

# Tragic Cuban Émigré and a Tale of 'The Door To Happiness'

---

## THE DOORMAN

By Reinaldo Arenas

Translated from the Spanish by Dolores M. Koch  
Grove Weidenfeld. 208 pp. \$16.95

---

by David Foster Wallace

---

**T**he *Doorman*, a small, strange novel, is the mid-'80s product of probably the best Cuban-born writer since Alejo Carpentier - Reinaldo Arenas. His life was as sad and difficult as any in 20th-century letters.

Arenas, born in 1943, left home at 15 to join the anti-Batista forces, and, at 22, established himself as a major literary figure in Fidel Castro's revolutionary Cuba with his first novel, *Singing From the Well*. His second novel was denied Cuban publication because of its treatment of homosexuality; he was arrested on charges of immorality and "extravagance" at 25, and two more novels and a story collection were suppressed in Cuba but published in Mexico and Uruguay to acclaim.

Then his life took another turn for the worse. In 1970, Arenas was convicted by old Communist Party comrades of being a "social misfit," and he was sentenced to two years of cane-cutting at a labor camp, an experience about which he wrote in *El Central: A Cuban Sugar Mill*, a Spanish-language classic not published in America until a few years ago. After a decade of prison terms for various counterrevolutionary activities, punctuated by periods of low-profile-keeping in Havana, Arenas finally escaped to the United States during the Mariel boat lift of 1980.

He lived in obscure poverty in a Hell's Kitchen apartment in New York, spurned for his anti-Castro leanings by the same literati who praised him when he was in prison. His American career was revived in the mid-'80s with the translation of several of his early books and contracts to write three more (including *The Doorman*) - just in time for Arenas to be diagnosed with AIDS. Close to death, Arenas rejected a final trip to the hospital and committed suicide in late 1990.

The facts of Arenas' life and death lend a gray weight to the opening of *The Doorman*: "This is the story of Juan, a young man who was dying of grief." Like Arenas, Juan has fled persecution in Cuba in 1980, though he is exactly 20 years younger than Arenas was when he got out. Dreamy, weird, passive and speaking little English, Juan has a hard time holding any of the menial jobs secured for him by a shadowy community of successful Cuban émigrés.

\* \* \* \*

As the book opens in 1992, Juan is a doorman at a luxury apartment building in Manhattan. It is as a doorman that Juan finds his niche as an immigrant, his raison as a human being, and the grief that defines and ruins

his life:

For suddenly our doorman discovered (or thought he had discovered) that his tasks could not be limited to just opening the door of the building - but that he, the doorman, was the one chosen, elected, singled out (take your pick) from all mankind to show everyone who lived there a wider door, the door to their own lives, which Juan described as - and we must quote him exactly even though it may seem (and, in fact, be) ridiculous - "the door to true happiness."

The intrusive narrative voice here, the "we," belongs to the one million-member community of Cubans who emigrated at Fulgencio Batista's fall, who have now made American-dream successes of themselves and, for obscure reasons, have had Juan under particular surveillance and protection since his arrival in 1980.

Though the stilted, interpolated commentary that this "we" indulges in can get irritating after a while, Arenas' choice of a whole community to narrate Juan's story ends up being apt, because *The Doorman* is less a disguised autobiography or even a novel than a dark fable about the very possibility of community.

Hence, the fact that each of Juan's building's tenants - characters who are introduced, enter and engage Juan in some bizarre exploitive encounter, one after the other - is a parody of American isolation, fear and obsessive attachment. As Juan tries to proselytize his tenants on the need to find a "wider door" than the glass one he opens, each tenant tries to involve Juan in some monomaniacal focus that the character has decided ensures community and fulfillment.

One tenant believes that giving out candies is the way to make connections between people, and his apartment is a confectioner's warehouse. Another believes that the key to happiness is ultra-white teeth, and he tries to get Juan to trade his own set for some movie-star caps.

There's a senescent playboy whose worship of sex is undercut by his impotence. There's the Ecuadoran founder of the Church of Love Through Friendly and Constant Contact, who espouses a goopy, Buscaglia-type touching as the way to bring people into true relation.

