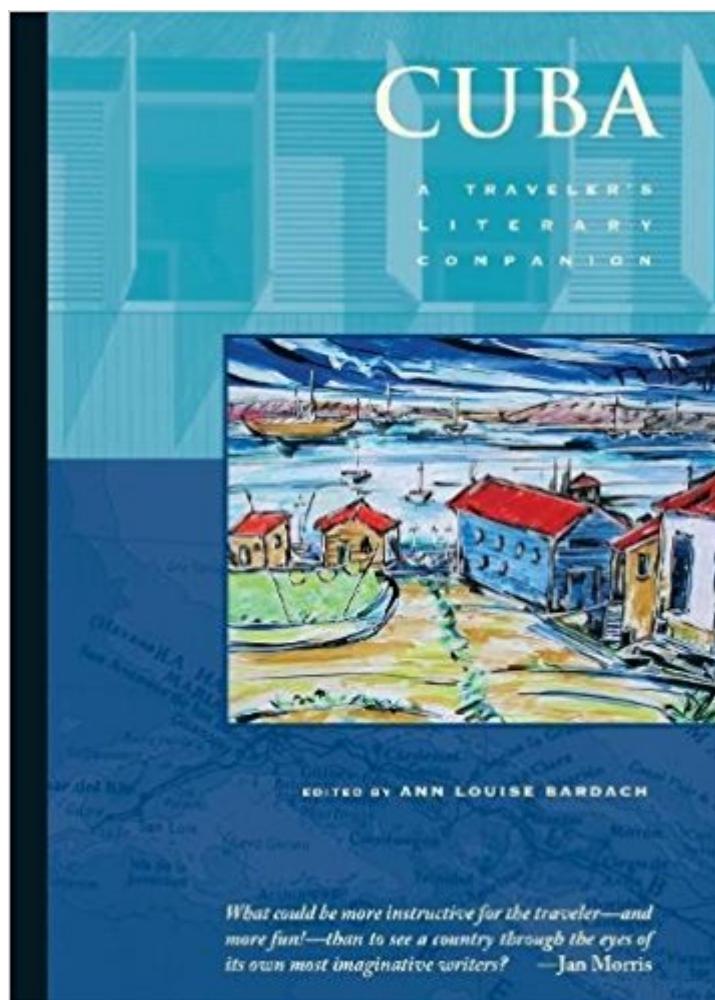


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Cuba : A Travelers Literary Companion (Traveler's Literary Companion, 8)



Synopsis

Travel to Cuba in the company of its finest writers and gain an understanding of its remarkable mystique. The twenty-one stories in this collection – some of which appear in English for the first time – will take you on an odyssey through the country's rich past to its dynamic present, where it is poised at the brink of immense change. Arranged by the areas of Cuba they illuminate, these stories offer up a rich literary banquet. Contributors include Luis Aguilar León, Maríá a Eugenia Alegría Nuñez, Uva de Aragón, Reinaldo Arenas, Richard Blanco, Lino Novás Calvo, Calvert Casey, Alfonso Hernández Catón, Josefina de Diego, Abilio Estévez, Leonardo Padura Fuentes, Cristina García, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, José Lezama Lima, Pablo Medina, Ana Menéndez, Ernesto Mestre, Mayra Montero, Achy Obejas, Senel Paz, Antonio José Ponte, and Zoé Valdés.

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Customer Reviews

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Ann Louise Bardach, Editor

An anthology of writings about the areas in Cuba tourists might most want to visit. It is a required book in preparation for a November trip to Cuba.

Book arrived soon after ordering and was in excellent condition. I have only read the introduction, but book promises insights into life in Cuba.

Interesting mix of contemporary authors.

Good read

Very helpful and informative.

The item came within the required time. I would recommend it to anyone who plans to visit Cuba anytime soon

Having been toying with the idea of travel to Cuba, I looked forward to reading Cuba: A Travelers Literary Companion. I had been enchanted by a collection of short stories from Costa Rica offered by this group. Instead, the stories about Cuba were often written by those living outside of that country and seemingly negative about returning. I do not like to say negative things about life, but this collection was too often dry and uninteresting. If it did nothing else, it definitely changed my ideas about a visit to Cuba.

This book was published in 2002 and contained 22 works by as many writers. As far as could be determined, there were 11 short stories, 9 excerpts from novels and 2 excerpts from memoirs. Of all the writers, eight were women, most of whom were living in the United States or Western Europe at the time of publication. In their relation to Cuba, the authors might be divided into three kinds. There were those who remained there throughout their careers before/after the revolution or live there now; these included Alfonso Hernández Catófalo (1885-1940), José Lezama Lima (1910-76), Pedro Juan Gutiérrez (1950-) and Senel Paz (1950-). There were those who emigrated fairly late in their careers: Lino Novás-Calvo (1905-83), Calvert Casey (1924-69), Luis Aguilar León (1925-2008), Reinaldo Arenas (1943-90) and Zoé Valdés (1959-). All of these were represented in this collection by works translated from Spanish. Finally, there were those who came to the United States or Puerto Rico early on, before starting out as writers: Uva de Aragón (1944-) and Mayra Montero (1952-), whose works here were translated from Spanish, and Pablo Medina (1948-), Achy Obejas (1956-), Cristina García (1958-), Richard Blanco (1960-), Ernesto Mestre (1964-) and Ana Menéndez (1970-), all of whom wrote in English. Most of these

