

A Hundred Fires in Cuba

John Thorndike

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John Thorndike's *A Hundred Fires in Cuba* is a ranging, unflinching story of the Cuban Revolution, focused on the "beautiful commander, the hero of Yaguajay, the wildly famous Camilo Cienfuegos."

One of Castro's most loyal commanders, Cienfuegos was as well known for womanizing, dancing, and drinking as he was for his courage on the battlefield. This compelling novel captures the folk hero, cannily using an outsider's perspective to shine light on matters of great historical import.

While he is in New York City, Cienfuegos falls in love with a young American photographer, Clare Miller. Their affair, which ends when he's deported, results in a daughter whom he fears. Clare romanticizes the beautiful, powerful, rifle-toting comandante, but she harbors no illusions about the revolution or his qualifications as a parent.

The prose is elegantly crafted. It's not flashy, but it is effective. Word choices are lean, taut, and purposeful. Just enough Spanish is sprinkled in to be authentic, making the book seem thoroughly researched and authoritative. Depictions of communicating in a foreign land are captivating, bringing to life the resultant displacement and alienation; some over-enunciate, and others "talk like auctioneers, too fast to understand." Though this is clearly a work of fiction, the novel feels like a definitive account of a lesser-told narrative in a historically significant time.

Solid, fully realized characters—both real and fictitious—come across realistically, grounding the book. Clare's psychology is especially well established.

A Hundred Fires in Cuba is a sophisticated historical novel that effectively deploys a love triangle to capture the essence of a remarkable figure and the historic period that produced him, laying bare the yearnings of the heart.

JOSEPH S. PETE (July/August 2018)

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