

BOOKS

Boy's view of life in Cuba reads like Huck Finn in Havana

■ Carlos Eire's award-winning memoir beautifully captures the story of children caught up in political cataclysm.

BY ELIZABETH HANLY
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"I intended my memoir, *Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy*, to be published as a novel," says Carlos Eire, who won the 2003 National Book Award for the

work. "I didn't want to reveal that much rambunctiousness or that much pain. Not so directly." Only after serious urging from his editor did he relent.

Eire grew up the son of a municipal judge in Havana, a man sure he was the reincarnation of Louis XVI. This begins a child's kaleidoscopic view of the mysteries of this household and 1950s Havana. The memoir is full of adven-

tures — at least one reviewer has compared Eire's work to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. He writes of car surfing with his Dad along Havana's flooded boulevards, of untiring experiments with lizards and firecrackers and the possibilities of reptiles in space.

Even as he writes of his adventures, Eire recalls images that were too big to understand. But one thing was clear: the boys of the town of

Regla, across the bay from Havana — poor kids who spent their days diving for the coins those who pass by throw to them. At the airport, as the revolution's bureaucrats sneered at the 11-year-old about to leave Cuba without his parents, Eire knew that he too had begun diving for coins.

"The story of children caught up in political cataclysm needs to be told," says Florida International University's Dr. Damian Fernández, director of The Cuban Research Institute. "Eire tells that story beautifully."

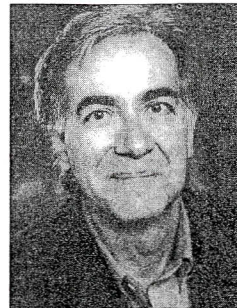
It was The Cuban Research Institute in partnership with The Downtown Book Center and The Operation Pedro Pan Group that hosted Eire at a book signing recently at FIU. "We were proud to welcome back one of our own," says Elly Vilano Chovel, founder and chairwoman of The Operation Pedro Pan Group, an association of the alumni of the effort that brought 14,000 unaccompanied children to the United States during the early years of Cuba's revolution.

A large crowd of Pedro Pans attended the event. "The miracle is that Carlos' memories are so fresh," Chovel continued. "With his, we can find again our own."

DEATH OF FAMILIAR

Waiting for Snow is not about nostalgia for paradise or innocence lost. Rather, it is about "death" that Eire writes — that experience where nothing is recognizable anymore and still one goes on. Pedro Pans may rightly claim the story. But it is the authenticity of Eire's voice as he describes the process that has brought him a circle of readers far beyond Miami as well as such a prestigious award.

Eire has other books to his credit. But the experience of writing "without footnotes" is new to Yale University's T. Lawrason Riggs professor of history and religious studies. Eire's earlier works, studies on



POWERFUL MEMORIES: Carlos Eire won the 2003 National Book Award.

the 16th century, have had hundreds of footnotes.

He acknowledges that his preference for exploring a century nicknamed by scholars as The Age of Revolution has plenty to do with his childhood.

"I've needed to study what happens to people when their lives have been quite literally turned upside down," he says. "Yet if you had told me five years ago I would write a memoir, I wouldn't have believed it."

Then came the Elián González debacle. Something of that story awakened his own. "Maybe it was listening to Fidel talk of the sanctity of the family," Eire says. "I was one of the Pedro Pan kids that managed to leave Cuba early on in the revolution. Fidel denied visas often for years and years to our parents."

Still, pre-Elián, so much of this had been sleeping. "I was never consciously injured by the experience," Eire says. "I dealt with it by ignoring it, until it all boiled up."

Eire realizes Elián wasn't the only catalyst. He began writing when his children were more or less the same age he was when he left Cuba. "I was beginning to realize not only how much I lost, but how much my parents gave up in letting us go."

Eire's father never left Cuba. It took his mother three

years to rejoin her children. "By then," Eire says, "we would never need her the same way again."

Eire wrote late at night. Although ostensibly his daytime life went on as before, later his wife told Eire that he simply hadn't been there during those months; he had been very far away.

"This wasn't a book with an outline. There were very few things I planned as I wrote. But I do read a lot of history. In my classes we do look at the universal questions. I did want to touch on a few of the big themes," Eire is shy as he says it.

"After all, there is such a complex relationship between good and evil," he continues. "It's hard sometimes to tell the difference. In a certain way it was a very good thing I lost Cuba. I'm not exactly thankful, but if I'm honest with myself I have to say it. If I had remained there in the circumstances to which I was born, I wouldn't have understood what I do now of poverty or discrimination. Exile may have made me a more religious person. I'm not sure. It's terribly complicated."

BACK TO MIAMI

As is Eire's relationship with Miami. He lived here for several years after Pedro Pan, but his adult life has been spent far away from *el exilio*, far from any large community of Cubans. Thanks to the popularity of *Waiting for Snow*, this year he has visited Miami a number of times.

Eire rejects any suggestion of visiting Fidel's Cuba. So it is only here that Eire the adult can revisit his childhood.

Will Eire continue to write without footnotes? "It was too pleasurable not to," he says. But first he's got to complete a long-overdue volume on the Protestant Reformation. He was supposed to write it during the summer of 2000 before he was taken by other winds.

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