

Biography of a Runaway Slave: 50 years



The 50th anniversary of the novel *Biography of a Runaway Slave* by Cuban writer and ethnologist, Miguel Barnet was celebrated at the Cuban Writers and Artists Association, UNEAC.

The novel, considered by its own author a 'testimonial novel', is based on the life of late centenarian, Esteban Montejo, a former runaway slave, whose story was immortalized from the perspective of a common human being who become the protagonists of real stories. The literary forum of UNEAC, which is part of the Havana International Book Fair, currently underway in the Cuban capital, held a panel this week to celebrate the novel's 5 decades and what has been termed as an essential work in Cuban and universal letters and a paradigm in the genre.

At the panel, Cuban National Literature Award winner, writer Eduardo Heras extolled the use of narrative techniques by the then young anthropologist, who, in his words, tried to touch with delicate hands and skills an area of Cuban history, using an unexpected voice, that of a man who went through the horrors of slavery. He added that the author used convincing examples in the novel to show that the story was told by a hybrid narrator half way through between the real narrator (Esteban Montejo) and the fictitious narrator (Miguel Barnet), which theory also calls "implicit author", who cannot be confused with the real author.

Even when the use of only one point of view, added Heras, might turn into an awkward resource that could run counter to the narration's efficacy, the variety of shades in the narrator's voice, far from overwhelming the reader, becomes one of the book's technical feats. One of the novel's successes has been to assign the role of hero and storyteller to an anti-hero per excellence, to an anonymous person and one of the most discriminated characters in the history of a classist society, who fought on the island's Independence war against Spain, was a citizen of the 1902 Republic and witnessed the new era brought by the 1959 Revolution.

Cuban writer, Francisco López Sacha, said that the book's thesis is the resistance of the Cuban people against all odds, and projects into the future that capacity of the Cuban identity that, in his words, has helped us stand firm until today. Barnet paid tribute to Esteban Montejo, whom he called an extraordinary man, with a blunt, laconic and profound language.

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