Helen Oakley


Perhaps more than in any other Latin American country, crime fiction has played an important role in recent Cuban literature and society. Following Fidel Castro’s (in)famous speech at the closure of the “Primer Congreso Nacional de Educación y Cultura” in April 1971, literature came to be perceived as a weapon of the Cuban Revolution. As a result, tight control of journals, publishing houses, and literary awards followed, as well as strenuous promotion of specific genres, like crime fiction, considered especially appropriate in the Revolution’s fight against capitalism. In 1972, the MININT (Internal Affairs Ministry, which included Cuban Intelligence Services) created a literary award to stimulate the production of crime fiction in the country; this award, coupled with the genre’s promotion by the Revolutionary cultural officials, made crime fiction enormously popular in Cuba.

Due to both the popularity and the quality of much of the crime fiction written by Cubans and Cuban Americans in the past two decades, a number of valuable critical studies have been published in the last few years. Before Helen Oakley’s book, however, no one had explored the relationship between the United States and Cuba as seen by Cuban and Cuban-American writers, so this thoroughly researched and carefully written monograph is particularly welcome.

The first chapter of *From Revolution to Migration* summarizes the origins and development of Cuban and Cuban-American crime fiction; the remaining four are devoted to the crime fiction of Leonardo Padura, José Latour, Alex Abella, and Carolina García-Aguilera. A somewhat too brief preface and conclusion complete the volume.

The first chapter reads extremely well, and Oakley should be commended for not being overwhelmed by the large number of sources she has reviewed. She discusses the use of British and American models in Latin American crime fiction, a topic that she revisits throughout her book. She then turns to some of the most influential studies in this area, written by Jorge Luis Borges, Carlos Monsiváis, Ilan Stavans, Ana María Amar, Persephone Braham, and Glen S. Close, among others. Finally, she focuses on Cuban crime fiction, tracing its history, especially during the revolutionary period, with clarity. Both experts in the topic and newcomers will find this chapter very useful, and it will no doubt become a staple reading in relevant university courses.

In Chapter 2, however, Oakley makes the puzzling decision to include writer Leonardo Padura in her study. Although Padura is undoubtedly the most suc-
cessful Cuban crime fiction writer and has, more or less singlehandedly, transformed Cuban crime fiction with his Cuatro Estaciones tetralogy, his attention to U.S.-Cuban relationships and migratory issues—the main focus of Oakley’s study—is minimal. In contrast, the novels of Jose Latour, Alex Abella, and Carolina García-Aguilera deal extensively with the relationship between the United States and Cuba, and the changing identity of first and second generation Cuban migrants. Possibly not unrelated to this issue, Oakley refers rather excessively to other studies of Padura’s novels, at times almost drowning out her own voice. The following three chapters are quite different, offering numerous interesting insights into the authors analyzed and their representation of Cuban-U.S. relationships and exilic and migratory experiences.

In her reading of crime fiction by Jose Latour, a Cuban-born author who migrated in the 1990s, first to the United States and then to Canada where he currently lives, Oakley discusses Outcast (1999), Havana Best Friends (2002), and Comrades in Miami (2005) with nicely placed references to Latour’s only essay to date, Postcommunist CUBA Poscomunista (2005). As she points out, Latour “spans the categories of Cuban, Cuban American, and Cuban exile” (p. 76), a tension he clearly reflects in his novels, offering readers plenty of food for thought. Her discussion of the themes of the journey and the trauma of emigration, ethnic identity, and sibling rivalry are particularly impressive, as is her exploration of the reference to Shakespeare’s The Tempest, and its link to Fernández Retamar’s Caliban, José Enríquez Rodó’s Ariel, and the Revolutionary ideology.

Oakley’s takes on Abella’s Charlie Morell and García-Aguilera’s Lupe Soriano series are also interesting. She pays special attention to Abella’s use of magical realism (certainly innovative in a genre so often stifled by convention), the representation of Afro-Cuban religions and black characters, and the detective’s journey of discovery of his own ethnic identity throughout the series. For me, the highlight of this book is the chapter on García-Aguilera—a thorough discussion of a detective series that has been labelled as both feminist and antifeminist, and in which the representation of the so-called “generation 1.5” (those who were born in Cuba, but migrated to the United States as children) is equally problematic. Oakley’s effort to avoid taking a black or white stance on García-Aguilera’s series as feminist or antifeminist, conservative or liberal, allows for the possibility that both attitudes can co-exist in her writing. The result is a refreshingly subtle and convincing study that will help readers appreciate the contradictions in García-Aguilera’s crime fiction.

From Revolution to Migration is a welcome addition to the study of Cuban and Cuban-American crime fiction, establishing clear links and adding to the ongoing debate on postnationality and cultural hybridity. It will be useful for
experts in the field, university students, and readers interested in constructions of masculinity, femininity and ethnic identity.

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