Fantasy Island

A novel chronicles several generations in the life of a Chinese-Cuban family.

Chen Pan’s son Lorenzo goes back to China to study herbal medicine and leaves behind a family he never sees again. Lorenzo’s daughter, Chen Fang, is raised as a boy in a Chinese village and goes on to lead a lonely life as a schoolteacher in Shanghai. Pipo, Lorenzo’s son by his second wife, is a short-order cook at the American naval base in Guantánamo Bay who escapes to New York with his druncle teen son, Domingo. While Domingo longs to return to his childhood fishing spots, he is instead shipped out to Vietnam (his great-grandfather’s voyage from Asia in reverse), where he ends up picking the remains of fellow soldiers out of breadfruit trees in the Central Highlands.

Garcia seldom writes less than beautifully, a literary daughter mind.

Consider the anemic first-person recollections of Chen Fang, Chen Pan’s granddaughter, who is stranded in China. Abandoned by her father, Chen Fang gets by dressing as a boy, takes a Frenchwoman as a lover in cosmopolitan Shanghai and ends up in the Maos’ prisons, where she utters laments like, “Instead of 100 flowers blooming, we have 10,000 bloody corpses, 10,000 pairs of vacant eyes.” Limp passages like this told us about the woman who is speaking — and even less about the events she describes. When it is revealed that her own son (whom she, in turn, abandoned long ago) is a bloodthirsty Communist official, this seems more like a stylized historical parable, decreed from on high, than an actual fact of an actual life.

Despite his harrowing early adventures, Chen Pan himself settles into a comfortable life as a paragon of stoic virtue, embalmed in a kind of literary ancestor worship. For too much of the book he exists only as a witness to the cataclysmic events — and a mouthpiece for the comforting attitudes of our own time. We’re told that Chen Pan’s friends “believed that women, and by large, were mankind’s menace” but are reassured that Chen Pan “didn’t share their views.” In one late chapter, Chen Pan finds himself on a long train ride at the peak of the Afro-Cuban uprising of 1912. As he glides back over events, his friends’ captors, Chen Pan thinks to himself, “How was it that fear so cloaked rational thinking?” and wonders, “What did any of it have to do with race?”

For all the ground Garcia covers, the most beautiful and moving parts of her novel are the chapters on Chen Pan’s youth. Sufferings. Here, horror and wonder alternate unthinkingly, as if they are randomly experienced in a dark passage. As “Dreaming in Cuban,” “Monkey Hunting” (which takes its name from one of the Chinese classics “The Journey to the West”) is shot through with the fatalism of the exile who knows he can’t go home again and is haunted by the idea of self-sufficient. On the ship from Amoy, a distraught boy kills himself by thrusting a sharpened chopstick into his ear. “In this way he stopped his regretting is, widely, all Garcia chooses to say. On the sugar plantation, desperate new arrivals stuff their mouths with dust and dirt themselves into caldrons of boiling sugar — anything to bring on oblivion.

But oblivion, Garcia reminds us, is coming for them anyway. As Chen Pan lies dying, he laments: “On the island all the trees had been chopped down, the land leveled and torn to plant more sugar cane. Forget the pines… forget the mahogany, the cedars, the indigo trees. Forget the tropics. Forget the tropics. They’re just scraping up the canopy. Forget them. Forget everything.”

Garcia’s novel is an honorable attempt to recover ancestral memories. But all her blossoms and incantations and tears don’t quite succeed in making those ancestors live again.

Jennifer Schuessler

MONKEY HUNTING
By Cristina García

By Jennifer Schuessler

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