
*The Tragedy of Fidel Castro* is Karen Bennett and Chris Mingay’s translation of the João Cerqueira’s Portuguese alternative history novel *A Tragédia de Fidel Castro* (Saída de Emergência). This review is primarily concerned with the English translation, which has been nominated for the 2014 Montaigne Medal and was the finalist in the Historical Fiction category of the USA Best Book Awards, winner in the Multicultural category of the same awards and ForeWord Book of the year winner in Translations (Adult Fiction).

The prologue of *The Tragedy of Fidel Castro* sets the tone of a dry, playful satire. God, in his heavenly quarters, receives a call from Fátima, a real-life Portuguese civil parish, who anxiously informs him that war is about to begin. Careful note must be made here, as the pronouns for God are not capitalized. As Cerqueira states in his preface, the book takes place in ‘an imaginary time and space … All characters and organizations mentioned are entirely fictional’. Cerqueira lists Christ, God, JFK and Fátima as being in no way connected to the son of God, ‘the creator of the world and men’, the US president and the Portuguese site of a miracle of the same names. However, he admits that Fidel ‘perhaps has some similarities with the revolutionary leader and dictator, Fidel Castro’. That being said, it is difficult in the beginning to disassociate the characters from their famous namesakes. Indeed, some readers have apparently been somewhat offended by the fictionalized versions of God and Christ. In any case, God agrees to persuade his son to intervene in the impending war, as both instigators – JFK and Fidel – are claiming to act in his name or in a manner derived from his teachings.

Though a short novel, *The Tragedy of Fidel Castro* is rich with metaphor and multiple layers of meaning. It stands as a not-entirely-subtle reflection of the current state of politics the world over and the place and efficacy of religion in politics. An early example of this use of metaphor describes the effect Cerqueira’s unnecessary repetition sometimes has on the reader, when Fidel contrives to give a rousing speech to his followers. Here, the narrator drily notes that:

> He [Fidel] had repeated the same arguments time and time again, until they had simply become a tasteless mass thrust down the throats of his glutted company. They, with mouths open, partook endlessly of the revolutionary host offered by the high priest despite waves of nausea.

*The Tragedy of Fidel Castro* is often too wordy and long-winded in its efforts to impress a point. While Cerqueira’s use of metaphor is sometimes delightful, at other times the intricate metaphors are weakened by long-winded and unnecessary repetition; I would argue that the same dry points could be made much more powerful in an extended essay rather than in fiction. That being said, *The Tragedy of Fidel Castro* is a humorous, enjoyable read and the absurdity of some of its situations are truly comical yet eye-opening, when the subtext is read in relation to current and recent political practices. Metaphors are successfully drawn between the farcical rituals of political movements and the game of chess as each player finds his role changing. J.E. Hoover believes himself Queen to Fidel’s King, yet finds himself nothing more than an expendable pawn. For the readers, this metaphor is an obvious comment on the ruthlessness of power and expendability of political pawns. Similarly, metaphors are drawn between political machinations and a form of dance similar to the courtship or mating rituals between animals when Fidel is bizarrely disguised as a voluptuous woman dancing to an electronic beat. He finds himself frenzied in his efforts to maintain his appearance, struggling to keep up with the dance moves expected of him as the public hungrily...
strips him with their eyes. Readers can plainly see the underlying message of political leaders struggling and often failing to maintain the pretenses they are making to the public. As such, the translators must be credited for completing what was clearly an intense task bringing The Tragedy of Fidel Castro into the English-speaking world.

In this regard, the translation process and the attitudes toward translators are more appealing that Cerqueira’s text itself. In a 2013 interview, Cerqueira praises his translators, saying that they have a ‘fascinating profession … the literary translator is also a writer – in a way he creates another book with the same story’. He describes this as a very difficult and complex task … sometimes the meaning of some metaphors and other literary techniques can be misconstrued. On the other hand, as my book is a satirical work, transferring the humour into English was crucial – and this they managed quite well. In the end … I learnt a great deal and grew as a writer.

The Tragedy of Fidel Castro is technically proficient and a prime example of the power of translators yet fails to provide a sustained output of entertainment. Whilst admittedly humorous, it quickly loses its appeal through over-reliance on repetition to the point where it becomes a rambling backtrack over the same few points with a very loose, almost insignificant plot taking second place to social, political and religious commentary.

Caitlin Roper

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