

CONVERSATIONS WITH CUBA



CONTENTS

Foreword by Bob Shacochis	xi
Acknowledgments	xvii
Batista's Vase	xix
REVOLUTION AND TOURISM	<i>May 1991</i>
Gettin' Inside	3
Necessary Rules	19
Playa Girón	35
Casa Grande Hotel	46
Benedictions	59
THE SPECIAL PERIOD	<i>July 1992</i>
<i>Resolviendo</i>	69
26th of July	90
FOOD AND DOLLARS	<i>December 1994</i>
Dollars	107
Paulo and Neddie	121
FORMS AND TRADITIONS	<i>September 1995</i>
Fathers and Sons	137
Things Held in Common	149
Seeking Santiago	156
Known in Santiago	164
Following Fidel	173
In Search of Saints	183
GOLD AND SCANDALS	<i>May 1997</i>
Havana Gold	195
A Good Life	203
Acts of Public Scandal	219
Neddie and Luisa	228
Epilogue: July 1999	235
Second Epilogue: July 2000	244

FOREWORD *Bob Shacochis*

"Are books dangerous?" I asked Ricardo Alarcón, the president of the Cuban Parliament. "Do you think that a book can be a weapon?"

Implicit in the question were years of imprisonment suffered by Cuban writers judged subversive by the state, poets made to eat their own poems, novelists whose work would never be published and read in their homeland.

The year was 1995, my second visit to Cuba, this time as a guest of the American Publishers Association, which had organized the first-ever U.S. book fair on the island. Literary intrigues were heating up. The Cubans maneuvered to block the public display of one of the more blatant anti-Castro books the APA had slipped into its luggage. The U.S. Interests Section in Havana hosted a party for the group to introduce us to a collection of writers whose lives had been made difficult by government harassment, censorship, isolation, and, occasionally, incarceration. Dissident writers were barred from a joint meeting between American authors and members of the Cuban Writers Union, whose president at the time, Abel Prieto, was verbally attacked by human rights activists traveling with our entourage.

"Can a book be a weapon?" Alarcón repeated dismissively. "No, I don't think so, unless you hollow out the pages and place a gun or a bomb inside."

It was, any reasonable person would agree, a most disingenuous answer, coming from one of Fidel Castro's inner circle. For Cuban writers, free and independent expression was, and often is, a crime against society, enforced capriciously by the authorities as their mood of siege waxes and wanes.

Mr. Alarcón and the Cuban authorities certainly are aware that books can be dangerous, highly effective weapons in any campaign against ignorance, intolerance, authoritarianism, and repression. Alarcón's du-

plicity reminds me of a second anecdote, of equally sinister import. When contra rebels, financed by the U.S. government, launched their ugly little war against the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua in the 1980s, the operation inspired an anti-contra demonstration, replete with calls for the end of U.S. involvement in Central America, in downtown Miami. The demonstrators were, for the most part, Anglo activists, and they were set upon by counter-demonstrators, for the most part far-right Cuban Americans, who charged into the crowd, fists swinging in fury. A few days later, a friend of mine spoke with a prominent attorney in Miami's Cuban American community, arguing with her about the violent manner in which her ideological fellow travelers had broken up what was otherwise a peaceful demonstration.

"You and your people don't understand the First Amendment to the Constitution," my friend argued. "People have the right to demonstrate and express themselves freely."

"On the contrary," the lawyer, herself an exile, replied. "We understand it. We just don't agree with it."

To understand freedom and yet to not agree with it is a breathtaking admission, given the magnitude of suffering it engenders, and one that provides valuable insight into the complexity of the ongoing Cuban tragedy and its ever distant resolution. "Necessary rules"—muzzling the opposition, for instance—are, throughout the ideological spectrum of unchecked power, responsible for unnecessary sins: the purges, the violence, the hatred and absolutism that contaminate the righteousness and purity of cause on both sides of the modern Cuban experience.

So goes the story of the twentieth century and its revolutions, especially those decades that encompassed the Cold War. When the left and the right butt heads, common people pay the price with their liberty. When the extreme left and the extreme right butt heads, the common person is devoured. When the bottom rises against the top, the middle is swept away in the flood. When the bottom replaces the top, any genuine movement toward the middle is seized upon as counterrevolutionary. And far too often, the difference between the old masters and the new masters is simply rhetorical, a matter of language, a matter of style.

