

Eight Brief Reviews of Literary Works

By Armando Simón

La Casa de los Naúfragos / Boarding Home / The House of the Shipwreck by Guillermo Rosales

It is a truism that the best Cuban writers, as a rule, have been ignored by other Cubans and have practically starved to death, until they finally die, at which point Cubans begin to appreciate them and tell each other what a pity what happened to so-and-so writer.

Little is known about Rosales. He left Cuba, struggled with mental illness, was a writer who unsuccessfully tried to get published by publishing presses at a time when being a Cuban-American automatically meant being ignored or demonized by the many Communists infiltrated said enterprises in America and elsewhere in the West—and continue to do so to this day (I can testify to that). Unfortunately, what makes it worse, he kept destroying his works, revising them again and again.

The House of the Shipwrecked survived because it won a local literary prize. It is a brutal autobiographical/semi-fictional narration of a boarding home for the detritus of society, the mentally ill, a place that is incredibly filthy, run by a scumbag who steals the residents' income and barely feeds them, a place where the day to day supervision is by a criminal who routinely rapes an elderly woman and steals the possessions of the residents. Rosales mentioned elsewhere that the book's writing was motivated by hatred. One can see why. Nonetheless, the writing is superb.

Translators take liberties when they translate a work of fiction, as if resentful that someone else (the original author) was a better writer than them. The title in English is

Boarding Home instead of the more accurate *The House of the Shipwrecked*. Go figure.

The Fur Hat by Vladimir Voinovich

Miaow.

Voinovich wrote great satire about the Soviet Union. In this one, he took on the Writers' Union which had expelled him a decade earlier. In this book, the protagonist is an apolitical so-so writer. When the WU announces that writers will receive a hat in appreciation for their work, it is clarified that the quality of the hat will depend on how the WU views each writer (in a utopia where everyone is supposed to be absolutely equal). He will be assigned a hat made from cat fur. Usually mild and unassuming, he goes ballistic on learning this and tries to pull as many strings as he can in order to get a hat worthy of his self-appraised worth. Throughout, we are introduced to all sorts of characters and see that anti-Semitism was alive and well in the Soviet Union.

Submission by Michel Houellebecq

A prelude to dystopia.

The main character is a literature professor in a Paris university, a devotee of Huysmans. His life is isolated, disappointing, lonely, rudderless even though he is highly ranked in academia. He goes from one sex partner after another, temporarily satisfying. At one point, he tries to revive his faith, but finds that he cannot.

In a France which has become increasingly become Muslim, the transformation of French society has gone apace with nary a peep of serious dissent. It gets to the point that the Muslim Brotherhood wins the election, through a charismatic, ever so reasonable leader, assuring everyone of his moderation. Once in power, certain changes take place in France, particularly in education, but it is all done without violence, and above

board. Nonetheless, the real France is about to vanish. Meanwhile, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Turkey are about to become part of the European Union. The main character has no strong opinions on what is going on, certainly no objections. In this, he reflects the present European zeitgeist of being rudderless, brainwashed into not fighting back against the steady, stealthy, invasion. He is dismissed from the now Islamic university, but he is welcomed back if he converts to Islam and, if he does, he will get an increase in salary, academic honors, and several wives, plus the comfort of familial stability. He sells his soul in the end, without any serious doubts.

The author presents at length the reasonable argument for Muslim values to be imposed over French society. So convincing is he that there were times that I wondered if the author was, indeed, promoting Islam, or simply presenting the way that Islam would be made presentable, if not palatable, in order to facilitate a takeover of *la belle France* and of Europe.

Incidentally, the title is *Submission*, which is the translation of the Arabic word "Islam."

Women's Voices: An Anthology of Short Stories by Indonesian Women Writers by Pamela Allen

These thirteen stories written by Indonesian female writers fill a cultural vacuum in the West. Although they are based in the archipelago, the themes that they deal with are applicable to anyone in any society (the themes of treason, fidelity, honor, love, ancestral roots, etc.). There were two stories with which I had trouble and I put it down to cultural differences, but the others were easily comprehensible and enjoyable to one degree or another. Each reader will, of course, prefer one story to the other.

It is a thin book and can be easily read through in the course of a day.

