

## BOOK REVIEW

### *The Death of Fidel Pérez*

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*The Death of Fidel Pérez.* By Elizabeth Huergo. Lakewood, CO: Unbridled Books, 2013. Pp. 296. \$22.50 (Hardcover).

Elizabeth Huergo's background as a poet and short story writer imbues her first novel with a welcome lyricism, a well structured narrative, and a plot that is easy to follow. Through its excellent narrative technique—metaphors, similes, the personification of the city of Habana, and frequent use of flashbacks—the novel takes the reader to the present, the past, and the future of the city. Habana stands as a city anchored in a colonial past, fighting to justify its presence in Cuban history. Threaded through the novel are the lives of various Cubans, representing the many different social locations of those affected directly and indirectly by the dictatorial past as well as by the effects of the Cuban Revolution. Huergo creates dynamic and rounded characters that grow and change in the aftershock of a revolutionary history.

The Batista era and the Cuban Revolution provide a backdrop to the novel. With traces of the narrative techniques of great Cuban and Latin American writers, the novel begins with a death announced—that of Fidel Pérez and his brother Rafael. The fall of Fidel Pérez and his brother Rafael from a balcony of an unnamed Havana street on a historic day for Cuba becomes, ironically, the catalyst for an entire revolution against the regime of Fidel Castro. Convinced that it was Fidel Castro and his brother Raúl who fell, owing to the shout of “Fidel has fallen,” the cautious Havanans start to stir from their lethargy and

walk “To the Plaza de la Revolución” (21). It is through the fictive death of this pair that the city awakes and starts to nervously dream of, if not entirely believe in, change. With great skill, Huergo portrays two generations of Cubans who overnight are confronted, once again, with an uncertain future.

Huergo’s story focuses on two central characters: Saturnina and Pedro. Both are clearly affected by the historical and politico-social changes and represent character types in so much as, while the novel paints their personal histories, these become collective as the novel progresses. Saturnina, an old Cuban woman who walks through the streets of Havana while crying for the disappearance of her son at the hands of the Batista regime, represents not only Cuba’s past, but its future. Huergo, echoing Latin American magical realism, confers on this protagonist the ability to listen to the dead and predict the future. The portentous words of Saturnina offer a prophecy of the possibility of change: “What has been done would be undone” (15). Saturnina proves to be the central thread of the story. Another key character, Pedro, a university history professor, lives haunted and tormented by the guilt he feels for having betrayed his friend Mario in order to save himself from certain death in prison. Pedro is a reflection of that Cuban who feels rooted to a stormy past that denies him any possibility of personal liberation. In this way, and through these characters, Huergo achieves a collective rememorization of a turbulent and not so remote period in history.

It would be reasonable to suggest that *The Death of Fidel Pérez* has similarities in theme, construction, and character development with *La Habana es una ciudad bien grande* (1980), the collection of brief portraits by Huergo’s fellow Cuban, Mirta Yáñez. Both works use the city of Habana as a historical witness and protagonist, and dwell on the themes of collective experience, suffocation, anguish, fear, and anxiety. With the critical eye of the émigré, Huergo delivers

a fierce attack on—as well as a field study of—“the Cuban problem” in all its complexity. Her novel is a worthy addition to the field of “Latina/o studies” in general, but also to university courses in history, sociology, and creative writing, as it offers both a comprehensive approach to contemporary Cuba, and a story narrated with rich, evocative and poetic language.

Huergo creates a story that feeds on its memories to imagine what is not even dreamed of. *The Death of Fidel Perez* is, overall, an excellent dramatization of Cuban history and the devastating effects of the past on the collective Cuban psyche. “Cayó y calló/He fell silent and he fell” (283) shouts Saturnina, and with her the whole Cuban people who have shrugged off their lethargy and begin to imagine anew.