

BEHIND THE BOOK - FIDEL'S LAST DAYS

As most of my friends, and many readers of this newsletter know, our older daughter was born with cystic fibrosis. She's doing fine now, age 17, though she's suffered through three sinus surgeries and too many visits to doctors and countless procedures of one kind or another - blood tests, chest PT, sinus washes, throat cultures, X-rays, lung function tests, etc. I wrote about this in more detail in the "behind the book" section on *A Little Love Story*. I mention it here only because it's connected to how another novel, *Fidel's Last Days*, came to be.

In the hopes of keeping Alexandra as healthy as possible, Amanda and I decided to take her (and her younger sister, Juliana, who does not have CF) out of grammar school for part of every winter. The principal at their public school, Dr. Fred Venne, was incredibly understanding and helped us arrange this without endangering the girls' academic standing.

It so happened that Writers in Paradise, a conference run by Dennis Lehane and Sterling Watson in St. Petersburg, Florida, held its classes and workshops in the last month of January. Dennis and Sterling invited me to teach there and they were gracious enough to arrange for the whole family to stay at the B&B that was otherwise reserved for faculty members.

After that week of work, we headed across state, rented a condo on Miami Beach, and, for four years in a row, passed the month of February there - a much better place than Massachusetts for a girl with cystic fibrosis to spend the coldest month of the year, and a much better place for her parents, too. (We'd first become acquainted with Miami Beach in 2004, when the poet Michael Hettich invited me to be Writer in Residence at Miami Dade Colleges.) It was a great situation for us: The salt air was healing, Alexandra wasn't exposed to the height of the cold and flu season in her classroom, and the WIP teaching defrayed some of the cost.

Because I like to talk to people I don't know (a habit about which my children often tease me), I met a number of Cuban Americans during those months in Miami Beach. Many of them had incredible stories to tell - either from their own lives or their parents'. They held an obvious affection for Cuba and its culture, an understandable anger at Fidel Castro, and they fed my curiosity about the place and its history. We had some Latin genes in common, those new friends and I, and I'd spent years living in a communist system, and the Russians had been so much of a presence in Cuba over the years - it all seemed to be pointing me toward a novel.

Fidel's Last Days is really an outlier among my books: there's not much spiritual material in it, nothing about Revere, and it has more violence and suspense than anything else I've written, with the possible exception of *The Talk-Funny Girl*.

Though I've been to Cuba since the book's publication, I never set foot on the island before I wrote *FLD*. But I did a lot of research, spoke to as many Cuban Americans as I could find, studied photographs and news reports, and asked a kindly Cuban American woman - who wishes to remain anonymous - to read the manuscript and tell me if I'd gotten anything wrong (Among other errors, I'd written pear trees into one scene; she told me there were no pear trees in Cuba).

My wife, Amanda, vetted the Spanish grammar, and I've never heard a complaint about inaccuracies.

I'll probably never write a novel like that again, but international politics and intrigue fascinate me and I was in a mood to try a different kind of writing. The central idea - an assassination plot - wasn't exactly original, but not so many suspense novels have a female main character, and I enjoyed the challenge of plot, enjoyed imagining a place I was curious about but had never seen. . . and the book has one of my favorite covers. The research also made me a good friend or two (hello Alex), and when I did get to Cuba - for *Golf World Magazine* in 2013 - I understood the strong feelings of those who had their worlds turned upside down in the revolution of 1959. Whatever injustices existed before Castro showed up - and there were plenty - not many of us could have our homes and property confiscated without holding onto an abiding bitterness. That bitterness and anger, so freely expressed on the streets of Miami Beach and Little Havana, form a central part of the story.

I think it's fairly common for writers to stumble upon their material in serendipitous ways. Most novelists I know - and I know dozens - tend to be people who pay close attention to what surrounds them, who listen carefully, and observe continually, and who have a strange urge to reform the facts of life into stories of their own making. Being in a new place always heightens my senses and helps me to pay close attention to foods, accents, faces, and stories. Maybe it's why so many writers like to travel - to keep sharpening their observations. In any case, we had some wonderful hours at Miami Beach, and now that the girls are too old to be taken out of school, we look back on those years with real appreciation and gratitude.