ForeWord Reviews

A View from the Mangrove
Antonio Bentez-Rojo
Antonio Bentez-Rojo Translated by James Maraniss
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So little of what is said about the Caribbean reveals the history of its worlds. Indeed, it is quite often reduced to images of exotic females, sandy beaches and lilting accents. Such a narrow view detracts from the cultural nuances and history that characterize the worldview of each island. In A View from the Mangrove, Antonio Bentez-Rojo demystifies “the islands” for Western audiences. In his 11 short stories, he employs a variety of narrative techniques to tell the histories of slavery, imperialism and genocide that shape the region. His pieces effectively demonstrate the relative ungeneralizable nature of the Caribbean and the Americas.

The history of the area is loaned to us through the voices and language of the people who influenced it. There is John Hawkins, an intrepid English seafarer who, in his dispassionate tone, offers guidelines about how to capture slaves, communicate with them and maintain control over the region’s islands in “Gentlemen’s Agreement.” There is the decadent priest who serves in a small Haitian community shortly after the Haitian revolution in “Windward Passage.” The piece that lends its title to the collection is a reflective one, and it is largely narrated by a dying and delirious soldier who is on hiatus as Cuba’s war of independence from Spain rages. He speaks to us from the mangrove, that is, a location within the parameters of the island. He presents to us its landscape and politics with the authority of a native who is dying as a result of having tried to save Cuba from its European conquerors. Hence, “A View from the Mangrove” demonstrates one of the work’s central messages that the Caribbean perspective is best conveyed to the outside world by the islander him/herself.

These are not happy stories. Each has as its center or underlying theme the pain that is rooted in slavery, colonization and battles wreaked on people of color in the Caribbean. (Parenthetically, Bentez-Rojo demonstrates the inhuman(e) nature of the men who fought for ownership of the region.)

A View from the Mangrove takes you on an anthropological expedition. On each stop, readers unearth some relic that - dusted off - offers insight about the nascence of the Caribbean and the Americas. The stories are as fictional as they are historical, and each is taut, perhaps

echoing the kinds of stories and histories that lend them impetus. Yet we miss the voices of strong female characters. They are barely visible and - with the exception of Rebecca Crumber in “Summer Island” - peripheral or highly sexualized. However, A View from the Mangrove remains a thrilling piece, replete with passion, excitement and lore and marks Bentez-Rojo as a skilled and sophisticated storyteller. Readers will simultaneously battle some of the bleak narratives of the characters while succumbing to the magic of these tales. They cannot leave the experience until the last piece has ended. Bentez-Rojo humbles us with the history that is the Caribbean, but lets us appreciate the view from the mangrove, the beach and beyond. A View from the Mangrove is hardly an easy read, but - as Butas Antonio Bentez-Rojo demonstrates - neither is the Caribbean.

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