



Hispanista: Interview with Daína Chaviano

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Published online in Uptown Literari on April 22th, 2010 ([Part 1](#)) and on May 7th, 2010 ([Part 2](#)).
Access July 27th, 2013

Part 1

Daína Chaviano is a Cuban writer living in Miami; she writes science fiction and fantasy books, with themes that are inescapably tied to reality. In this first part of our interview with her, Daína talks about her new life in Miami, her thoughts on Cuba and politics, her writing style, and the writers that inspire her.

Hispanista: You have lived in Miami since 1991: Why did you leave Cuba?

Daína Chaviano: There came a time when I felt I could not write what I wanted without posing a danger to myself. I had to take care of what I said. I hid to avoid signing those letters that the government forces artists to sign, saying they condemn this or that, even if one disagrees. It was very hard. I could not continue to live in a place where I was forced to say what I didn't want to say. I always refused to do it, but there came a time when I got tired of hiding and decided to leave.

H: How has Miami treated you so far? How has the change affected or changed you?

DC: Miami has been a shelter that I will always be grateful for, even for someone like me (who likes to live in cities with centuries of history and culture) it is



sometimes a bit dry. That is why I barely leave my house and I live enclosed in my books. I have some friends with whom I meet. And when I can I travel, especially to Europe. Nevertheless, I have learned many things in this city. For example, I was able to keep enough distance to understand certain things about Cuba and what it means to be Cuban. This has been important in writing the novels in my series *La Habana oculta* (The Occult Side of Havana). As one of the characters in my novel says: “A country is like a painting. From afar it’s better distinguished.”

H: How has your writing changed since you left Cuba? In other words, is what you write in Miami different than what you wrote in Cuba? Do you write with a different voice and/or purpose now?

DC: I think writing is always changing over the years because of maturity. This does not mean that there aren’t any features of a writer that don’t remain forever. In my case, having left Cuba gave me new experiences that are reflected in my books. However, at heart, my essence as a writer and as a human being remains the same. I remain passionate about fantasy, the paranormal, magic, mysteries of the universe, quantum physics, science fiction, ancient history, mythology ... I could not say that I write in a different voice, but I still do it for the same reasons I did when I was in Cuba: to find answers, to show alternatives to the reality we live, to discover through my stories what I can not find otherwise. For me, writing is a tool for personal search and reflection of what surrounds me.

H: In *The Island of Eternal Love* one of the stories points to disillusionment with the Cuban revolution, considering the latest events in Cuba (the hunger strikes, Las Damas de Blanco, etc.) Will you continue to include these political themes in your writing?

DC: I am currently writing a novel that is halfway between Cuba and myth—something that has been the tone of the novels in *The Occult Side of Havana* series. I don’t like to mix my political opinions or actions with literature. In fact, although I have actively participated in campaigns for the release of political prisoners or in favor of the Ladies in White, I never talk about that in my interviews, unless I get asked. To be honest, I hate talking or writing about politics in public -- an exasperating issue for me because I never find solutions to the problems it presents. That is why, if any of my novels touch some political issue, it is only because the plot forces me. It is never my goal as a writer. In the novels of



the aforementioned series I tried to describe some of the disasters in which I was born in and lived. But politics is not what interests me, it is the human being and their spiritual development, their psychology, their ability to confront problems and maintain the mystical heritage of their soul, despite the worst circumstances. Most of all, I'm interested in those magical, paranormal and unexplained universes that surrounds us, full of mysterious events that I myself have been exploring and experimenting for years. These appear in all my novels, no matter if they take place in Cuba, Miami, another planet, or Atlantis.

H: You use fantasy and the supernatural in your writing. How is your writing style different from Magical Realism? Is it in any way similar?

DC: I know very little about magical realism for one reason. The few novels I know, classified as such, have not given me much enthusiasm. Indeed, sometimes it puzzles me when someone says that my latest novel is magical realism, when in fact I wrote it using the same resources I apply in my fantasy and science fiction books. Critics are inclined to think that if a ghostly element is placed in a Caribbean setting it must be magical realism, but I could have placed that same plot in the Scotland of Mary Stewart. Maybe then they would have understood that this is a Gothic novel. In fact, I've said elsewhere that the novels of The Occult Side of Havana series belong to what I call "Caribbean gothic," a term I've used to classify my own books, because no critic has managed to do it. The truth is that the ways in which the characters in these novels act, and the things that happen to them, do not differ much from some situations in my fantasy books. My literary tropics, nevertheless, is a very different from the usual settings in the magical realism novels. In my tropics, gods and mythical creatures belonging to other regions converge on the island for the same reason as mortals – they are seeking shelter or fleeing from their own misfortunes, and they come mostly from Europe.

