Cristina García
American Novelist (1958 -)

Author(s): Persis M. Karim (San José State University.)


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Table of Contents: Biographical and Critical Essay

Dreaming in Cuban
The Agüero Sisters
Monkey Hunting
Writings by the Author
Further Readings about the Author

WORKS:

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS


OTHER


BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY:

Cristina García is one of several late-twentieth-century Cuban American writers whose work represents the experiences and issues of a generation of Cuban-born children who immigrated with their families to the United States after the Cuban Revolution in the early 1960s. Her novels contribute to a body of writing that has been considered the literary "coming of age" for Cuban American literature. García's first novel, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), received widespread acclaim and has exerted a tremendous influence on the ways that American readers understand the complexity of the Cuban American immigrant and exile experience. Reviewers from publications such as *Time* and *Publishers Weekly* praised the novel as a literary tour de force for its ability to capture the experience of "living
between two cultures." For García, *Dreaming in Cuban* established her writing career and marked her entry into the American multicultural literary scene.

García was born on 4 July 1958 in Havana, Cuba, to Francisco M. García, a cattle rancher, and his wife, Esperanza Lois García. Like many members of Cuba's middle and upper classes, after the establishment of Fidel Castro's government and the experience of confiscation of private property and vilification by the new regime, the García family left Cuba in 1960 for a life of exile in the United States. The family settled in New York City, where they had relatives, and established a small restaurant. García grew up in the Brooklyn Heights neighborhood, where she attended the Dominican Academy. She graduated from Barnard College at Columbia University in 1979 with a bachelor's degree in political science. While studying at Barnard, she continued working in her parents' restaurant. García later entered the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore with the goal of working in the Foreign Service.

Although García earned a master's degree in European and Latin American studies, a strong interest in writing led her to a career in journalism. In the early 1980s García worked for several prominent publications. She began her journalistic career as an intern at the *Boston Globe* and later worked for United Press International, *The Knoxville Journal*, and the Washington, D.C., bureau of *The New York Times*. During the 1980s and early 1990s García worked as a correspondent at *Time* magazine in New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. In 1990 García married Scott Brown, with whom she has a daughter, Pilar García-Brown. A one-year position as the *Time* bureau chief in Miami (1987-1988), reporting news and features on Florida and the Caribbean, nurtured her burgeoning interest in writing about her family and their heritage. Journalistic writing, however, proved to be too restrictive for García. She then turned to fiction as a venue to bring the images and memories of her childhood and the stories of Cuban immigrants to life.

The populous and vibrant Cuban American population of Miami had a strong impact on García, reawakening her interest in Cuban culture and reconnecting her to memories of her family on the island. In 1984 García returned to Cuba to confront these memories and to meet many of her relatives for the first time. Five years later, the trip still haunted García. She equated meeting her family members to "finding a missing link in my own identity." Early in 1989 García set out to write *Dreaming in Cuban*. The publication of the novel three years later initiated her into a group of writers and artists of Cuban origin that Gustavo Perez-Firmat, a scholar of Cuban American culture, has called "one-and-a-halfers"--those Cuban Americans born in Cuba but who have lived a majority of their lives in the United States and are, to some extent, marginal to both Cuban and American culture.

Some critics have referred to *Dreaming in Cuban* as a feminist novel, despite the fact that García does not view herself as a feminist writer. The novel chronicles aspects of the Cuban diaspora from the point of view of three generations of women who experience their national and cultural status as Cubans through the periods of revolution and exile. The novel begins with an image that stayed with García long after her trip: a woman sitting on her porch by the sea, scanning the Cuban coast for invaders. In the novel, members of the extended del Piño family struggle to make sense of their personal, historical, and political
circumstances as a result of the Cuban Revolution. Moving between Cuba and New York, the novel focuses on Celia del Piño, the matriarch of the family, who stays behind in Cuba; her vehemently anticommunist, procapitalist daughter Lourdes, who runs the Yankee Doodle Bakery in Brooklyn; and Pilar, Lourdes's daughter, who has assimilated into American culture and rebels against her parents and their rigid political and largely anti-Castro views. As she comes of age, Pilar experiences a longing to know Cuba firsthand. Based loosely on García's life, the novel depicts the strong emotions evoked by exile, nationalist disillusionment, and alienation with which many Cubans, both in the United States and in Cuba, have had to deal. As Ibis Gomez-Vega asserts:

The only one of Celia's descendants who shares Celia's generosity is Pilar, who makes the journey home to Cuba and to Celia only to find out that she cannot live in Cuba. Life in the United States has made her less a Cuban than a New Yorker, and she chooses to leave Cuba all over again although she realizes that she may never see her grandmother again. The journey home is often as disturbing as the life lived in exile, for one risks finding out that the dream of going home can never be made real.

