

A Simple Habana Melody

by Oscar Hijuelos



About the Book

A gaunt man walks the deck of the ocean liner that is taking him home to Cuba. He is sad and frail, saying little, eating less, politely nodding to his fellow passengers, many of whom know his name, even though they don't recognize his face or figure. Twenty-five years earlier this same man was famous throughout the world. He was corpulent, expansive, and cheerful. On any given night he could be found at a Habana nightclub enjoying a sumptuous meal, perhaps rising to entertain the crowd with one of his famous songs. Later he might visit a bordello, then return to his comfortable home and sleep soundly until the next afternoon.

The transformation of Israel Levis can be traced most directly to the years he spent in Buchenwald, where he "mistakenly" was sent by the Nazi forces occupying Paris. But Israel's spiritual journey is a decades-long process of reflection and self-examination that comes into full relief in this beautiful elegiac novel about identity, music, and faith. Along the way we are treated to a vibrant, fascinating portrait of Habana before and after the Second World War.

Born to an affluent, educated Habana family, Israel Levis was a musical prodigy, coddled and adored by his parents. He grew up believing that his talent was a gift from a benevolent God, whom he would one day meet in Heaven. As he grows older, Israel begins to encounter life's imperfections: his beloved sister dies young, and his father is killed in a tragic accident. He falls in love with a beautiful singer, yet cannot reveal his feelings to her. He is horrified to find himself attracted to other men, and represses these unseemly passions with visits to prostitutes.

By the time he reaches adulthood, Israel Levis is famous -- not just for his musical gifts, but also for his appetite for food, drink, and women; for his generosity, piousness, and devotion to his mother; and for his eccentric ways. A melody he composes on the fly becomes an international sensation, and his fame grows. As Habana suffers through a brutal dictatorship, Israel continues to live the life of a dandy, plagued by his unrequited desires, and only vaguely aware of the dangerous unrest that surrounds him.

Convinced, finally, that he is at risk in Cuba, Israel immigrates to Paris, where he is the toast of the town. Even as Hitler advances on the city, Israel continues to pursue his primary interests: music, food, and sex, with little thought to the changing world. It isn't until he is identified as Jew by the Nazis -- despite his exhortations of his Catholicism -- that he becomes fully aware of the horrors unfolding around him. Little by little the life that Israel so enjoyed slips away. He is shunned, derided, and eventually shipped off to Buchenwald where, along with thousands of others, he is stripped of his dignity, his identity, and eventually of his faith in God.

Until his imprisonment, Israel Levis would have considered himself a blessed man, convinced that God was watching over him and protecting him. Israel's relationship to God was not unlike a child worshiping a parent, wondering what that parent is truly like, but happy enough to accept his or her sovereignty without question. Once he is released, Israel has lost his voracious appetites. He feels betrayed by God, and remembers with humiliation the life he had before, consumed as it was with trivial and vain pursuits.

And so Israel returns to Habana a changed man. He is no longer certain of his faith, or even of the importance of his musical gift. His longings for food and drink, for women and men, have been replaced by an unsettling awareness that his life has been wasted. Where once he welcomed fame, he now shies away from the limelight, for if God fails to exist, then so must his talent. When at last he dies, Israel revisits his childhood, his fantasies and joys, his sorrows and disappointment. But most of all he wistfully remembers the Habana of his youth, when life -- and the world -- was good.

Discussion Guide

1. "Rosas Puras," the simple melody of the novel's title, becomes "a blessing and a curse" to its creator, Israel Levis. How does the song reappear throughout the novel? How does its significance change over the course of Israel's life?
2. Why do you think Hijuelos gave his main character, a Catholic, a name that seems to be Semitic? Is he merely illuminating the history of Jews in Spain? Is he making a larger point about identity and religion?
3. Like any person who survived the Holocaust, Israel emerges from his experience at Buchenwald a changed man, both in appearance and in spirit. One of the most fundamental transformations has occurred in his religious thinking; he was once a devout Catholic, but now he no longer believes in the existence of God, for how could God allow such evil to exist? Does Israel's abandonment of his belief indicate that his faith was never as strong as it appeared? Is faith only valid once it's been tested?
4. Israel spends much of his adult life longing for the singer Rosa Valladares, but he never speaks of his true feelings, even though Rosa clearly returns his affections. Do you think these two would have been happy in a romantic relationship? Is it really a fear of rejection that keeps Israel from telling Rosa the truth?
5. How do you explain Israel's affection for his friend, Manny Cortez, a person who seems so at odds with Israel's own personality?
6. How do you reconcile Israel's homosexual yearnings with his frequenting of bordellos and his love for Rosa? Is he bisexual? Homosexual?

7. Why do you think Israel waits so long to notice, or protect himself from, the dangers brought about by the political situations in Habana and Paris? Is he truly unaware? Or is he relying on the good fortunes that seemed to have befallen him since his infancy?
8. As a man of voracious appetites, Israel can never seem to get enough to eat or drink and he is equally dissatisfied in his romantic life. Why do you think this is? What would truly satisfy Israel's "appetites?"
9. How does Hijuelos portray the idea of celebrity in Israel's time? How did the advantages and drawback of fame differ from those today?
10. Mistaken by the Nazis for a Jew, Israel's life in Paris becomes one of restriction, discrimination, and eventually imprisonment. How would you feel if you were cruelly persecuted for being something you are not? Could he have tried harder to convince the Nazis that he was not Jewish? Should he have done more to further the cause of the resistance?
11. If Israel had escaped imprisonment by the Nazis, how do you think his life would have turned out? Would he have professed his love for Rosa? Would he have continued to write music? Would he still maintain his devotion to Catholicism?
12. Do you agree with Israel that his life "as a composer and conductor of orchestras was really the life of a clown, or an impostor, of someone tricked by fate"(p. 23)? How important is a "simple melody" when compared to the suffering of innocents, or the destruction of a dictator's regime?
13. The novel is composed of vignettes, often very brief, and descriptively titled. What is the effect of this structure on the novel? Does it make Israel seem more real as a character?
14. At the beginning of his novel, Hijuelos defines the term, *zarzuela*, the kind of Cuban song Israel becomes famous for composing. How is the definition significant to the novel?

Author Bio

Oscar Hijuelos, the son of Cuban immigrants, was in New York City in 1951. He is a recipient of the Rome Prize, the Pulitzer Prize, and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. His novels --- MAMBO KINGS, OUR HOUSE IN THE LAST WORLD, THE FOURTEEN SISTERS OF EMILIO MONTEZ O'BRIEN, MR. IVES' CHRISTMAS, EMPRESS OF THE SPLENDID SEASON and A SIMPLE HABANA MELODY --- have been translated into 25 languages.

Critical Praise

Pulitzer-winner Hijuelos is at his massively engaging best. A masterpiece of history, music, wonder, and sorrow . Riveting.

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