

Book Review:
A Simple Havana Melody

Oscar Hijuelos
by
Henry Pérez, Ph.D.

Oscar Hijuelos, the Pulitzer Prize winner for *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, has written another great novel. In some ways it is his best work yet. It probably will not become as famous as *The Mambo Kings*, where Desi Arnaz (Ricky Ricardo), the best known Cuban in the United States, gives the novel a mixture of the television world of “I love Lucy” and the night life of a couple of Cuban musicians in the United States. *The Mambo Kings* became a successful Hollywood movie, it is doubtful that the same will happen with his latest book.

A Simple Havana Melody is Hijuelos sixth novel. Before *The Mambo Kings* he writes *Our World in the Last World*, the story of a Cuban child who forgets Spanish as he grows up in New York and the identity crisis that follows. After *The Mambo Kings* comes *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien*, a novel that describes life in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century and the travails of a young man in a Cuban-Irish family. *Mr. Ives' Christmas* deals with religious doubt, and the eternal question: why do bad things happens to good people? The *Empress of the Splendid Season* concerns itself with economic upheaval and the many difficult adjustments that have to be made when personal financial situations change completely for the worse.

Oscar Hijuelos' books tend to have certain characteristics in common. There is always a Cuban character in the work, reflecting the author's ethnic background. There tends to be a strong dose of sexual energy. Lurking in the main character's mind resides an existentialist angst ready to surface at times of tribulation. Reality is a mixture of fiction and history and it is difficult to tell them apart without a great deal of historical research. And always, always, there is the joy of Hijuelos' writing style which swings constantly from poetic rhapsody to the non-poetic reality of everyday slang.

A Simple Havana Melody begins in 1947, with the return of Israel Levis, a Catholic Cuban composer, who returns to his beloved Havana after having survived the Nazi concentration camps in France due to his Jewish name and ancestry. Most of the action in the novel is presented through flashbacks that retell his beginning as a composer of classical and popular music. After one of his popular songs becomes an international success, his career never fades, the money from his big international pop song supports his work in classical music. However, history intrudes itself for the worse and his forbearers' ancient faith makes him a victim of Hitler's racist rage.

Although one is aware, from the beginning, of the tragedy that awaits Levis in the concentration camps, the reader is nevertheless eager to compare the two Levises—the joyful musical genius during his musical apprenticeship and triumphs, and the psychologically damaged idealist who

returns to his native land unable to ever compose again. Youth's idealism is a joy to watch, but it is tragedy that is heroic in life just like in fiction. *A Simple Havana Melody* proves the point that a novel is so much more than a plot; the reader knows from the first page what the ending will be, however the reader is unable to put the book down, because the author has created a bygone era that is worth reliving. Hijuelos has the reader traveling back in time, not only for its joy, but also for the lessons that history teaches, so that those mistakes won't be repeated again, in the present. No happy ending, but still what a joy it is to see a novelist when he is at the top of his profession.

Biography

Henry Pérez, Professor of Foreign Languages, is a native of Cuba. He graduated from the University of Massachusetts at Boston with a double major in English and Spanish. He received his Ph. D. in Spanish and Latin American Literature from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Dr. Pérez is a former chair of the Department of Modern Languages at Manchester College in Indiana. He has taught at Henderson since 1991.

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