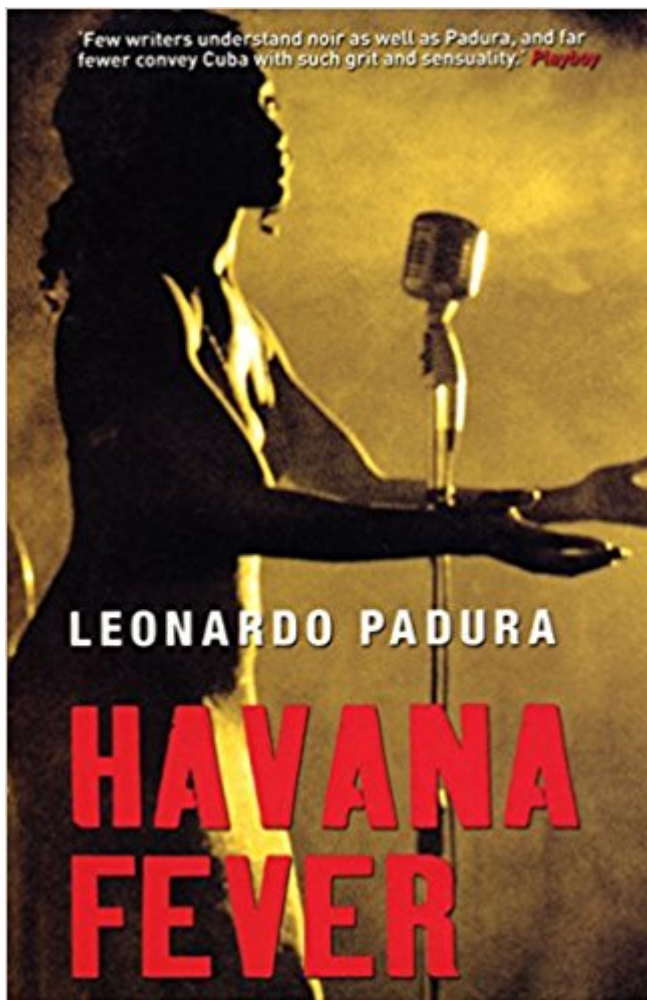




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Havana Fever



Synopsis

“The finest crime-fiction writer in the Spanish language...” –The London Times
“Full of atmosphere and descriptions to savour, this is as much a life-affirming tribute to Havana as a fine novel of death and detection.” –The Independent
“Police work is not merely a vocation but a metaphor for a futile yearning to solve the island’s deepest crimes and misdemeanours.” –Times Literary Supplement
Mario Conde has retired from the police force and makes a living trading in antique books. Havana is now flooded with dollars, populated by pimps, prostitutes, drug dealers, and other hunters of the night. In the book collection of a rich Cuban who fled after the fall of Batista, Conde discovers an article about Violeta del Rio, a beautiful bolero singer of the 1950s who disappeared mysteriously. A murder soon follows. This is a crime story set in today’s darker Cuba, but it is also an evocation of the Havana of Batista, the city of a hundred night clubs where the paths of Marlon Brando and Meyer Lansky crossed. Probably Leonardo Padura’s best book, Havana Fever is many things: a suspenseful crime novel, a cruel family saga, and an ode to literature and his beloved, ravaged island.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Part biblio-mystery, part tragedy and all brilliant, Padura’s follow-up to his Havana Quartet (Havana Gold, etc.) finds Mario Conde 14 years after retiring from the police force pursuing books instead of criminals, acting as a book scout to earn enough for food and drink. His famed intuition leads him to a decrepit mansion, its old and odd inhabitants, and to the most impressive

private library ever assembled in Cuba, untouched for 43 years. Stuck in between a book's pages, he discovers a 1960 magazine photo of a sultry singer, Violeta del R  o, who disappeared in the 1950s. Conde's curiosity turns to obsession as he tries to unravel Violeta's sad fate. The trail takes Conde into the past when Batista ruled, revolution was near and gangsters like Meyer Lansky oversaw casinos, clubs and brothels. It will also take him into the most dangerous and terrible of Havana's barrios. The glory of Cuba's biblio-history drives this exceptional novel. (May) Copyright      Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Ex-cop Mario Condo supports himself as a bookseller in Havana. When he finds a treasure trove of old valuable volumes in the mansion of a wealthy Cuban who had fled after the fall of Batista, an old newspaper clipping about a missing singer captures his fancy. Things turn ugly when the books' owner is murdered. Padura portrays the dark underbelly of today's Havana with insight and a deep sadness. Copyright      Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Havana Fever is atmospheric and captures the cultural and economic climate of present day Havana perfectly. A retired policeman now a seller of used books is drawn into the mysterious disappearance of a night club singer from pre-revolutionary Cuba and the investigation drives the plot in unexpected and fascinating directions. This is the first novel by Leonardo Padura that I've read and I was drawn to it after a recent trip to Havana. His literary skills and those of the interpreter Peter Bush are extraordinary and the descriptions of neighborhoods and conditions ring true based on what I saw there. This is a novel to get absorbed in and some of the passages are philosophical and beautifully written. In the end it was much more than I expected and I highly recommend it.