H: Which authors have influenced your writing?

DC: Ray Bradbury, William Shakespeare, Margaret Atwood, Sigmund Freud, Anaïs Nin, Milan Kundera, Ursula K. LeGuin, Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, some romantic and occult writers, like Yeats, and especially the anonymous authors of ancient texts related to Greek, Roman, Sumerian, Egyptian, Hindu, Pre-Columbian, and Celtic mythologies



H: What are your favorite themes to write about?

DC: I'm interested in mythology, ancient history, parapsychology, magic, searches of all kinds, mysteries associated with life after death, reincarnation, the sublimation of love ...

H: Whom do you write for? Who is your audience?

DC: I have no idea. I never intend to write for a specific audience. If I ever think of the readers it is to ask myself if they would understand what I am trying saying, but I never think of them in terms of age, gender or country.

Part 2

Hispanista: What inspired you to write the story (or I should say, stories) in *The Island of Eternal Love*?

Daína Chaviano: I had always meant to write a conclusion for my series, a novel that would include the protagonists of my previous novels. But I was not sure how to do it. Then, one night, I was with some friends in a night club at Little Havana (the same bar that appears at the beginning of the novel), and I was watching one of those old musical clips described in that chapter. I felt the urge to tell the story of a lonely woman from another time —the same time from those musical clips. I took a half-wet napkin and, in the dark, while my friends where dancing, I scribbled some lines. Then I realized I was writing the beginning of the novel I wanted to write.

H: How long did it take you to write it? Did you have to do a lot of research for it?

DC: It took me almost seven years. There was a lot of historical research, but also a lot of work in terms of plot structure. Also, in those days I was still working as an editor in a magazine, so I did not have much time to write.



H: A lot of people know you as “the writer of *The Island of Eternal Love*,” and some don’t realize you wrote a lot of other books before this. Why do you think this particular novel became so successful?

DC: Well, this only happens among my English-speaking readers. My Spanish readers had known me for some years after my previous novels. I think there might be several reasons why this novel has appealed to such a global audience. It is a story that travels around the world, throughout three continents, and spans more than 150 years. Also, the plot covers a lot of genres. It includes a ghost story, some historical and genre issues, love stories, paranormal phenomena... But I think the main reason is the characters themselves. In their letters and emails, the readers always talk to me about how they love the characters, even the nonhuman creatures. In one way or another, they find them very appealing

H: Is your family and heritage in any way similar to Cecilia’s family and heritage? Are you in any way like Cecilia?

DC: No, my family does not have anything to do with Cecilia’s heritage, although each author (and I am not the exception) many times builds their characters based on some aspects of his or her personality. Cecilia has a little bit of me, although my life does not resemble Cecilia’s.

H: Cecilia seems to represent a group of young immigrants (or children of immigrants) that turn their back to their heritage, and Cecilia is in a way forced to face it because of the phantom house and the woman at the bar; did you do that on purpose? Or is that just my interpretation?

DC: Cecilia’s personality represents a trend that is usual among the Cuban immigrants of recent generations. When we arrive to US, many of us are so tired of Cuban politics that we spend some years trying to forget about it. But at the end our own personal ghosts (i.e. the family and friends we left behind, and our own memories) compel us to look back and evaluate our past from a different and new perspective. Something similar happens to Cecilia, although her particular circumstances are very peculiar.

H: Did you write *The Island of Eternal Love* with Cubans like Cecilia in mind? Did you want to inspire Cubans to connect with their heritage?



DC: I never intended to inspire anyone to do anything. I just wanted to tell a story about this girl that is trying to avoid her past and her heritage because she is worn-out by her experiences, but at the same time she is surrounded by strange events. At the same time, I wanted to write a story where the life of an immigrant, always so lack of poetry and mystery, would be immersed in ghosts, imps, and paranormal phenomena –something that is part of my own experience. I have always lived a double life, not only here but also in Cuba, because I have always been in the middle of political upheavals while my inner self is witnessing paranormal events. I wanted to give other persons an idea about how this world (my world) is.

H: In your opinion, what is the message or theme of *The Island of Eternal Love*?

DC: I think a book has as many messages as readers. Each person must look for what the story or the characters might reveal to him or her.

H: You told me you are in the middle of a new novel: can you tell us a little bit about it? Is it similar to *The Island of Eternal Love*?

DC: I prefer not to talk about any book I am writing. If I do, I can lose the energy I put in this book. I can only tell that it will be completely different from *The Island of Eternal Love*. The only similarity would be the mixture of history and certain unexplained events, although the time and plot of this novel will not have anything to do with the previous book.