The characters in *Dreaming in Cuban* struggle to maintain their connections to family, culture, and nation, despite the ideological rhetoric that has divided Cuban families on both sides of the Straits of Florida.

*Dreaming in Cuban* challenges readers to understand the Cuban American experience not only as a single event of a national migration but also as an attempt to grapple with the historical disruptions of the revolution and the ensuing American blockade of the country. The novel also suggests the deeply scarring events of the Cold War and the impact of anticommunist fervor on populations whose nations were affected by policies of this period. *Dreaming in Cuban* demonstrates the ways that families can be divided politically and geographically yet still remain united. The novel highlights strong nationalist sympathies, which were evoked by the ideological fallout from the 1959 revolution that eventually changed the nature of Cuban life. García's narrative voices have drawn readers in part because of the style in which they are written. Rather than featuring a single narrator, *Dreaming in Cuban* is written through a polyphonic, multivocal narrative that suggests the impossibility of representing a single truth about the Cubans and their experiences with revolution and emigration, which are two of the single most important historical events for Cuba in the twentieth century. The novel also highlights Cuba's interesting cultural mix of Catholicism and Santeria, a religion that was brought to the island by African slaves centuries earlier and that features magic spells, incantations, and sacrifice as elements of ritualistic practice.

*Dreaming in Cuban* received favorable reviews and was hailed as an accomplished first novel. Several reviewers found García's attempt to consider several generations of Cubans an innovative and important literary device that diffused the inflammatory political rhetoric surrounding Cuba. Laura Cumming commented in *The Guardian* (19 November 1992): "For humility aside, this fervent tale of patriotism, voodoo, reincarnation and passion has a sophisticated politeness about it, a tactfulness that diminishes unpleasantness in favor of delicate poetry." Cumming observed that the intertwined narratives of grandmother, daughter, and granddaughter complicates the singular image of Cuba as either island
paradise or communist bastion by creating a narrative that offers a "dutiful pluralism in which Garcia makes no judgements." While some reviewers praised García's fragmented style and the use of diverse female voices to narrate the story of Cuba and its complex and painful history for Cubans both at home and abroad, other reviewers found this polymorphous prose difficult to follow. The reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews* (1 January 1992) called the novel a "patchwork of incident, memory, letters, dreams and visions."

While García's work shows the influence of other Latin American writers and the stylistic qualities of magical realism embodied by an earlier generation of writers such as Gabriel García Marquez and Mario Vargas Llosa, it moves beyond these forms to tackle the difficult social and political issues that are characteristic of the Cuban American experience. When asked by an interviewer whether she considered herself a magical realist writer, she answered that indeed she was "influenced by magical realism as it exists in contemporary Latin American fiction and elsewhere."

García's first novel was instrumental in breaking into a new niche within the Latino literary world: her novel, unlike those of an earlier generation of Cuban American writers, is written in English and translated into Spanish. García, who grew up speaking and reading Spanish at home but English at school, is acutely aware of the changing demographics in the United States that indicate by the year 2010 Hispanic Americans will become the largest minority group in the nation. Her commitment to writing in English also stems from her desire to convey the Cuban American experience to an English-speaking audience. In a *Newsweek* article on Latino writers, she expressed her growing sense that as Latino immigrants make their way in the United States and become better educated, "there is going to be more good writing [in English] surfacing" (April 1992).

*Dreaming in Cuban* was a finalist for the National Book Award, and an excerpt was anthologized in *Iguana Dreams*, a volume of Latino fiction, that same year. García's success as a writer of fiction won her the 1992-1993 Hodder Fellowship at Princeton University and the Cintas Fellowship from the Institute of International Education. From 1992 until 1995 García taught courses in creative writing at the Los Angeles and Santa Barbara campuses of the University of California. Since 1995 García has been teaching in the English department at the University of Southern California, near the home she shares with her daughter. With the success of *Dreaming in Cuban*, García set out to write a second novel, which she later shelved, and instead began writing *The Agüero Sisters* (1997). A 1994-1995 Guggenheim Fellowship augmented her ability to work on the novel.