were born in Cuba but left very early and grew up in the United States. Indeed, the writers who remained in Cuba throughout their careers were a minority in this collection. A large number of their stories, by the writers who emigrated, were concerned with exile, memory and loss. It appeared that more than two-thirds of the works came from the 1990s and 2000s. For the rest, the first half of the 20th century was represented by Hernández Catáñez and Novás-Calvo, the 1960s by Lezama Lima and--I think--Casey, and the 1980s by Aguilar León and Arenas. By Cuban writers inside Cuba after the revolution, there was nothing between the 1966 work by Lezama Lima and the 1990 work by Paz. As background to the writing, the editor's introduction mentioned the 1959 revolution followed by gross economic mismanagement; government oppression of writers that grew in severity from the late 1960s and was typified by the 1971 arrest of the poet Heriberto Padilla; the collapse after 1989 of the Soviet-financed welfare state; the opening of a window of opportunity for authors after the mid-1990s, with the 1996 publication of *Pillars of Salt*, an anthology of stories by women, including those in exile, and which contained casual criticism of the government, and the 2000 publication of the nihilistic *Dirty Havana Trilogy* by Gutiérrez. The editor said she'd tried to make the collection as diverse as possible, including old and new writers, both those living in Cuba and those in exile. She noted that contemporary authors rarely mentioned the state's leader or the nation's socialist experiment, but for all of them these subjects were the "unidentified elephant in the room." Among Cuban writers inside Cuba, the most interesting for this reader were Hernández Catáñez from the early 20th century, whose story followed a patriotic landowner around the turn of the century who refused to sell his sugar mill to U.S. interests after a visitation by the ghost of José Martí. From the 1990s, there were Gutiérrez's novel describing the roaches, rats and smells facing the narrator in a Havana neighborhood and Diego's interior monologue of an economist reduced to selling cigarettes on the street to make ends meet. Padura Fuentes' work showed a sour detective investigating a crime. The other works in this group were opaque or otherwise uninteresting. Among the authors who emigrated later in their careers, the pieces were uniformly strong. These included a guilt-ridden taxi driver's feverish drive through Havana during a general strike in the 1930s (Novás-Calvo), a blend of past and present as a melancholy narrator sat in a café and recalled a building that had stood there and its residents (Casey), a humorous story in which a prophet spoke on Cubans' good and bad traits (Aguilar León), a dizzying piece of writing in which an old woman, in the midst of burning down her house, recalled her deflowering by her husband (Arenas), and a moving description of childbirth (Valdés). Among the writers who grew up abroad, the most enjoyed by far was Obejas, who described beautifully the entry into the United States, the feelings of the narrator's parents for Cuba, as well as memories and the

passing of time, and Menéndez, who described an adult's trip to Cuba to find what her mother had remembered and search for roots. Most of the rest felt comparatively slight or shed much less light on the nation. The editor's introduction said that the Cuban government had denied permission to reprint works by two major writers, Alejo Carpentier (1904-80) and Virgilio Piñera (1912-79), who would've added comprehensiveness to the collection. Three others omitted were Lydia Cabrera (1899-1991), Guillermo Cabrera Infante (1929-2005) and Severo Sarduy (1937-93), who's been called the most experimental of Latin American authors, which is saying something. An older work, the Borzoi Anthology of Latin American Literature, Vol. 2 (1977), contained nine Cuban writers, including Carpentier, Cabrera Infante and Sarduy and several poets. Other collections include *The Voice of the Turtle: An Anthology of Cuban Stories* (1998) and *Cubanísimo: The Vintage Book of Contemporary Cuban Literature* (2003). Some excerpts: "It's not enough that you have made of our land a diabetic country at the mercy of neighboring markets; now you want to market the land itself, the sacred land whose sales will be thrown back at you by everyone from Hatuey to the last descendant of the last fertile Cuban womb. . . . You fought for freedom; one must fight for freedom every minute in a thousand ways" "In the mornings, when everything was fresh and new, she had thought that they had something [in Cuba] that her parents' generation had lost in exile. . . ." "All the millions of human beings who were alive at that moment and making love and deflowering virgins and sobbing . . . and eating and buying honey and thinking what I'm thinking right now and going to war and treating their sores, and of whose lives nothing remains, nothing, nothing at all, not the slightest memory, because the buildings that housed their lives have already turned to dust and the papers on which they wrote their names have disintegrated and their dust lies beneath many layers of earth" "A tongue of fire cut through the crown-of-thorns plants, carbonized the dead horse slumped across the bed of yellow irises, and broke like an incandescent wave over the guinea grass, which exploded into flame amidst the cackling hens fluttering madly in fright; the flames kept spreading; they cut through the wire fence and reached the old patch of wild pineapples, which instantly began to burn like a long wick drenched in gasoline. The fire reached the cultivated land, and the already yellowing cornfield trembled with fury, vanishing in a dark glow. . . ." "She wanted to watch me emerge from her body, and cried softly, like a cat purring. I was easy and slippery. I was detached from myself. I still am. My mother ceased being me. I ceased being her Cut off from her universe, I set out into my own. Her pain had ended. Mine had just begun. . . ." "Any single Cuban feels capable of defeating communism or capitalism, straightening out Latin America, eradicating hunger in Africa, and teaching the Germans philosophy. They forbid everyone from opining about Cuba while they generalize on the whole world . . . And they balk that foreigners cannot grasp their

simple and obvious formulas. So they live among you, and travel the earth, and can't understand why its peoples aren't like them." "And as I lie here wondering about the spectacle outside the window and the new world that awaits us on this and every night of the rest of our lives, even I know we've already come a long way. What none of us can measure yet is how much of the voyage is already behind us."

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