



# Dancing to "Almendra"

*Mayra Montero , Edith Grossman (Translator)*

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Havana, 1957. On the same day that the Mafia capo Umberto Anastasia is assassinated in a barber's chair in New York, a hippopotamus escapes from the Havana zoo and is shot and killed by its pursuers. Assigned to cover the zoo story, Joaquin Porrata, a young Cuban journalist, instead finds himself embroiled in the mysterious connections between the hippo's death and the mobster's when a secretive zookeeper whispers to him that he "knows too much." In exchange for a promise to introduce the keeper to his idol, the film star George Raft, now the host of the Capri Casino, Joaquin gets information that ensnares him in an ever-thickening plot of murder, mobsters, and, finally, love. The love story is, of course, another mystery. Told by Yolanda, a beautiful ex-circus performer now working for the famed cabaret San Souci, it interleaves through Joaquin's underworld investigations, eventually revealing a family secret deeper even than Havana's brilliantly evoked enigmas. In "Dancing to "Almendra," "" Mayra Montero has created an ardent and thrilling tale of innocence lost, of Havana's secret world that is "the basis for the clamor of the city," and of the end of a violent era of fantastic characters and extravagant crimes. Based on the true history of a bewitching city and its denizens, "Almendra" is the latest "triumph" ("Library Journal") from one of Latin America's most impassioned and intoxicating voices.

## Dancing to "Almendra" Details

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Author : Mayra Montero , Edith Grossman (Translator)

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# From Reader Review Dancing to "Almendra" for online ebook

## Featherbooks says

Alternating stories of a young journalist investigating the organized crime activity in gambling in 1950's Havana and the confessions of his girlfriend, a one-armed former circus performer. Strange and bloody tale and I found it hard to care about the characters, although the Cuban atmosphere was authentic and rich. You could almost hear the danzon music.

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## Martha says

Eh.

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## Leo says

The plot, a well paced narrative, is set in Cuba during its golden years. Fulgencio Batista was the dictator and ruled with strong fist. The setting is 1957 and Fidel Castro had started the revolution in Sierra Maestra. A journalist is sent to cover the story of a hippopotamus that escaped from the zoo and was shot. The death of the hippo is connected to the death of mobster Umberto Anastasia. The journalist keeps investigating and comes accross information of the mobsters controlling the gambling and other rackets in Cuba and backed by goverment agents. Meyer Lanski and Santo Traficante were in control and they were sending millions of dollars in cash to Miami where they were banking it safely. There is counter story of Yolanda, who was sort of a contortionist and had lost an arm, of her love to Roderico, the great Rodney. Between 1960-1963 I hapen to have spoken to many Cubans that were lucky to get out of Cuba and they gave me a good idea of how things were with the Batista regime and mobsters with their casinos.

I forgot to mention that "Almendra" is a danzon. The music is more likea waltz of minuette. They dance in a very formal way which is beautiful to watch but much better to dance.

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## Pam Giarrizzo says

The setting for "Dancing to 'Almendra,'" by Mayra Montero, is the Cuba I recall from watching the movie "The Godfather: Part II." Casinos, extravagant entertainment, mafiosi, and corruption took center stage, while Castro's revolution percolated in the background.

The book's protagonist is a 22-year-old reporter named Joaquin Porrata, who is frustrated at being assigned to the entertainment beat when what he really wants to do is cover the mob bosses who have converged on Havana. He thinks he has found his chance when an employee at the Havana Zoo tells him that the escape and subsequent death of the zoo's hippopotamus had been a warning to mobster Umberto Anastasia. Unfortunately, the message arrived too late, as Anastasia had been killed in a New York barbershop that same day.

Joaquin changes newspapers in order to be allowed to write about the mob, and his life becomes both more

exciting and more dangerous. He develops an infatuation for a one-armed woman who may or may not have been the mistress of Mafia boss Santo Trafficante, gets beaten up by mob enforcers twice, and crosses paths with the American actor George Raft, part owner of the Capri hotel and casino.

