

The Man Who Loved Dogs

Leonardo Padura, translated by Anna Kushner. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014) 576 pp.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

Western readers are not the only ones with the taste for espionage thrillers. Soviet-bloc writers—and even North Koreans—have produced them, essentially reversing the formulas we are familiar with to tell of pure-hearted communists serving the people and rescuing them from dastardly Western plots.^a The Soviet novels have been forgotten, of course, disappearing with the regime for which they served as propaganda. Cuba, however, soldiers on as a socialist paradise, and it is from there that we have a surprising new spy novel, *The Man Who Loved Dogs*, by Leonardo Padura. This is not simply a fine thriller, but one that transcends the genre, rising to the level of true literature.

The Man Who Loved Dogs is an ambitious work, one that addresses the large and consequential question of why revolutions and revolutionaries fail. The central story is the relationship between Ivan Cardenas Maturell, a writer left to work as a proofreader at a Cuban veterinary journal after falling afoul of the literary authorities, and a mysterious man he meets on the beach near Havana in the mid-1970s. The man turns out to be Ramon Mercader, the NKVD agent who killed Leon Trotsky in Mexico in 1940, and who is living out his last days in Cuba. Padura combines the stories of Ivan, Mercader, and Trotsky, setting them against the backgrounds of the Stalinist terror, the Spanish Civil War, and Cuban life from the 1970s to the 2000s. In them, he explores the motivations of revolutionaries and their ultimate disillusionment.

Padura weaves the threads of these revolutionaries' lives into a complex, sophisticated, and demanding novel. Readers versed in the history of Europe in the 1930s and the theoretical disputes among Marxists in the mid-20th

century will have an advantage. Readers who do not remember Trotsky's bureaucratic critique of Stalinism, why James Burnham and Max Shachtman broke with him, or what POUM was, might want to keep a biography of Trotsky and a history of the Spanish Civil War nearby.

Padura is a great stylist, and *The Man Who Loved Dogs* is a pleasure to read. The book checks in at just under 600 pages of dense type often unbroken by dialogue, but the prose, beautifully translated by Anna Kushner, is mesmerizing and Padura brings events and characters to life in such a way that the pages fly by. This achievement is especially striking given that Padura covers topics ranging from Marxist theoretical arguments to NKVD training and tradecraft while still working within the framework of historical events, the true timeline, and recreations of actual conversations.

The Man Who Loved Dogs is at its best as Padura builds the psychological portraits of his characters, which he uses to explore the fate of the Soviet revolution. Shortly before his murder, for example, Padura's Trotsky wonders if "all great dreams were condemned to perversion and failure." (451) Padura believes the answer is yes, and to demonstrate that, he delves deeply into his characters, seeking to understand their motives and actions. Mercader, as the central figure, gets the most attention, and Padura meticulously chronicles how this dedicated communist was manipulated by the NKVD and his Stalinist mother—although a secondary character, Padura's portrait of her alone makes the book is worth reading—to become an unquestioning assassin.

As for Trotsky, Padura shows him to be a kind and gentle man, tortured by Stalin's gradual destruction of his family and friends, but, despite all his brilliance as a theoretician, foolishly unable to comprehend how his actions during the Russian Revolution helped create the foundations of the Stalinist state. Padura shows Trotsky twisting himself like a pretzel, trying to defend the Soviet

a. For a good summary of Soviet spy thrillers, see Julie Fedor, *Russia and the Cult of State Security* (Routledge, 2011). For a discussion of North Korean spy fiction, see Stephen Mercado, "Changgom [Long Sword]," in *Studies in Intelligence* 54, No. 4 (December 2010).

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Union as the homeland of socialism while blaming its obvious faults on others. “He needed to convince himself that it was still possible to show the difference between fascism and Stalinism...that the USSR still contained the *essence* of the revolution and that essence was what had to be defended and preserved.” (388, italics in original) Even Nikolay Bukharin makes an appearance, briefly sketched as he decides to return from France to Moscow and certain death because he knows he lacks Trotsky’s inner strength and ability to live abroad under the strain of being a hunted man.

