*The Cuban Comedy*, by Pablo Medina rev. by Alasia Parra

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Pablo Medina is a Cuban writer and translator. He has written sixteen books of fiction, poetry, and a memoir. He has also translated the works of Virgilio Piñera and Federico García Lorca and earned grants from foundations such as the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, and others, and he is currently a professor of poetry, fiction, and translation at Emerson College. His new novel, *The Cuban Comedy*, is historical fiction with hints of magical realism. It surrounds a young woman named Elena who is from the small town of Piedra Negra, Cuba, known for her father’s particularly potent firewater. Elena has turned to poetry to use words as a source of some understanding of the world around her and it ends up having her win a national poetry contest, a free ticket to the capital.

As for craft elements in this piece, the tone, the characters, and their types are all proficiently portrayed. The tone shifts throughout the book as Elena meets different characters that have different things to offer, so these elements go hand in hand. In Chapter Two, Elena and her father go to a woman known as a healer to help cure Cándida's mysterious melancholy. The woman is called Eulalia la Santa and certain language is used when describing her movements to distinguish her personality. When they first get to her house, she “waddled over to where the three of them stood” (Medina 21). The tone and character here are effective because the word “waddle” itself is often associated with children, creating a simple, unique tone around Eulalia. Perhaps Medina is reminding the audience that the sadness Cándida is plagued by is a sadness known to people from childhood and maybe in order to heal it Eulalia has to have an understanding of a child’s mind, she has to do things such as waddle. Either way, the tone created by that word has the effect of a wider perspective on the character. This is done again in the next paragraph when Eulalia drinks the firewater she was receiving as payment: “her rubbery lips wrapping around the bottle’s mouth like a child’s around a pacifier. She cackled and spoke in a language none of them had heard before” (Medina 21). Once again, the reference to childhood lies in the specificity of the language here. Medina is telling the audience that Eulalia is relying on a drink like a child relies on a pacifier and speaking a language others don’t understand like a child babbles nonsense no one understands. The tone from before remains the same but is more cemented in the reader’s mind; there is no doubt that this healer is small-minded and misunderstood, just like a child. These few paragraphs alone of this small character give a lot for the reader to reflect on and understand. Throughout the book, tone and character work together to give the reader an immersive experience they won’t soon forget.

At the start of the book, the impact is surely an element Medina used to lay a foundation for Elena’s decision-making throughout it. In Elena’s hometown, veterans, drunks, and peasants alike all enjoyed Fermín José’s drink. He spends all his time making it and playing an elaborate chess game with himself. Her mother Cándida, on the other hand, constantly finds herself in what her family calls “bouts of sadness” that no one can get her out of. Neither of them pay too much attention to Elena, not even when she mangles her hand in a firewater incident and is nicknamed La Manquita.

Growing up in this household has made Elena into a naive but confident individual who feels things intensely. One of the people she feels things intensely for is a disabled miscreant named Pedrito (he came back from the revolution’s war with half a leg missing). The veteran is a regular customer of firewater, and one night Elena takes pity on him when he lingers on her front porch after buying some; she offers and he accepts dinner. Whether it’s through bonding over their shared physical disabilities or Elena’s love for her admirer’s war stories, the two fall in love, wed, and she soon has a baby girl. After the baby’s baptism, Pedrito breaks his sobriety promise and dies. Shortly thereafter, Elena’s learns that she’s won the contest-which causes “gastrointestinal distress” (Medina 47). She travels all the way to the war-torn capital, full of strange new things and people all on her own. She leaves her daughter and makes a life of her own. The impact of losing her husband to addiction and being faced with choosing between her poetry and her daughter has put Elena in a tough spot, but after growing up surrounded by damaged people in and out of her home constantly, she’s ready to handle another loss and make a tough decision: “Elena didn’t feel the need to mourn for a man who loved alcohol more than he had loved her, and so she went back to her writing as soon as Pedrito was put in the ground…”(Medina 45). Her emotional tenacity and strong belief in her writing makes it so she has almost no choice at all; she’s going to the capital no matter what. So, even though the impact of her upbringing and short-lived marriage all happen at a young age and scar her deeply, they also cement her self-trust and push her to follow through on her dream.

The diction, tone, and magical realism of this book are what distinguish it. It tells the story of people suffering from mental illness, poverty, and ego in an educational, rich, and sometimes funny way. This book is surely a diamond in the rough, absolutely deserving of attention. Anyone looking to learn more about the world around them and dive deep into the world of poetry, war, birds, and everything in between should pick up *The Cuban Comedy*.