

The Skinny Years

Raul Ramos Y Sanchez

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A family flees from Castro's Cuba, in this gritty, humorous novel about a young boy's coming of age.

Raul Ramos Y Sanchez's *The Skinny Years* is a complex, humorous, and utterly absorbing coming-of-age tale set in the 1960s. With themes of friendship, family loyalty, and economic hardships, the novel explores a decade in the life of eight-year-old Victor "Skinny" Delgado. The novel opens with Victor's father, Juan Delgado, and his family living a life of luxury and success in Havana. As a professor of law at the University of Havana and a top supporter of the Batista regime, Mr. Delgado is proud of his anticommunist essays, but when Fidel Castro takes over, Batista and his defenders flee Cuba for their own protection.

Mr. and Mrs. Delgado, Skinny, his little sister Marta, and his maternal grandmother are left with little money when they arrive in Miami. Forced to live in a small house, with roaches as roommates, Mrs. Delgado takes a job as a hotel maid to support the family. Mr. Delgado refuses to work, convinced that Batista will regain power and the family's former riches will be restored. With the constant negative undertow in his home, Skinny decides to spend most of his time out in the neighborhood.

When Loco, a local kid with red, bushy hair, saves the overweight Skinny from getting into a fight at the park, they become loyal friends. Loco is also Cuban and helps Skinny adapt to some of the cultural differences. Ramos infuses the novel with comical teaching moments, as when Loco takes Skinny trick-or-treating for the first time. Skinny informs Loco that he will not wear his mother's scarf when they dress up as pirates, but Loco advises Skinny to "cut the *macho* act ... this isn't Cuba. Nobody here is going to think you're a *maricón* for wearing a scarf on Halloween."

Ramos has written a realistic, gritty, and witty coming-of-age story that focuses on not only Skinny's growth, but the growth of all the characters. This well-written novel about the Cuban experience in 1960s Miami offers a much-needed perspective to that era of American history.

MONICA CARTER (Summer 2016)

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