Except for Trotsky, all of Padura’s characters end up stripped of their hopes and bitterly disappointed, but at least gaining insight from their experiences. In a series of conversations, echoing Arthur Koestler’s classic *Darkness at Noon*, Leonid Eitingon, Mercader’s NKVD handler, explains to Ramon in the 1960s why he had manipulated him into a plot from which he was not supposed to have emerged alive. Eitingon says he became a revolutionary because “I had faith, I wanted to change the world, and because I needed the pair of boots they gave to Chekist agents,” but he continued on because he was a coward. “We’ve always been afraid and what has motivated us is not faith, as we told ourselves every day, but rather fear. Out of fear, many kept their mouths shut: what else could they do? But we, Ramon, went beyond that, crushing people, even killing... because we believed, but also out of fear.” (530, 522) Thus does revolutionary faith descend into cynicism.

Padura, of course, is interested not merely in criticizing the Soviet experience, but using his critique to evaluate the Cuban revolution. Padura has done this before, writing a series of detective novels that describe in detail the seamy side and deprivations of Cuban life. In fact, these novels (which are also available in English) have made Padura one of the country’s most popular authors and, with so many of Cuba’s most talented writers either repressed or in exile, one of the few with a strong international reputation who are still working on the island.

In *The Man Who Loved Dogs*, however, Padura goes much further in his criticism than in his previous books, with long passages in which he describes explicitly how the Cuban revolution and its ideology have reached the same dead end as the Soviet model on which they are based. Speaking through Ivan, Padura talks of his early faith in the revolution—“I had cut sugarcane, planted

coffee, and written a few stories pushed by the faith and the most solid confidence in the future”—and then of his gradual disillusion. (399) In the course of the story, Ivan goes beyond his own punishment to tell of the death of his brother trying to flee Cuba because his persecution as a homosexual made life unbearable; the stifling of independent intellectual life; the near starvation conditions of the 1990s; and the physical decay of the cities and towns. “We were the gullible generation,” says Ivan, looking back, “the one made up of those who romantically accept and justify everything with our sights on the future.... Now [in the 1990s], with great difficulty, we managed to understand how and why all of that perfection had collapsed.” (487–88) Padura makes sure his readers get the point by killing Ivan near the end of the book—he dies in his bed when the roof and ceiling of his dilapidated house collapse on him.

Here, though, Padura reaches his personal limits. Cuba seems to be the passive victim of a series of misfortunes that, somehow, have just happened; nowhere does Padura say that the regime is responsible for Cuba’s problems, or that the Cuban system is doomed to collapse, just like the Soviet system it copied. Nor does Padura mention Fidel Castro or the Cuban Communist Party by name, and he does not subject Fidel’s ideology to the same relentless analysis he uses on Stalin’s and Trotsky’s. Perhaps, however, this is unsurprising. Padura’s prominence as a writer has brought him privileges, including the freedom to travel and publish abroad; the ability to collect hard currency royalties that make his life more comfortable than that of almost all Cubans; and the indulgence of the regime, as long as he does not go too far. He is unwilling to jeopardize this position, to take on the hardships that would come with following the examples of Havel or Solzhenitsyn.^a

It would be easy to judge Padura harshly for this, but also premature. True, he is careful not to go beyond the limits set by the regime, but the message and point of his criticism-by-analogy should be clear to any but the most obtuse reader. The members of Cuba’s small literary community each have to make their own decisions about how brave to be, and Padura apparently sees no point in going far enough to risk being silenced by going to jail

a. For an informative look at Padura’s position in the Cuban literary community and his privileges, see Jon Lee Anderson, “Private Eyes,” *New Yorker*, 21 October 2013.

or losing his authenticity by accepting exile. Not until we have a post-Castro, postcommunist Cuba will we be able to evaluate fully the actions of writers under the regime and whether they compromised themselves too much.^a In

the meantime, however, *The Man Who Loved Dogs* stands as an important literary achievement.

a. On the choices facing Cuban writers, see Ezequiel Minaya,

“Authors Who Knew or Know the Limits,” in Lydia Chavez, ed., *Capitalism, God, and a Good Cigar* (Duke University Press, 2005).



