



## **Biography of a Runaway Slave**

*Miguel Barnet , Esteban Montejo , W. Nick Hill (Translator)*

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**Biography of a Runaway Slave** Miguel Barnet , Esteban Montejo , W. Nick Hill (Translator)

In this remarkable testimony, Cuban novelist and anthropologist Miguel Barnet presents the narrative of 105-year-old Esteban Montejo, who lived as a slave, as fugitive in the wilderness, and as a soldier in the Cuban War of Independence. Honest, blunt, compassionate, shrewd, and engaging, his voice provides an extraordinary insight into the African culture that took root in the Caribbean.

## Biography of a Runaway Slave Details

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# **From Reader Review Biography of a Runaway Slave for online ebook**

## **Zach Lee says**

When this book is first published in 1968, Esteban Montejo is a 105-year-old former slave, but he has lived through more than abolition and the war for independence. The book is published in the wake of another Cuban revolution, this one Castro's, and Montejo's voice is as timely then as in the late-nineteenth century. His wisdom and recollections are based as much on his own experiences in daily life as the events that reshaped Cuba. He is not a historian in an academic sense, but rather in the sense that he has seen things and recorded them. Because of that, he has no solid thesis, but the objective of the book is clear: It is to serve as a testament to the black experience in Cuba.

Montejo's voice is timely, but it wanders with no real direction, and it should be noted that Miguel Barnet, the book's editor, is responsible for transcribing Montejo's words to paper. That lack of direction can be partially attributed to the tired mind of an elderly man, but the extent to which that is the cause is questionable. Barnet only breaks the book up into three vague sections: Slavery, Abolition, and The War for Independence. That said, the story may have been unable to be told by the "orthodox, schematically-minded historians" Barnet holds in such contempt. Regardless of the lax editing, Montejo shines through in a very believable way.

His casual recollections of events and issues that still affect society are signs of an honesty not often found in history books. His take on homosexual slaves, for example is both telling and hilarious, when he admits he is "of the opinion that a man can stick his arse where he wants." The color and life in his stories speaks more to the experience of the black Cuban than explanation ever will. His testimony of African religion and its capabilities is enough for educated readers to call science into question – not because it is plausible for a man to be transformed into an animal, but because Montejo believes it so unflinchingly. He does not question that his audience will believe in the power of a charm or witchcraft, so he speaks of magic as if it were taken for granted. The pleasure he gets from women, especially, adds a human element to the history that surrounds him.

As a whole, the book adds a wonderful new voice to the discussion of slavery and racial discrimination on the island – this one from the inside looking out. For all the wandering of Montejo's voice, and his propensity for telling stories about women, he gives readers a clear picture of what life was like for a black man in Cuba. Barnet explains in the introduction that "history merely enters [the book] as the medium in which [Montejo's] life was lived," and readers who realize that the book is at heart a human story are able to take the most away from it.

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## **T. York says**

Cuba

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## **Mary Emily O'Hara says**

Leí en español para una clase sobre literatura Española, y fue muy claro y fácil de entender por una estudiante y nativa hablante de inglés. ¡Perfecto!

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### **Kim says**

This book is a collection of interviews with a Cuban man who was born enslaved, escaped and then fought in the war of independence. The interviews were conducted when he was 103-105. So he made it to after the Revolution and died at about 113.

I didn't finish the book. I actually stopped during the most interesting bit, with only about 40 pages to go. I enjoyed what I did read. It is more anthropology than history in the sense that these fields don't overlap. For example he talks extensively about witchcraft and the different solutions to different problems and the differences between methods of people from different parts of the African continent.

I would recommend this book for those who already know a fair amount about Cuban history. It's more of a supplemental text, and if you don't already know about the history of Cuba - pre-Fidel and Che - you could be a little lost and not get as much out of this book as you otherwise might.

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### **Jack D says**

This is an incredibly interesting compilation on Cuban religion, customs and culture, and history. I would recommend this book.

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### **Alejandro Fajardo says**

Un testimonio poderoso de nuestra ignorada historia afroamericana. Y un valuarte para entender la formación de cuba.

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### **Dusty says**

In a time of despotism and heavy governmental censorship -- say, in Cuba in the decade after its 1959 Revolution -- how do you write stories?

With this book, Miguel Barnet founded one potential answer in what he would call the "testimonial novel". The trick is this: You (the author) interview another person, preferably an ordinary person whose voice would otherwise be considered too inconsequential for the pages of history, and you turn his/her experiences into a novel, maintaining his/her idiosyncratic forms of expression. In other words, you write your book from this (real) person's experiences. This is not altogether different than what we call "ghost-writing" today, but whereas mostly famous people like Sarah Palin have others "ghost-write" their autobiographies because they're presumably too busy to do it, the "witnesses" in true testimonial novels probably do not have the skills and/or the social clout to pen their narratives themselves.

Of course, whether the testimonial novel empowers its witnesses (by finally providing them a voice) or further subjugates them (by robbing them of their voices, which are inauthentically transformed into "legitimate" narratives and often yield commercial gain and literary respect for the writer, not the witness) is a question than has been asked since this book was published. And it becomes even more pertinent in Barnet's more ambitious follow-up, *Canción de Rachel*, which is a testimonial novel formed by the amalgamated voices of multiple (nameless) "witnesses".

