, maybe because I associated it with the portrait of Ophelia's madness that Shakespeare creates in *Hamlet*," she recalls.

She inherited her passion for classical music from her mother. "I began listening to popular Cuban music in the street, because in my house we heard only classical," explains the author, who, whenever she sits down to write, does it to music, a little of everything, but especially Celtic music and also classical, like Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. "This love of music became connected to ballet. Whenever I'm depressed, I have a recurrent dream in which I find myself dancing ballet on a stage. That takes away my depression."

The integration of reality and fantasy is the common thread throughout her work, from her youthful beginnings in Cuba, with *Los mundos que amo*, so popular that it was turned into a photo novel; to *Fábulas de una abuela extraterrestre*, which won the Anna Seghers Prize in 1990 in Germany; to the entire «**The Occult Side of Havana**» series, to which *The Island of Eternal Love* and *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* belong. The last of these titles earned her the Azorín Prize for Best Novel in 1998.

"In life, reality and fantasy are blended, and I deliberately look for that connection in my work. It gives me pleasure to do so," she says.

As a reader, she continues to be interested in mythology, archeological mysteries, monuments related to Neolithic culture, like Newgrange (Ireland), described in detail in *Gata encerrada*.

As a writer, which books do you consider indispensable in a library?

"Fairy tales continue to influence me. Practically no one has read the original versions, which are real horror stories. Greek and Roman mythology, Sumerian myths, epics like *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *Gilgamesh*, as well as other books dealing with historical, miraculous, or fantastic subjects, like *Slave of the Huns* [by Géza Gárdonyi] and *Memoirs of Hadrian*."

In *The Island of Eternal Love*, she focuses on one of the least explored historical and cultural paths in Cuban literature: the study of the Chinese population, which, together with African and Spanish influences, forms that nation.

Chaviano, of Asturian (Spanish) and French descent – her mother's maiden name is Miniet – considers it a great compliment that her novel has been chosen for translation into Chinese.



“The Chinese hardly ever translate novels about themselves that were written by Westerners, because they complain about being stereotyped. They feel that in this hemisphere there’s a prevailing ignorance about what it means to be Chinese. The fact that it’s going to be published in China tells me that my research has captured the necessary authenticity,” the author says.

Cuban music is a central ingredient of the novel. Each chapter bears the name of a bolero. Cuban musical figures like Rita Montaner, Beny Moré, the *chanteuse* Freddy, Joaquín Nin (Anaïs Nin’s father), La Lupe, and Ernesto Lecuona amble through Havana and through the pages of the novel, making “special appearances” or taking on key roles in the development of the plot, as when Rita Montaner helps solidify the forbidden love affair between Amalia and the “Chinese” Pablo.

“I’ve reconstructed a fictional Rita, based on the image that her songs and films, as well as the anecdotes I’ve read about her, provided me with,” says Chaviano. “In her I try to capture the essence of the Cuban woman: alluring, street-smart, and at the same time romantic; temperamental and capricious, but full of tenderness and sensitivity. She’s a very lovable character who acts as accomplice in this Caribbean version of a Romeo-and-Juliet type love affair, in which she would be the equivalent of Friar Laurence in the Shakespeare play.”

One of the novel’s most memorable characters belongs to the other world that is so omnipresent in the work, the world of the fantastic. The inspiration for Martinico is an imp in friar’s clothing, quite naughty, who purportedly can be seen among the mountains of Cuenca, in Spain. In the novel he appears to the women of a Spanish family when they reach puberty, and he plays jokes on them, demonstrating acts of kindness when his “mistresses” are having a bad time.

“In a sense, the imp personifies the feminine sixth sense, which begins to develop when a young girl reaches adolescence and begins to feel maternal instincts. He is also woman’s playful, mischievous spirit,” explains Chaviano, for whom her female characters are very important because “they bear the weight of family, of history, and of the mistakes men make.”

Like all writers, she has her phantoms that float to the surface. “Mine are Cuba and God, in all their manifestations. And when I speak of God, I’m referring to all facets of human spirituality,” she says.

