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A concise history of Cuban crime fiction

© May 30, 2021  ⚫ Latin America, Noir, Spanish Language  ⚫ Conde, Cuba, Padura djeannerod  ⚫ Gallery  ⚫ Leave a comment
In 2015, the Princess of Asturias Award for Literature winner was the Cuban author Leonardo Padura Fuentes. The jury’s report highlighted, among other achievements, his interest in listening to “popular voices and the lost stories of others” and described his work as “a superb adventure of dialogue and freedom”. For crime fiction lovers, the granting of this award was a real boost since that genre had been questioned many times in different academic circles. Besides, although Padura has cultivated various genres, he stands out especially for being the creator of a series of detective novels starring an unusual hero or anti-hero, Mario Conde.

From his initial appearance in the 1991 novel Pasado Perfecto, Conde will be the key element around which Padura turns the tables on the crime novels written mainly in Cuba during the previous two decades. His critical, sometimes disappointed, but also lucid vision invites readers to review Cuba’s past and present, starting precisely in such complicated years as the early 1990s.

Even though crime fiction had not been profusely cultivated in Cuba before the revolutionary triumph of 1959, some texts deserve at least a brief mention. In 1926, the Social magazine published the collective novel Fantoches. Its plot is focused on the attempted murder of a young woman from a wealthy family. It is interesting to highlight how this work, written by eleven different authors, close to the grupo minorista (Alfonso Hernández Catá, Carlos Loveira, Jorge Mañach, etc.) to a greater or lesser extent, constitutes an avant-garde detective literary entertainment. In fact, it chronologically precedes a similar initiative carried out by members of the London Detection Club, such as Agatha Christie, G. K. Chesterton or Dorothy L. Sayers, captured in the 1931 novel The Floating Admiral.
Among the pioneers of Cuban detective fiction, the work of Lino Novás Calvo also stands out, especially known for the literary biography *El negrero. Vida de Pedro Blanco Fernández de Trava* (1932) and the non-generic volumes of short stories *La luna nona y otros cuentos* (1942) and *Cayo Canas* (1946). Between 1948 and 1952, Novás Calvo published eight crime stories in the Havana magazine *Bohemia*, of which he was editor-in-chief. These stories are characterised by a noirish flavour, a modality that he had defended in theoretical articles and his collected letters with Professor José Antonio Portuondo –another of the fundamental voices in the conceptualisation of the Cuban detective genre–. In addition, he gives a leading role to crime news and places the narrative focus on the revenge of the victims against their repressors. In 1991, José María Fernández Pequeño compiled these stories in the volume *8 narraciones policiales*. 
After the symbolic date of 1959, we had to wait until 1971 to find a detective novel that would achieve a broad resonance and serve as a pillar for future productions within the genre. We are referring to *Enigma para un domingo*, by Ignacio Cárdenas Acuña, a book awarded in the 1969 Cirilo Villaverde Novel Competition. Strongly inspired by the American hard-boiled novel, Cárdenas knew how to combine this foreign influence with the ideological defence of the revolutionary project. From now on, a new version of crime fiction (both detective and espionage –or counterespionage, as it is called in Cuba) would rapidly develop, adopting an apologetic tone. Thus, throughout the early 1970s, we witnessed a singular phenomenon: the creation and evolution of a new genre, that we could label as “Cuban revolutionary crime fiction”, sponsored by various government bodies (through literary competitions or mass editions). Furthermore, a corpus of critical texts that defined the genre’s features appeared at the same time, or even earlier, as the publication of the most representative works of this generic modality; works that, indeed, multiplied quantitatively in an outburst that had its epicentre in the 1970s and 1980s. Nonetheless, this multiplication of pieces contributed to its quality reduction. Another reason for the
impoverishment of this literature was the excessive weight given to the ideological message. Nevertheless, among this extensive post-revolutionary production, some authors showed enhanced literary skills, as is noticed in novels such as *Joy* (1978) by Daniel Chavarria and *Y si muero mañana* (1980) by Luis Rogelio Nogueras.

