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Adrift: The Cuban Raft People (review)

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Reviews

Alfredo A. Fernández. *Adrift: The Cuban Raft People*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 2000. 263 pp.

Alfredo Fernández has produced a book that should be required reading for academics, researchers, and the general public interested in the Cuban raft phenomenon, human rights, and/or immigration. Fernández covers all aspects of rafting, from the raft crisis of 1994 through the opening and closing of rafter refugee camps in Guantánamo and Panamá, the sinking of the tugboat *13 de Marzo* by Cuban officials, the shootdown of two Hermanos al Rescate planes in international waters, and the resolution of the Elián González case in 2000. Moreover, he uses the colorful and engaging prose of a prize-winning novelist and scriptwriter.

Fernández's text has the ring of truth, as it presents detailed anecdotes about the actors, political dynamics, and drama of key events. The story is larded with testimony from rafters, showing the range of motivations, experiences, and outcomes of those who set out to sea in fragile crafts. Of all the accounts of the raft exodus, *Adrift* is the most compelling and comprehensive.

Unfortunately, the book lacks an index, bibliography, and footnotes to substantiate the sources of this richly specific account. Rafters who gave testimony are named, as are some analysts of the events, but many are not. We do not know if the author was present at events, or interviewed participants himself, or received the stories from third parties. The work is more an impressive and readable tale than a fully documented historical account. Lack of verifiable sources leaves its credibility open to attack. Nonetheless, as one who helped establish the demography of rafting and gathered oral history on this subject, this reviewer would evaluate the tale as one based in fact. Fernández has clearly investigated the story from many angles.

Still, parts of the story are distorted and contain minor inaccuracies. For example, indignation regarding living conditions during the first months at the U.S. Naval Base leads to simplistic and inaccurate explanations of problems. A heartless and lazy military staff is blamed for having allowed the rafters' latrines to overflow, which presented a degrading public health hazard. In fact, for security and privacy reasons, the rafters themselves were the ones who sealed the latrines using various improvised devices in order to "privatize" their use among family and friends. This meant that the soldiers assigned to latrine duty often could not enter sealed units for several days, resulting in a

health hazard. The author shows little patience or empathy with the logistical task or with U.S. officialdom in general.

Of course, the same criticisms could be made of many footnote-laden but inaccurate academic accounts as well. Yet, in an academic work we would have the benefit of a stated hypothesis or research question revealing the researcher's frame of reference, as well as an explicit methodological trail that could be retraced. One wishes that *Adrift* had more academic rigor.

Despite the occasional error, the work is a solid package that covers the rafters' saga with sensitivity and style. It is the most complex appreciation yet written on the subject and deserves to be widely read.

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Gustavo Pérez Firmat. *My Own Private Cuba: Essays on Cuban Literature and Culture*. Boulder, Colo.: Society of Spanish and Spanish-American Studies, 1999. 251 pp.

Desde la introducción misma, incluso desde el título, *My Own Private Cuba*, el nuevo libro de ensayos de Gustavo Pérez Firmat no niega su carácter subversivo contra las expectativas creadas por el ensayo dentro de la academia norteamericana a la cual el profesor y ensayista pertenece. La vocación deconstructora que rige el libro festivamente se nota en el formato seguido por los ensayos que establecen un juego de inversión de la metodología tradicional del trabajo investigativo norteamericano. Sabemos que la correcta documentación, el estudio exhaustivo de las fuentes, el dominio de las previas investigaciones sobre el asunto, la calidad de la bibliografía utilizada son elementos que deben formar parte de un "buen" ensayo. Todo esto lo podrá encontrar el lector en las notas, es decir, en la posición marginal. En el texto central se privilegia un lenguaje gozoso que discurre sin atarse a citas o pruebas, sino creando a la vez un tipo de argumentación que discutiremos en sus líneas generales en los párrafos que siguen.

La estructura del libro responde a dos partes. La primera es un conjunto de ensayos que básicamente reproduce con cierta actualización de los recogidos bajo el título *The Cuban Condition* en el año 1989. La segunda, explica el autor, se compone de "essays that anticipated, extend and modify the arguments of that book" (6). La analogía que Firmat establece entre este continuo explorar el tema de la literatura y la cultura cubana (que por supuesto tiene en cuenta sus obras más colindantes con la autobiografía o el testimonio como *Life on the Hyphen* (1994) o *Next Year in Cuba* (1995) con el trabajo del cartógrafo de Borges en "El Hacedor," que termina identificando su nunca acabado mapa