

★ **Sacrificio**

Ernesto Mestre-Reed

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Ernesto Mestre-Reed's historical novel is set in Cuba in the late 1990s, where a displaced young man learns the limits of family, trust, and community.

Rafa is an orphan. He moves to Havana, where Cecilia, a restaurant owner, becomes like family to him. Cecilia's older son, Nicolás, courts Rafa prior to becoming infected with HIV and becoming more erratic. Cecilia's younger son, Renato, follows in his brother's footsteps, including asking for initiation into a movement of disillusioned young men who consent to being infected with HIV.

Together with their missing father, the family has more secrets than the nearby beach has grains of sand. Renato takes up residence in a state-sponsored sanatorium where Rafa visits him, but when Renato disappears, Rafa feels compelled to find him, follow him, and determine the extent of his involvement in the shadowy world of the counterrevolutionaries. The Pope's 1998 visit to Cuba lights a spark among the disenchanting youth, promising a wave of violence. Caught up in Renato's inexorable pull toward self-destruction, Rafa falls in with European tourists, double agents, and the downtrodden.

Rafa's desires are inscrutable, beyond wanting to be near Renato. The extreme experiences that he has, from anonymous, paid sex to participating in a covert operation, point to the impact of systemic failures on him, showing how they obliterate his personhood, just as surely as nihilism and secrecy could. Narrated without the use of quotation marks, the prose takes on a psychedelic cast, blending memories with hallucinations. Evocative language is used to detail the creep of infections in once-healthy bodies and the decay of society in once-thriving cities.

Lush, dreamy descriptions contrast with grim fatalism in *Sacrificio*, a transcendent novel that catalogs the many ways that humans can hurt each other, and that a society can fall apart.

JEANA JORGENSEN (September / October 2022)

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