Present-day contemporary Cuban crime production is characterised by both the survival of the revolutionary and the emergence of neo-noir fiction. For its part, the revolutionary modality prolongs, in essence, the features outlined since the early 1970s and privileged in the competition Anniversary of the Triumph of the Revolution (sponsored by the Home Office), which since then has acted as one of the main instances of legitimisation and is still in force today. Among the authors faithful to this trend, Leonelo Abello Mesa stands out, having won the competition several times with titles such as *Miami: otra vez* (2006), *Misión en Langley* (2007) and *Nieve en La Habana* (2010).

Alongside this continuous revolutionary detective novel, a crime fiction linked to the Spanish-American neo-noir trend emerged and developed that, in Cuba, was initiated by Leonardo Padura Fuentes by creating the National Revolutionary Police officer previously mentioned, Mario Conde. His kinship with the neo-noir side of the genre places him alongside other detectives in Spanish and Latin American literature, such as Héctor Belascoarán, by the Mexican narrator Paco Ignacio Taibo II; Heredia, by the Chilean Ramón Díaz Eterovic; or...
Pepe Carvalho, by the Spanish Manuel Vázquez Montalbán. This aspect would grow, especially in the 1980s in the Hispanic peninsular and Latin American sphere, when the revolutionary model was still maintained in Cuba, albeit on the wane. The main features of neo-noir fiction allow the reader to look into the depths of the most corrupt and muddied side of the societies in which the crime stories are set. These plots usually place readers in front of a dark and perverse authority, ultimately responsible for the torn situation of, generally, a large city that is harassed by the economic and political upper spheres of the State.

Mario Conde made his name in the tetralogy “Las cuatro estaciones” (1991-1998), in which he had to solve four crimes committed in a Havana marked by corruption and famine in the crucial year of 1989. Subsequently, the trajectory of this character persists through five more titles: Adiós, Hemingway (2001) and La cola de la serpiente (2001; 2011), La neblina del ayer (2005), Herejes (2013) and La transparencia del tiempo (2018). While La cola de la serpiente adds a new case set in the recurring year 1989, the rest of the titles are projected forward in time to the 21st century. These works present various stories where the detective and historical genres intertwine with the life adventures of an increasingly aged Conde, who, having resigned from his job as a police officer, works as an old bookseller and occasional detective.

Other names such as Amir Valle and Lorenzo Lunar Cardedo also enrich the Cuban neo-noir scene. Valle’s biting novels comprise the “Descenso a los infiernos” series (2001-2008), which, through five titles, tells the story of the adventures of the police officer Alain Bec and the old delinquent Alex Vargas in the marginal neighbourhood of Centro Havana. On the other hand, Lunar’s raw vision is reflected in the trilogy “El Barrio en llama” (Que en vez de infierno encuentres gloria, 2003; La vida es un tango, 2005; Usted es la culpable, 2006), set in a suburb of the provincial city of Santa Clara, a series of novels starring police lieutenant Leo Martín. Finally, other writers and animators of the genre, such as Rebeca Murga, Rafael Grillo and Vladimir Hernández, stand out on the current Cuban scene.
In conclusion, the trajectory of Cuban crime fiction shows some distinctive features and others that are common to other Latin American countries. At the beginning of the 20th century, crime fiction, in a relatively incipient way, encountered its first exponents on the island. In this pioneering phase, the influences of the British tradition were mixed with the hard-boiled style, both marked by their desire to adapt the foreign patterns to the island’s atmosphere. In the 70s of the last century, the revolutionary, strongly ideologized, style emerged, which, after a solid hegemony for two decades, from the 90s onwards, shared the stage with the neo-noir style. This last version of the genre in Cuba has grown in line with its treatment in other Hispanic spheres, to the point of having acquired a significant national and international projection.

Further readings:


Translated by Laura Cabeza Muñoz

Acknowledgments:

The authors of this piece would like to mention the kind contribution of the Instituto Universitario de Estudios sobre América Latina (IEAL), University of Seville, Spain, in relation to its translation from the Spanish original version. A shorter version of this text (in Spanish) has been used as script for a podcast of the series “Háblame de CSIC”: https://delegacion.andalucia.csic.es/hablame-de-csic/ (https://delegacion.andalucia.csic.es/hablame-de-csic/). We gratefully acknowledge that the cover of the magazine *Misterio* proceeds from an original from the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí, Havana.

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