The title of the book refers to a popular Cuban song called "Almendra." It takes on significance for Joaquin when, as a teenager, he sees the mother of his best friend, a woman he's had a crush on since childhood, dancing to "Almendra" with a man who figures prominently in the book.

I enjoyed learning more about the years and events leading up to the Cuban revolution. Now, though, I'd be interested in reading a novel by a Cuban author about life in Cuba since the revolution. Any suggestions?

<http://thebooktrekker.blogspot.com/20...>

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### **Stefanie says**

Montero's book is set in Cuba just as the Revolutionaries start their successful campaign to (re)claim the country. It is a layered book with one layer focused on a gangster/mafia story (the setting of Cuba's casinos is perfect, obviously), a complicated love that has an intimate connection to a circus and magicians plus a layer (really a backdrop) of the horrors of violent revolution. And, yes, the zoo features, too. Having studied "literature in revolution," this book would qualify and does not disappoint. It's not my favorite in the genre, but it is a new addition worthy of a read. I still think I need to learn Spanish, though, as this book must be excellent in the original language. Nevertheless, the translator (Edith Grossman) does a good job ensuring that the context and feel are right. Given she's translated for authors such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, I trust it's a good translation.

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### **Karl H. says**

Dancing to "Almendra" is a noir book set in pre-revolution Cuba with a one armed woman, a lion feeder who is a celebrity doppelganger, and a childhood best friend who is also a pimp. Based on the summary, the story sounds colorful and exciting- so why did it wind up being such a slog? There are a lot of pieces assembled and back stories that might be interesting if done right but it never really takes off. The problem is these stories never really add up to much or go anywhere. The plot kind of peters out, and even though there are some interesting turns of phrase, the clever parts are far too small to sustain interest. Too much mobster name-dropping is another problem. It's almost as if Lucky Luciano or Meyer Lansky showing up is supposed to keep us engaged in a story that has little urgency or point. By the end, my interest had pretty much flagged.

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### **Brayden says**

On the surface this is the perfect book for me as it is both historical fiction (taking place on the eve of the Cuban revolution) and a book about the Mafia. A young Cuban journalist, Joaquin Porrata, discovers that on the same day that a hippo was killed in the Havana zoo, a mafia leader, Anastasia, was assassinated in a barber shop in NYC. Nobody sees the connections between the two killings except for Joaquin and a poor

zoo-hand. Joaquin starts putting the pieces of the puzzle together once he begins embedding himself in the dark underworld of the Mafia, traveling to NYC to visit the scene of the crime (which he never actually does) and beginning a sexual relationship with a Mafioso's mistress.

Despite its promising topic and sometimes intriguing plot, why didn't I love this book? I guess the problem for me was Montero's writing. Montero neither has the bite of a neo-noirish style like James Ellroy nor does he write with a compelling sense of dread like his fellow Latino author Roberto Bolano. The Cuba that Montero writes about seems thoroughly unenchanted, which is a major let-down if you think there's something fanciful about Cuba on the eve of revolution.

Sadly, the book never captured my interest and so I read the last hundred pages half-heartedly and anxious to begin a new book.

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### **Peter Evans says**

I loved this as much as I enjoyed her short stories.. the opening lines here .. "On the same day Umberto Anastasia was killed in New York, a hippopotamus escaped from the zoo in Havana. I can explain the connection. No one else, only me, and the individual who looked after the lions." .. It is impossible not to read on, and I believe worth every hour spent devouring this novel.

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### **Robert Friedman says**

--From my 2007 review in The San Juan Star--

Let us return to those good old days in Havana, B.C. (Before Castro) when Meyer Lansky and the Mafia ran the hotels, fading movie stars like George Raft ran the casinos and hippos were let loose from the zoo to run in the streets before being "whacked" in a mob war. When shows at the famed Tropicana made Las Vegas extravaganzas pale by comparison. When the forces of Fulgencio Batista stuffed identity cards into the mouths of the tortured dead bodies of would-be revolutionaries.