For a while at least, the Cuban revolution seemed different, seemed to break the mold, seemed to be a victory for the dignity and freedom of the common person—and then it didn't seem that way at all—and on

both sides of the Florida Straits, one rule was constant: If you disagree with us, you'd better keep your mouth shut.

C. Peter Ripley's *Conversations with Cuba*, I think, is indeed dangerous, and will be seen as such by the irreconcilables within the Cuban communities, exiled and indigenous, and their die-hard supporters. And on still another level, this account of the author's travels in Cuba and his illuminating dialogue with its citizens poses a threat to the complacency of inside-the-beltway thinking about Cuba. As such, Mr. Ripley's book is a weapon not against people, American or Cuban, but against wrong-headed policies, aging stereotypes, dogmatic clichés, intransigence and arrogance, and the brittle but enduring myths of Cold War politics.

The essential, driving motivation behind *Conversations with Cuba* is the author's struggle to know, to know truly and clearly, beyond the headlines, beyond the policies, beyond the hatred and blind allegiance, beyond the cult of personality, beyond his own naiveté and earnestness, and beyond the strange seductive glamour of the revolution itself. It is a struggle to understand what lies at the heart of a sense of community, the collective energy that gathers itself into a grand cause, a struggle to understand the awfulness of the history between the United States and the island nation of Cuba.

An informed citizen presents a danger to all those who would wield power over the life of their societies, for an informed citizen, first and foremost, measures the use and abuse of power by its impact on the common person, which is to say, by its humanity. Most important, a citizen who has informed himself or herself has earned the right to speak out, a most provocative act, even in a democracy.

The virtue of this book, I believe, is the author's unflinching honesty, which also serves as its greatest point of vulnerability. Ripley, by vocation a historian, steps away from the strictures and orthodoxies—and, one must add, the illusions—of his profession to allow himself the opportunity to bear witness to history in the making. When a writer assumes the role of correspondent or chronicler, immediately certain fundamental decisions must be made, certain conventions and received beliefs reexamined and resolved anew. At the top of this list rests the notion of objectivity, or neutrality, one of the great conceits of journalism. Frankly, our most respected periodicals and news outlets and our

most respected reporters are no more models of neutrality than, say, Switzerland, which we now know negotiated a rather duplicitous posture during World War II. While one can acknowledge the honorable intentions of objectivity and its appropriateness for gathering hard evidence, one must also recognize that the ideal leaves room for intellectual dishonesty among its practitioners—or room for an aesthetic that chills me, like T. S. Eliot's insistence on the "impersonality of art."

Identity—who the writer *is*, rather than who the writer *isn't*—is most definitely a part of the story, regardless of the precious detachment coolly manufactured by so-called objective reporters. Objectivity is a matter of degree, and its threshold is rigid; past a quickly reached limit of purpose, the principle itself becomes a guise, a ruse. And even the most "objective" reporting is obliged to serve the higher agenda of the establishment press and its unanimous support of the status quo. In this context, objectivity is a comforting lie, a tacit endorsement of a system. Trust us, it urges. We are disinterested messengers. Well, not even a camera is a disinterested messenger; rather, it is an extension of the personality holding it, and a picture might well be worth a thousand *irrational* words in a society so easily swayed by imagery. "I think some people come to Cuba to find our unhappiness," says Paulo, the young man from Havana who became the author's steadfast companion. I think Paulo is right, and I think the behavior he describes is inevitable and wrong.

At the most basic level, a writer earns credibility by getting the slippery, shifting facts of the moment right, of course, but it's never as simple as that, and beyond accuracy, beyond convention, there's plenty of room for disagreement about the nature of the correspondent's role. Objectivity, for someone trying to understand the most complicated and difficult things about the world—politics and power, the human heart, betrayal, sacrifice—is a false, or at least an inadequate, science. In its stead, fair-mindedness and open-mindedness, expressed in the envelope of the writer's own value system, are the best we can hope for—are what we *should* hope for. A writer shapes what we know as much as any other player invested in a story—policy analyst or historian, spin doctor or diplomat, leader or peasant or exile or anyone else, and to report from a vacuum of self becomes a political, and perhaps ethical, sleight of hand.