



The Chase

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Transcurre durante los 46 minutos que dura la ejecución de la «Sinfonía Heroica» de Beethoven en un teatro de La Habana donde se ha refugiado un joven que ha pasado del combate político a la acción terrorista y, mediante la tortura, a la traición.

Sirviéndose de su portentoso dominio del lenguaje y de la técnica narrativa, Alejo Carpentier (1904-1980) recrea en esta novela a través de una pluralidad de voces el narrador, el acosado, el taquillero del teatro tanto el clima político que se vivió en Cuba durante los turbulentos años de la dictadura de Gerardo Machado, como los aspectos que nos dan la clave para entender la vida del protagonista.

The Chase Details

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who is having second thoughts about participating in political organizing in the face of death was vivid and startling.

Tony says

Those who first saw it, in 1804, the musicians who first played it, saw the name BUONAPARTE at the top of the title page and LUIGI VAN BEETHOVEN at the very bottom. By October, 1806, however, when Beethoven published his Third Symphony, Napoleon's name was gone. Instead, the dedication began:

Sinfonia Eroica, composta per festeggiare il souvvenire di un grand Uomo . . .

The Great Man is not named, but it's still Napoleon, or at least the 'memory' of Napoleon, still alive in 1806, so, rather, what Beethoven had wished Napoleon to be. The controversy over when Beethoven soured on Napoleon is unimportant for our purposes, but *someone* erased the Emperor's name on a copyist's score so fiercely a hole was worn in the paper.

But why talk about the *Eroica* in a review about an odd novella set in 1950s Cuba? Well, duh. But I'll get back to *duh*.

'The Chase' *opens* with that 1806 dedication in italics. The action begins in a concert hall, which is about to perform the *Eroica*. A student ticket seller is reading a biography of Beethoven, waiting for the music to begin. A fugitive runs in, throws a large banknote at the teller and runs into the theater, pursued by two men.

The student and the fugitive will be intertwined through that banknote (is it counterfeit?) and through their nocturnal visits to the prostitute Estrella. *It was she who was visited, almost never visiting anyone herself.*

The fugitive hides, flees, hides again, from his pursuers and his past, when torture tested his loyalty. Is he running from the police or his one-time comrades?

But the music pursues him, too. The notes are everywhere: in the concert hall, in the prostitute's room, in a garden, in a conversation. Carpentier, a musicologist as well as a revered Latin American novelist, does this as well as anyone I've read: weaving plot and music lines together.*

Which brings me back to *duh*. Carpentier published this in 1956. Batista was still in control in Cuba but Castro was beginning his guerilla war. Surely Carpentier had some *grand Uomo* in mind. Whose name was Carpentier scratching out? But we can choose too. Who was the Great Man? Sixty years later, we have memory to let us choose.

The fugitive runs from tree to tree, hiding in each shadow:

Before him the avenue, where various Presidents, with thick bronze frock coats, standing on granite pedestals, were sculpted in heroic size above the ice-cream vendors, who were ringing their viaticum bells, descended to the sea covered by clouds palpitating with distant flashes of lightning.

A cautionary tale, then, that is not confined to an island.

* The Lost Steps haunts me still.

Melissa says

A novella in the form of a sonata, with three main "themes" or narratives that interweave and imagery that overlaps and repeats, centered on a man who's being hunted for political reasons. All the action takes place within the forty-six minutes it takes to perform Beethoven's third symphony, Eroica. The author says he walked out the plot in Havana just to make sure it was possible. I love shit like that.

Chaz says

Carpentier incarnates the perfect example of a Cuban intellectual. Eclectic in their authorities --boondoggles, really-- as people come to consult with them to better understand arcane subjects like, for instance, 18th century typography.

Cuba is an island that begs, borrows and steals from all over the world; its demographic reflects the full spectrum of the world's diversity. Its music, ideology, its patois-like Spanish, diet, art, all human creation in short is imported, masticated, and spat out--and this is the miracle-- "a la Cubain". Havana's architecture, to name one example, is an amalgamation of thousands of years of varied architectural orders, all neatly packaged into little bourgeois homes and facades.

Havana's architecture is given the role of protagonist in this short novel of Carpentier's which can act like a primer to his longer works.

Incidentally, when I have visited Havana, I have liked to visit his grave in the Necropolis there (Cement rio de Col n). This man who was a leading musicologist and aesthetic is buried under a nondescript headstone, deprived of any ornamentation. I wouldn't put it past Carpentier to mock his own vastly important body of work--typically Cuban!

jeremy says

a slim work from cuban writer alejo carpentier, *the chase (el acoso)* is set in havana during the oppressive reign of fulgencio batista. often cited as a progenitor of magical realism, carpentier and his novels also influenced the latin american boom. *the chase*, though rich in descriptive language and possessed by a circuitous narrative, is not magical realism, per se. as an acclaimed musicologist, it is evident that carpentier's lush, lyrical prose was influenced by his musical background. as one of the main characters attempts to elude his politically-motivated pursuers, *the chase* wends a course through the streets of the revolutionary capital city. though perhaps not as haunting or salient a story as similarly-charged political works (benedetti, dorfman, antunes), *the chase* is, nonetheless, a gorgeously-crafted novella.

everything had been just, heroic, and sublime in the beginning: the houses they'd blown up during the night; the dignitaries shot down in the streets; the automobiles that disappeared as if swallowed by the earth; the explosives that were stored at home, among clothes perfumed with bunches of sweet basil- next to pamphlets carried in bakery baskets or in cases of beer

whose bottles had been cut so that only the necks remained. it was a time when death sentences were passed from afar, a time for modest valor, a time for putting your life on the line. it was a time for dazzling executions carried out by an emissary wearing an implacable smile, executions that took place when the guilty party opened a book or a christmas present wrapped in paper decorated with mistletoe and bells. it was the time of the tribunal...

Julia says

I did like the style and structure so I probably would have enjoyed this were it not for the misogyny

Viviana says

Una trama algo compleja de aprehender y un final realmente inesperado.

Stenwjohnson says

Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier (1904-80) is often considered, alongside Gabriel Garcia Marquez, as a founder of Magical Realism, the distinctively Latin American literary school where mythology takes literal wing alongside commonplace events. In reality, Carpentier is a lucid, classical modernist in the vein of Marcel Proust or Malcolm Lowry-- a dreamlike aura enshrouds his work, but his novels are less about folkloric enchantments than a world of dense reflection rendered in pensive, oblique prose.

“The Chase” (1956) tells a simple, classically symmetrical story encrusted in dense, poetic reflection: an unnamed revolutionary in an unspecified country (eventually recognizable as Battista’s Cuba) is on the run after committing an assassination and confessing to police. But Carpentier is less interested in politics than a general atmosphere of tense, involuted self-exploration. Initial dissonance between the novel’s simple premise and opaque method finally gives way to a satisfying, logical conclusion. “The Lost Steps” remains Carpentier’s masterpiece, but “The Chase” is a unique, impressive work by one of Latin American literature’s true geniuses.