Like its predecessor, *The Agüero Sisters* is set in Cuba, New York, and Florida and also features female protagonists. Constancia and Reina Agüero are half sisters who struggle with their relationships to their past, their culture, and their society. Constancia and Reina share the same mother, whose cause of death remains a mystery to everyone but Constancia's father, Ignacio, who killed himself shortly after his wife's death. This novel delves into García's concern with the deep divides between Cuban immigrants and those who remained behind on the island and their attempts to reconcile both personal and national history with memory. Constancia leaves Cuba to go to the United States, where her husband, Heberto, is working as a cigar salesman in New York; he reserves the finest (albeit
illegal) Cuban cigars for his best customers. They have two children and eventually retire to Florida to join fellow Cuban expatriates. Shunning "their habit of fierce nostalgia, their trafficking in the past like exaggerating peddlers," Constancia dislikes the Key Biscayne Cubanas.

Reina lives in Cuba, where she works as a talented electrician and remains fiercely loyal to her mother and stepfather's memories. When a lightning strike unsettles Reina's life, she decides to go to Miami to see her estranged half sister. Their meeting ignites a series of divisions that are reflected in their attempts to find meaning and to reconcile their memories with their current circumstances. García presents Cuba's history in what is portrayed as the waning years of Fidel Castro's power. These historical and political events form the backdrop for these characters and their attempts to come to terms with their place in Cuban history, culture, and national memory. Like other novels by Latina authors, The Agüero Sisters deploys magical realism; it includes the mystical elements of Santeria and its impact on Cuban culture. Although García was not exposed to Santeria when she was growing up, her travels to Cuba led her to seek out more information about the religion and its practices. García has a cousin in Cuba who is a santera from whom she has learned a great deal and who has offered her the privilege of witnessing the rituals and practices firsthand.

The Agüero Sisters was praised for its refined evocations of homeland and exile. Again, García employs the same shifting narrative, whereby the complex web of events and people reveals the history not just of the two sisters but of Cuba and immigration itself. As in her previous novel, García shows the intransigence of politics that keep families apart and distant, focusing on the human costs that prevent these two sisters from knowing each other. Alejandra Bronfman in The Washington Times (25 May 1997) commented: "The story of the convergence of all these characters, as they zero in on Miami and on their shared past, is told in many registers, and the novelist's deft maneuvers through them reveal a brilliant send of narrative. She moves seamlessly from the subtle ambiguities of emotion to Miami's raucous absurdity and overabundance, surprising us with lively satire." Other critics, however, found García's second novel more elusive and difficult than the first. Several reviewers criticized her overly wrought use of magical realism. Overall, the critical reception for The Agüero Sisters was positive, but the novel did not quite make the same impression as Dreaming in Cuban.

García's next novel, Monkey Hunting (2003), charts the history of Chinese immigration to Cuba and the cultural influences and contributions of the Chinese community to Cuban society and culture. Protagonist Chen Pan unwittingly signs a contract as an indentured servant and is sent to Cuba in 1857, but eventually he becomes a prosperous businessman in Havana. The multigenerational story also traces the lives of Chen Pan's granddaughter Chen Fang, back in China, who disguises herself as a boy to gain an education and become a teacher but who dies in one of Mao Tse-Tung's prisons, and great-great-grandson Domingo Chen, who immigrates to the United States after Fidel Castro gains power and is then traumatized by his experiences in the Vietnam War. Reviews of Monkey Hunting were positive; one critic for Publishers Weekly wrote: "Though García ranges farther afield here than in previous works, her prose is as tight and polished as ever." Donna Seaman of
Booklist called the novel "Gorgeously detailed and entrancingly told, erotic, mystical, and wise."

García's novels situate family loyalties as the ultimate casualty of history--showing the divisions between those who have lived with the aftermath of the revolution and those who have left and found a second home in places like New York and Florida. In both of her novels, families are divided geographically and politically, and it is left to various narrators and voices to suggest the incongruity and irreconcilability of each of these narratives. With these multiple narratives and voices, García suggests that there is more than one truth and more than one way of experiencing the ruptures that have become so central to Cuban American existence and identity.

The success of Cristina García's novels has not occurred in a vacuum. Like other Latino writers of her generation, García has found a niche and audience for her work. While her novels are heavily influenced by the history of Cuban Americans and reflect the complexity of exile and immigration, her work has attained widespread appeal in part because she cuts across geographical and cultural boundaries. Unlike the writings of an earlier generation of Latino writers, García's work appeals to Anglos as well as Latinos. Her work draws on a continuing theme of American life: the need to participate in and acknowledge the multicultural texture of American society.

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Interview:

• Allan Vorda, "A Fish Swims in My Lung: An Interview with Cristina García," in Face to Face: Interviews with Contemporary Novelists, edited by Vorda (Houston: Rice University Press, 1993), pp. 61-76.

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