Here, the "real person" or "witness" involved is Estéban Montejo, a black man who was born a Cuban slave, ran away from slavery and lived alone in the jungle until abolition, and later served in the Cuban military in the country's war for independence from Spain. When Barnet interviewed him, he was over a hundred years old -- and indeed, it's rewarding to know that after his (?) testimony was published, Montejo received recognition as a national hero, the kind of recognition he says, again and again, is never lavished upon black Cubans no matter how greatly they sacrificed to the country's greater good.

Questions of testimonial novel and actual authorship aside, the book is an invaluable historical document. The first third, in which Montejo recaps his years as a slave, begs comparison to American slave narratives like those of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass. Unlike these two Americans, Montejo was never a "house slave" -- he worked only with his hands, as far away from his white masters as possible, and with nearly as much contempt for slaves who were "educated" as for the masters themselves. Of particular interest (to me?) is Montejo's recognition of slaves who -- far from our 21st Century archetype -- carried on homosexual relationships with each other, working side-by-side, sharing huts, presenting themselves as husbands/wives, etc. I've read a good deal of slave narratives this past year, but I'd hadn't run across any discussion of homosexuality before.

In any case, as powerful/intriguing as the first third of Montejo's narrative is, I found the rest rather dull. After he joins the Cuban army, he has additional memorable experiences, but the novel retells these experiences with arduous attention to history; the names of officers and generals and other political leaders are nearly impossible to keep straight. And ultimately, I was glad the testimony ended with the establishment of Cuban independence -- and left out Montejo's last sixty years of life. Of course, I confess the lack of interest / clarity surrounding the military history of the soon-to-be republican Cuba may be more a shortcoming of my own than of Montejo's storytelling.

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### **Michael says**

Cimarron is an essential, unparalleled document from the source: the account of an escaped slave in Cuba in the last decades of the 19th century. It is retold through the pen of Miguel Barnet, who spent 3 years taking notes from their conversations at the very end of Esteban Montejo's very long life (in 1963, he was 103 years old). Fascinating and enlightening, I'm not sure why it has never been translated into English. It's also kinda cool that the author and I share the same name.

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### **Isaac Timm says**

As a historical source, there was slim information but very interesting information about folklore, religion and culture of Afro-Cuban's, both before and after the abolition of slavery. I also found myself liking the cranking, sometimes fiery, loner and patriot Esteban Montejo. The man was 105, so I allowed for the

occasional Abe Simpson moment.

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### **Gary says**

The Cuban Revolution (that one against Spain) from a Cuban slave's perspective.

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### **Victor R&M says**

Tribuna de La Habana  
en la sección Lectura para ti  
Víctor González

“Nos ofrece un caso único en nuestra literatura: un monólogo que escapa a todo mecanismo de creación literaria y, sin embargo, se inscribe en la literatura en virtud de sus proyecciones poéticas”, fueron las palabras de Alejo Carpentier luego de leer *Biografía de un Cimarrón*.

Esta novela-testimonio, considerada por muchos la obra maestra del género en Cuba, nos cuenta en la voz de Esteban Montejo, desde los horrores de la esclavitud, hasta sus vivencias como testigo del nuevo proceso revolucionario de 1959, pasando por su trepidante usanza como cimarrón, esto último, el elemento más interesante que le convirtiera en una obra de arte descarnada, llena de vocablos y giros idiomáticos propios de la retórica contextual que habitó en el protagonista, la cual se interna en lo más profundo de la propia historia nacional.

Con una peculiar estructura narrativa desmarcada de cualquier canon literario e intuita por Miguel Barnet, es un libro de lectura ágil y emocionante, que nos lleva en un viaje a través de la oscuridad del alma en busca de su libertad.

Novela para sentir los olores de la naturaleza y el miedo a las más negras noches, nos lanza de bruces contra nuestra identidad mediante la indagación y el descubrimiento tanto del autor como de su propio protagonista. Cruzan en sus páginas personajes variopintos que, en ocasiones, parece increíble hayan existido.

Ya con 50 años, apenas cumplidos desde su primera edición, *Biografía...*, es un texto de incalculable valor patrimonial y de obligada lectura para cada cubano que así se sienta, al cual siempre se puede volver porque, entre sus letras esconde aún muchos secretos.

Link: <http://www.tribuna.cu/lectura/2017-09...>

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### **Valerie says**

Really interesting. I want to learn more about Cuba and the Caribbean now. Their wars for independence are a real blind spot in my education.

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### **Anna says**

This gets my vote for the worst book group book ever (the previous prize belonged to Saramago's *Balthazar and Blimunda*, another book I couldn't finish). I think maybe if the author had actually written a biography

rather than what appears to be transcribing tapes, it could have been interesting. It's tedious. I read 100 pages. I quit.

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### **Elsie says**

I'm working on my Spanish so... it might have been a 5 if I were up to the job. In the mean time it's about the problem of wanting to participate in a community when you have always separated yourself from the community you see and can't accept. The translation of the title into "Story of a Slave" is bad because Montejo is giving his story (of being a cimarron--more a 'fugitive') in contradiction to the official history of his person as slave. We talked about how *testimonio* is always an insurgent history, against the official history.

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### **John says**

Read because it was assigned in a class I am TA-ing. Really fascinating, particularly if you have only ever read slave narratives from the United States, as I had. Actually, I know practically nothing about Cuban history in general, so this was great for a number of reasons. And the undergrads seemed to like it, as practically everybody contributed to the discussion.

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