I set out to purchase the original Spanish version , but could not get it and had to settle for the English version. Much is lost in the translation, although the translator did a good job. What I did like is the way in which the author manages to describe the present situation of decay and corruption in Cuba (Havana) and weave this within the drama of the novel. Mr. Padura is a very gifted novelist. M. Garcia

There are some historical moments that have not been noted, writing this book must have taken a lot of personal courage, not because of the event but because of a tormented family that did not find peace.

Any time spent with El Conde is going to be time well spent. Thank goodness Leonardo Padura brought him back!

I think it is safe to say that I am a huge fan of Leonardo Padura, known in Cuba as Leonardo Padura Fuentes. I've reviewed several of his books on my blog at antarcticiiana (dot) blogspot (dot) com, and have posted this review here as well in the hopes of exposing more readers to his work. It's 2005, and Havana's greatest detective, Lieutenant Mario Conde, has long ago left the police force, having resigned in protest when his incorruptible mentor, Major Antonio Rangel, was made a target by the Department of Internal Affairs. In the Cuban context this means that the fictional Conde (the Count) has joined the great swirling, crowded whirlpool of the internal brain drain. The premature retirement of innumerable professors, teachers, doctors and professionals to become tour guides, translators, taxi drivers and waiters has been devastating to the Cuban state and the revolution. The abandonment of public service, and, often, the life of the mind, for the service industry and a chance to access the all-important tourist dollar has, fifteen years since the collapse of the Soviet Union and world Communism, sapped the revolutionary potential of an entire generation of Cubans. That Conde's creator, the Havana writer Leonardo Padura Fuentes, has seen fit to send his ace detective into "retirement" and out into the wilds of the dollar economy has weighty metaphorical significance. Mario's disaffection for the police force and his perennially postponed aspirations to become a writer of "squalid and moving" tales leads him inexorably into a new career as a used book dealer. It is a brilliant choice of destiny on the part of Padura Fuentes, whose detective novels always transcend their genre. For the used book-seller in Cuba is not the enthusiastic recycler of ideas and the noble guardian of our literary heritage that we sometimes imagine him to be here. (Yes, we are also familiar with the drooling ambulance chaser, picking through the estate like a crow nibbling at fresh roadkill). In Cuba, to be a used book dealer means that one is an active participant in the exportation of the country's culture, history, and patrimony. A looter, a defiler. No Cuban wanders the bookstalls of the Plaza de Armas in Havana with the wads of dollars needed to take home a musty, leather-bound tome. The client, everyone knows, is an *extranjero*, a visitor who will put that priceless volume in a suitcase and spirit it away, out of the country, forever. Padura Fuentes, whose work I've written about before, is only getting better at stacking multiple layers of meaning within the basic structure of the noir crime novel. *Havana Fever*, as the UK-based Bitter Lemon Press regrettably insists on calling their translation of *La Neblina de Ayer* (the mists of yesterday), presents, like all of its precedents, at least one robust mystery to be

