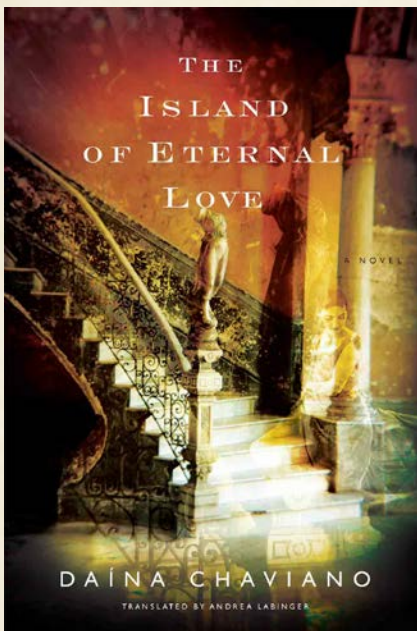


## Review: The Island Of Eternal Love

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In *The Island of Eternal Love*, Cuban author Daina Chaviano combines history, fantasy and romance to narrate the history of three of Cuba's major ethnic groups: Africans, Spanish and Chinese. Originally published in Spanish in 2006, *The Island of Eternal Love* is the first of Chaviano's novels to be translated into English. Besides this English translation, the work has also appeared in over twenty other languages, including Mandarin Chinese, making it the most translated Cuban novel in history.

The latest book in Chaviano's **The Occult Side of Havana** series, *The Island of Eternal Love* is set in various locations. The novel centers on Cecilia, a young Cuban woman struggling to adapt to life in Miami. Cecilia has no immediate family, very few friends, and knows little about pre-1959 Cuban history. Only through her encounters with the supernatural will she discover the often tragic and heartbreaking history of Cuba. In addition to highlighting pre-revolutionary Cuban history, including slavery, immigration and miscegenation, the novel accents the island's culture, including its syncretic religious beliefs and music. In fact, chapter titles are popular *boleros*. In this work, Chaviano joins other Caribbean writers, such as Mayra Montero, in integrating Cuba's musical past into her narrative. Readers of *The Island of Eternal Love* encounter famous Cuban artists Rita Montaner, Benny Moré, Bola de Nieve and Ernesto Lecuona alongside fictional characters.

Similar to other works from "The Occult Side of Havana" series, *The Island of Eternal Love* relies on a third-person omniscient narrator to weave Cecilia's personal story and those of families from Cuba's past. As stated previously, Cecilia, who has lived in Miami for several years, has difficulties adapting to her



surroundings. Yet during a rare outing to a local nightclub with friends, she encounters Amalia, an older woman whom she will befriend. Cecilia and Amalia's friendship is no doubt atypical. First, the two women only meet in the local nightclub; they never meet outside this specific space. Second, Cecilia only learns about Amalia's past from the family stories she narrates. And perhaps more importantly, the two women's friendship is unusual because of the fact that Amalia is an apparition—a woman who has been dead for some time, a fact that Cecilia only comes to learn at the conclusion of the work. Even though their friendship is limited by time and space, Amalia, nevertheless, becomes a surrogate mother figure for the young woman. Through her stories, Cecilia begins to discover the hidden history of her native country spanning several generations. While these stories are Amalia's family history, they represent the larger Cuban identity which famed Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz labeled *el ajiao cubano*. Through Amalia's retelling of her family's story, Cecilia becomes a part of the larger Cuban "family" history. Amalia's stories prompt Cecilia to uncover her country's past and her own individual history.

What makes this novel unique is not its use of the family structure as a metaphor for the nation. This technique has been used in Latin American literature since the nineteenth century, as the literary critic Doris Sommer argues in her study *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*. Rather, what makes this work fascinating is its fusion of history and fantasy. In this work, access to both the family's history and the nation's is only possible through an acceptance of the fantastic. But more importantly, this novel takes a matriarchal view of history, one where history is told from the perspective of the women who make up these families. Through its narrative, the novel empowers women to speak for their long-lost ancestors, rewriting both their family histories and the nation's.

The family stories that Amalia tells are the most interesting parts of the narrative. These fictionalized accounts offer a personal side to the specific historical events that shaped Cuba's history. Slavery, discrimination, sexism, and revolutions affect individual families with often dire consequences. Perhaps the most touching moments in the novel are those dealing with the death of the elderly and the devastating, disintegrating role immigration and exile play in the family unit.

The first of Amalia's stories takes us to early twentieth century China to meet Kui-Fa, a young girl who is raised by her nanny Mei Lei, following her mother's suicide. Kui-Fa marries Siu-Mend in an arranged marriage, and following the Chinese Revolution of 1911, she, her husband and young son join thousands of other Chinese immigrating to Cuba. Regardless of the miles that separate China and



Cuba, Kui-Fa brings her customs and beliefs with her, including her devotion to Kuan Yin, the Chinese Buddhist Goddess of Compassion and her devotion to the Three Origins: Heaven, Earth and Water. In Cuba, the three origins take on a new meaning: the syncretic union of three specific ethnic groups.

Amalia's other two stories carry readers to African and Spanish lands. Her second tale begins in late nineteenth century West Africa. There, Dayo is taken captive, raped aboard a slave-ship, and brought to Cuba, where she gives birth to a mulatto daughter, Caridad. As with Kui-Fa, who loses her mother, Caridad will also be separated from her mother, not because of death but as result of slavery. Although Caridad obtains her freedom and marries a free Black, much of her life will be marked with tragedy. Amalia's third story transports readers to Cuenca, Spain, and focuses on Angela, a young woman cursed with the ability to see magical, supernatural beings. Like Kui-Fa and Dayo, Angela also migrates to Cuba with her husband, leaving behind her elderly parents whom she never sees again. In the end, these two family stories—African and Spanish—intertwine as Caridad's daughter and Angela's son marry and give birth to our storyteller, Amalia.

Though Amalia's stories make up a significant part of the novel, alternating chapters concentrate on Cecilia. Initially, Cecilia's mundane life appears isolated from Amalia's stories, but her life also interconnects with these tales. There are numerous instances of the fantastic in the work, in Cecilia's supernatural experiences, as well as in the very tales Amalia tells. Still, as in many of Chaviano's earlier novels, including *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre*, the fantastic appears inexorably tied to history. A great number of intertextual references appear in the work, from characters in Chaviano's previous novels to those in classic Cuban novels, for instance *Cecilia Valdés*. Nonetheless, readers who may not have read these other works will not find this novel's plot difficult to follow. And unlike many translated contemporary Cuban novels, Andrea G. Labinger's English translation is excellent; a reader of *The Island of Eternal Love* need not be Cuban or an expert on Cuban history to follow the story.

In sum, in *The Island of Eternal Love*, Daína Chaviano succeeds in fusing fantasy, history and romance. In this most recent novel, Chaviano presents readers with a fictionalized account of pre-1959 Cuban history told from the perspective of the women who lived through these various epochs. The novel's plot is straightforward, the language is clear and the historical references are accurate. *The Island of Eternal Love* is a skillfully written, captivating novel that any reader interested in Cuba and its complex history will enjoy.



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