

Carving Out a World

By Michael Parker

Book Review:

Havana and the Other Missing Fathers, by Mia Leonin.
University of Arizona Press, 2009.



The Greek letters for *gnothi sauton* are etched into the stone entrance of Apollo's temple at Delphi. Employed by many of the greatest thinkers of that golden age of wisdom (e.g., Socrates, Pythagoras, and even the poet Phemonoe), "know thyself" was a metaphorical invitation for any soul who would find herself gazing upon it—to know your self fully.

Read any Greek philosophical text, tragedy, or tale, and you sense how they shunned theory and behavior that exhibited artifice and superficiality. This attitude is the grounding for the Socratic challenge: "Know thyself" is not some 60-second task. It is a thoughtful, time-investing experience that requires the participant to move past the surface and delve into the shadows of her soul. It demands a scrutinization of the life lived and of every good characteristic, as well as flaw. Knowing yourself in this manner, the Greeks believed, would awaken one to greater understanding, especially regarding one's own fundamental relationship not only to the *polis* but also to the larger human family. So important was this introspective exercise, that Socrates emphatically believed that "the unexamined life is not worth living."

Mia Leonin's memoir *Havana and Other Missing Fathers* is such a story, in which Leonin takes a literal and introspective journey to find her roots and her self. Growing up fatherless, Leonin lived her days and nights believing that her father had died when she was a baby. When she turned 16, her mother revealed to her the truth about her father—that he was a Cuban-born exile; that he

abandoned the mother when he learned she was pregnant; and that he was alive and living in Miami, Florida.

Leonin's sense of identity shattered and wounded, she sought to regain it by finding her father, her Cuban roots, and in doing so rewrite the narrative of her seemingly false past. Leonin set out on an unknown journey of discovery. She traveled from the only place she had ever lived, Missouri, to Miami, a place "that insists you shed your clothes and soak up its oils, humidity, and exhaust," then to Bogotá (Colombia), and finally to Cuba, a country she feared, at first, would eat her and "shine [her] bones."

Besides her introspective search for self, I was struck by the rich mosaic of themes layered throughout *Havana and the Other Missing Fathers*. Leonin builds a dynamic thematic structure grounded upon the notion that there are life-altering and psychologically damaging effects for those children of broken relationships and/or abandoned by fathers who rarely return. Leonin infuses additional sub-themes, such as analyzing the sense of "place" of the exile or the transitory soul; she ponders the effects of her mother's lies and how her mother's love life tainted her. In conjunction with this, she invites us into her psyche and indulges us with utterly honest accounts of her desires and sexual encounters. Ideally, she desired a lover who would make her feel that all of the wrongs of life could be set right and that the world would be a better place because of her new union.

Leonin's riveting, honest, and complete portrayals of a modern-day Cuba adds flesh-and-blood reality to the drawn-in stereotypes of a country and its people a mere 90 miles off the shore of Florida. Culturally, economically, religiously, and even structurally, Leonin relates the harsh history of Cuba; she pinpoints with vivid accuracy the vast contrast between Havana and Miami—the mansions of the rich were converted into hundreds of one-room apartments: there is a great lack of "transportation, electricity, and viable phone lines"; a toilet is "a hole in the floor, a lidless tank, a bucket"; food and the eating of food "happens on the sly—a piece of boiled yucca and some beans . . . a sandwich of bread and mayonnaise"; and the sense that "someone is watching; someone is always watching."

Another highpoint of *Havana* is its paean-like descriptions and thoughts about the Afro-Cuban gods, goddesses, and saints that sustain many people in Cuba and many exiles who take their makeshift rafts and search out liberty at the other side of the volatile sea.

Insightful, politically relevant, historically significant, provocative, intellectual, and woven together with beautifully poetic language, Mia Leonin's *Havana and the Other Missing Fathers* is a splendid memoir, a quality gem. She shows us that there is "permanence and possibility" in believing in one's origin and place—" [w]e can carve out a world in which we exist, a world where borders exist because we cross them, where journey's have value because we choose them." Lovely.

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