solved, but the novel manages all at the same time to be a look back at the evolution and devolution of the revolution; an ode to books both as objects imbued with aura and repositories of wisdom, history, and inspiration; a chronicle of a ruined family and its satellite members; and a revelation of contemporary Cuban life. It is tempting, although perhaps excessive, to see in the vicissitudes of Mario Conde's progress a metaphor for the revolution itself. He is getting old, and is not as indestructible as he once was. The hangovers once cured with a shower and some thick, cheap home-brewed coffee now linger long into the grim day. He has grown skinny from scarcity and may be willing to do things he shouldn't, and once wouldn't have, to ensure his own survival. In *Havana Fever* even his trust in his own atheism has grown shaky: "Conde had come to suspect that the blend of aging and disillusion overwhelming his heart might finally cast him back, or just return him, to the fold of those who find consolation in faith. But the mere thought of that possibility irked him: the Count was a fundamentalist in his loyalties, and converts might be contemptible renegades and traitors, but re-conversion verged on the abominable." In this novel he is battered, beaten to a pulp and left almost for dead, but he refuses to throw in the towel. Once, he was the most incorruptible of police officers, and then the most honest and plain-talking of book dealers, but the end of this thriller will find him stashing away a cache of Cuba's most prized publications on his modest personal shelf. And weeping. I'm going to leave many of Padura Fuentes' plot threads unpicked, in that hopes that you will seize the moment and read *Havana Fever* for yourself. I'll reveal nothing of the elusive bolero-singing seductress who disappeared from the nightclub stage just as the revolution was dawning, nor of the wealthy, handsome Batista-hating Meyer Lansky crony who flew off to Miami, leaving behind a spectacular library but no forwarding address. Once one really starts to appreciate what Padura Fuentes is up to, the lurid details of the actual plot are merely a fine veneer on the surface of dense layers of allegory. Let's concentrate on the library, and the books. The logical extension of Mario's career is that he quests after libraries; his livelihood depends on those same skills with which he once solved crimes, except that now he concentrates on locating fresh supplies of ancient texts. It is a difficult task. When I was in Cuba in 2001, walking through the island, I had the impression that already every last stick of antique furniture, every jeweled brooch, every Tiffany lamp and every mahogany mantelpiece had already been removed from the country. The woman at whose bed and breakfast I lodged in Havana had a regular client from Italy who specialized in buying diamonds passed down through the generations, stepping in whenever necessity overwhelmed nostalgia. He did not visit while I was there, but nonetheless a neighbor came around once, in the hopes that someone, anyone, might purchase her mother's wedding ring. It was a squalid and moving moment. Padura Fuentes conveys the dismal dynamics of this Havana used

trade with pathos and economy: Conde, standing before a grand but tattered mansion he somehow has never noticed before, imagines that "someone must have already beaten him to it, because that style of edifice was usually profitable; past grandeurs might include a library of leather-bound volumes; present penury would include hunger and despair, and that formula tended to be a winner for a buyer of second hand goods." The brother and sister who inhabit this house, in which Mario Conde discovers the ultimate library, have already sold off "the noble bone china dinner services, repoussé silver, chandeliers..." and it is only because of a solemn, fifty-year old pledge that the books still exist. But there they are, untouched except for their ritual biannual dusting. The reverence with which Padura Fuentes has Mario Conde enter that chapel of reading and savor the spines of those all-but mythical volumes rivals the bibliomaniacal inventions of Jorge Luis Borges. Not since the Argentine master has a library been this breathtaking, important, and charged. Naturally, it is in this place that the clues to two murders await revelation. But here also is inscribed the entirety of Cuba and, perhaps, much of the author's personal cosmogeny. Mario immediately spots the Alphabetic Index of Demises in the Cuban Liberation Army "from its rare 1901 single printing in Havana," and The Coffee Plantation, which "Conde's fingers caressed even more lingeringly." These are apparently real, rare, books, but their titles alone illuminate the march of Cuban literature and history, from sugar and coffee to slavery and rebellion. Here, too, is a first edition of "El Negrero," (The Slave Trader), by Lino Novas Calvo, which I bought a couple of months ago in a painfully crumbly acidic paperback edition from an online bookseller in Venezuela, because Padura Fuentes recommended it in a 2004 "ten best" novels list. This is not the only cross-reference to the Cuban writer's other work: The previous Mario Conde novel, Havana Black, opens with two quotes. The first, from J. D. Salinger, reveals the forgotten (by me, at least) template for Conde's now five-novel predilection for all that is "esqualido y conmovedora." "I'm extremely interested in squalor," Esme tells Salinger's narrator. Now, in Havana Fever, the battered Conde, during a semi-conscious reverie as close as Padura Fuentes has yet veered towards the postmodern, encounters Salinger in an orange jumpsuit, and castigates him for no longer writing. The second quote is from José Martí - a Heredia and relates to that feeling of grim but almost sexual anticipation for the onslaught of an impending hurricane, a theme Padura Fuentes has repeatedly made his own, but which also constitutes a pivotal moment in Alejo Carpentier's Explosion in a Cathedral, suggesting that the tense and frantic waiting for a deadly but purifying cyclone constitutes an essential aspect of the Cuban character. On the last page of Fever, it is a thin but priceless volume of Heredia's poetry that Conde gives to his beloved. As usual, it's all about the reading.

Although it's a mystery it's more about the journey this former detective goes on to get to the end. It provides quite a startlingly dark view of Havana today. I enjoyed it.

I wish I could read lots more by this author. He shows us life in Cuba in a way that feels real.

Leonardo Padura is my favorite Cuban writer. I recommend Havana Fever.

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