When an affair of sorts takes place between Yolanda, a beautiful one-armed former circus magician's assistant, and Roderico, a leprous homosexual choreographer (who is anything but "gay," personality-wise); when an investigation by Joaquín Porrata, a naive young reporter, leads him to the top underworld figures of the time and to chopped-up bodies fed to the lions at the zoo.

It's all in *Dancing to Almendra*, the latest of nine novels by Mayra Montero, who has spent twice as much time living in Puerto Rico as in Cuba, where she was born, and whose works have led critics to place her in the top rank of today's Latin American writers.

And let us note that *Almendra* also is a moving, sensitive story of improbable loves and unraveling family ties and distinctive, dissenting lives in the flamboyant, lovely, surreal Havana of 1957.

Among those other works is *Captain of the Sleepers*, a novel suffused with mystery, memory and death, set mostly on Vieques in the 1950s and dealing with, among other things, the Nationalists' uprising of the time.

Montero has the true writer's ability to pull the reader into the story from the opening paragraphs, deepening that involvement on every proceeding page until the eyes, the heart and the mind race along to the finale. By accomplishing this, she assumes the burden that the ending—the most difficult part for many novelists—better be more than just good, as it certainly is in *Almendra*.

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### **Vicki says**

I liked this book fine, but I have no basis for judging whether it is referencing real events or not (my knowledge of the Cuban mafia being what it is). Weirdly enough, I find that that is the reason I can't get more excited about it. It also seemed kind of scattered and frantic, but I think that it would've flowed better in the original Spanish. Thoroughly average reading experience, all around.

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### **Christopher Rex says**

Weak. The theme sounded great (pre-Castro, mafia-infested Cuba). I didn't know the author, but the translator is "famous" (she translates for Mario Vargas Llosa) and the reviews were solid. Unfortunately, the book fails miserably. Though it doesn't win an Honorary Sebald-Austerlitz Award" for being total verbal shite, it is pretty much a slog. I finished it out of principle and the hope it would improve as it went on. It didn't. The characters were shallow and the story wasn't any bit mysterious or thrilling as it would sell itself. It is all just sort of "there". With all the great "Latin" literature out there, I would tell anyone to take a pass on this book.

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### **Werebot says**

Glowing review on the front of the Times Book Review! Translated by Edith Grossman! I have to read this! Well, I did, and -- eh. Very flat, kind of dull.

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### **Lisa says**

I really enjoyed this book. At first, I was not certain whether a book about Cuba and the mafia would interest me, but there is so much more to the plot than meets the eye. The characters--a one-armed former circus performer, the gay leper she loves, the young journalist who gets mixed up with both them and the mafia--are so unique. And the world is so vivid and crazy that I couldn't put the book down and was sad when it ended and I had to. I'd definitely recommend this book for those with an interest in the subject matter, but I'd also recommend it for those who are willing to give something completely different a try. You may be surprised as I was.

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## **Li Misol says**

Es un libro que se ubica en la Habana anterior a la revolución de Castro, en tiempo de mafiosos, casinos y trifulcas por el territorio.

Un joven periodista, Joaquín, empieza a involucrarse en ese mundo buscando desesperadamente salir de el asqueroso trabajo que le han asignado en la seccion de espectáculos del periodico. Joaquin busca un reportaje serio, y decide que su historia estara centrada en el reciente asesinato del mafioso Umberto Anastacia en Nueva York y las conecciones del suceso entre la mafia habanera.

El libro es emocionante y con un toque garciamarquiano que le otorgan las historias de las mujeres que pasan por la vida del joven periodista.

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## **Diasamidze Ayse says**

Çok büyük bir keyifle okudum, yazar'ın ilk okuduğum roman? ve diğ?er eserlerini çok merak ediyorum. son on sayfada bitmese ke?ke diye diye sayfalar? güç bela çevirdim....:)

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