The Mahé Circle by Georges Simenon

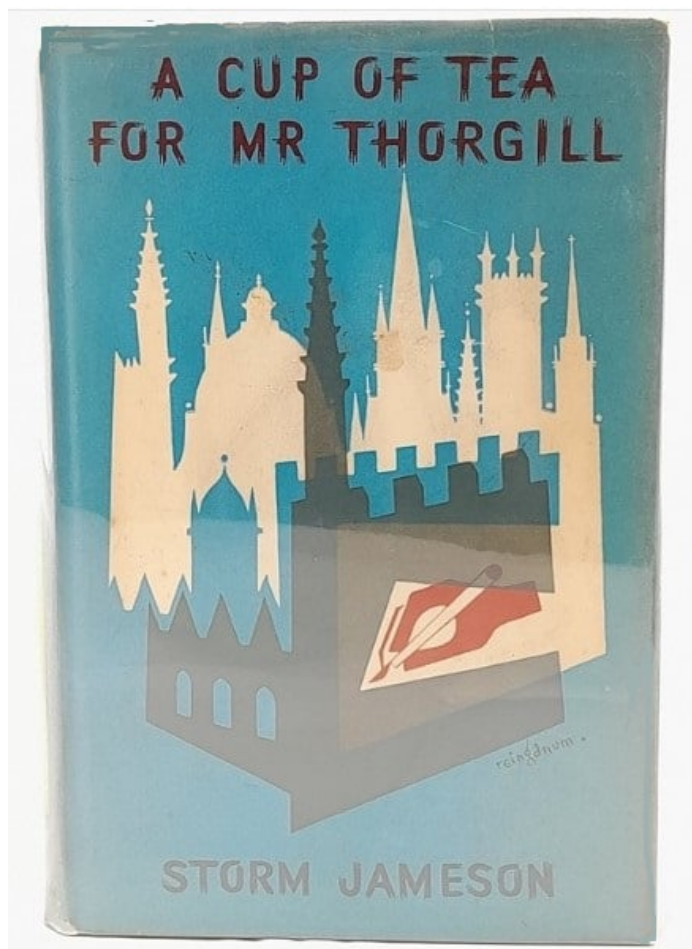
In this instance, a doctor goes on a bad vacation. He happens to see a teenage girl that he develops a slight (Lolita-like) infatuation with, but only in his mind, and the infatuation lasts for a long time. He realizes that his life is dull. He dies. That's it.

This novel is an example of the European literati belief that for a novel to be superior and elevated, it must be without a plot, it must be boring, it must be filled with pointless detail as to the setting, but above all, with endless detailing of the person's thoughts while doing nothing of consequence. Basically, a character analysis is the end-all of a European novel, all else being practically irrelevant. I wasted my time reading this plotless novel that went nowhere and got there slowly.

Your Republic Is Calling You by Young-ha Kim

The protagonist is a sleeper agent from North Korea (who has been infiltrated to the south, something that has happened several times). Years of just waiting, he thinks he has been forgotten by the regime of North Korea. He runs a small DVD rental business and is married to a woman who is constantly spreading her legs to seemingly anyone.

But suddenly, he receives a message that he must return to the north. He has been so long in the south that this message almost creates a nervous breakdown in him, and he begins to remember some of the training he had to undergo in order to fit in South Korean society as he wanders around the city, agonizing.



**A Cup of Tea for Mr.
Thorgill** by Storm Jameson

It is positively criminal that this book has been relegated to oblivion.

I am not exaggerating when I call this book a masterpiece. *Darkness at Noon* explored to a large degree the Communist intellectual's mind during Stalin's show trials. When it came out, the French Communist party tried unsuccessfully to block it. The British Communists were more successful with this book by Jameson. Koestler's work went just so far. This book takes up the slack and reveals the cold blooded, bitchy, self-righteous character of the British Marxist intellectual.

Without giving away too much of the plot, the story is set in Oxford, where one of the professors up for promotion suddenly reveals himself to have been a Marxist. This revelation is caused by an action which the Party has deemed essential, but which has filled him with revulsion. He follows it up by publishing an article stating that certain acts are elementary

immoral and cannot be brushed aside by simply using the usual clichés of the Left. Instantly, the rug is pulled out from under his feet and things go from bad to worse.

Selected Stories by Xun Lu

I have read various books by Chinese authors and, except for Lin Yutang's works, found them to be boring. Not so with this work. Lu Xun's short stories are valuable in two spheres: from a literary standpoint and from a historical standpoint.

Several of his stories are excellent. His most famous one is "The True Story of Ah Q," a very funny depiction of a neurotic individual; sometimes, the humor is lost because of cultural differences, but a lot nevertheless shows through. "A Madman's Diary" is an accurate depiction of the thoughts of an individual who has become paranoid and sees persecution and conspiracies around him. "An Incident" is an exceedingly short short story (we would now call it flash fiction) wherein a callous person is put to shame by someone lesser than him. "The New Year's Sacrifice," depicts the heartlessness in Chinese culture towards women. There are other gems as well. In the process, not only do we connect with universal human values and problems, but we are also shown cultural differences as well, something that we, in the West, are grossly ignorant of.

Hand in hand with the above is the historical standpoint. I believe that it was Croce who said that art can be a more accurate depiction of history than formal historical works. Throughout the stories we can glimpse a society that is at the border, emerging from a feudal background into the modern era, and the dislocation of values, traditions, etc. that result because of that transition.

Armando Simón is the author of *The U*.