There's a wacky inventor who preaches the virtues of the totally prosthetic body; a former movie star who's such a miser that she's getting ready to live on the streets to cut overhead; a beautiful thanatophile whose suicide attempts keep getting thwarted; two aging gay men desperate for a dream-love; a blowsy alcoholic; a Marxist academic who wants to "rehabilitate" Juan, and so on.

These overtly symbolic caricatures, so privileged, lonely, blinded by narcissism and

obsession, so oddly American, enter stagily, subjecting Juan to some diatribe or misadventure, and then disappear. They make the first half of *The Doorman* seem like a slighter version of Kafka's *Amerika* - another dark picaresque with a tortured foreign ingenue adrift amid all the nation's bright promise and sad reality, Juan as a Karl Rossman defined by questions of freedom and relationship instead of guilt and penance.

It's in *The Doorman*'s second half that the book abandons all pretense of being anything more than an ingenious parable about slavery and freedom, collectivities and outsiders. Each tenant has a pet - a million-dollar Egyptian dog, a polar bear, a parrot, a goldfish, an orangutan - and the pets, unlike their owners, are keenly interested in Juan's vague ideas of escape and big doors. They can speak. They invite Juan to secret meetings in the building's basement, where they advocate a particular Xanadu to which they can escape.

Juan and the Egyptian dog struggle to get them to transcend their own tastes and prejudices about freedom and submit to the greater chance of freedom that's a function of compromise and community.

Eventually, Juan's pet conspiracy is found out by the tenants; he is committed to an insane asylum (each of whose inmates is a brilliant pathological double of a tenant's neurosis); is liberated by the animals, who tear the bars from his window and carry him off, and is made the leader of a growing army of rebellious animals, who stop squabbling and unite to create their own state somewhere "near the equator."

The reader is struck by the resemblance, for Arenas, between house pets and immigrants, both removed from a "wild" exterior at once crueler and more real than privileged captivity, both objects of either derision or sloppy condescension, both imprisoned by the same promise of freedom and safety that has robbed them of the will to get truly free.

The constant narrative interruptions that apologize for the outlandish plot developments and assure the reader that every word is true do not create realism. But they do help establish the novel's sardonic counterpoint - the hostility between the established Cubans who fled Castro's revolution and the brutalized victims of the revolution who, like Arenas, arrived in Florida's refugee camps 20 years later.

Arenas has the narrators assume a self-congratulatory tone as they assure us that they'd done all they could for Juan when they abandoned him in the asylum: "To go beyond this point would have meant to endanger our hard-earned reputation as a reliable and powerful community in this country." And then he has them claim, contradictorily, that Juan who now presides over an army of liberated pets, is the Cuban community's "secret lethal weapon."

Arenas communicates a marvelous dis-

## THE DOORMAN (cont'd)

---

gust at these old anti-Castroites, who, once through the great door to freedom that America represents, have become more concerned with their own place in the enslaving hierarchy of power and privilege than with helping pull other humans through the same door.

Much of *The Doorman's* weird moral force concerns Arenas' idea of America as a false door, presenting itself as a utopia for huddled masses who, once they arrive, find either brutal exploitation, or the "freedom" to start doing their own exploiting . . . which of course is still slavery.

The figure of Juan, vague, driven, nutty, shy, obsessed with a doorway that he admits he can't conceive of, so much like Arenas but so much younger, communicates the author's own idea of happiness in such a poignantly paradoxical way that it manages to avoid seeming trite or sentimental even to Americans for whom so much, today, seems banal.

Arenas' central idea is a tragic one: that the possibility of happiness exists only for those who cannot be frightened or seduced into settling for substitutes, and that actual happiness consists simply in giving oneself up to a design greater than one's own happiness.

Finding the door, for Juan/Arenas, is nothing other than helping others to find the door. Happiness equals grief equals the integrity to experience either. The community of doors becomes, resides in, the individual. The end of *The Doorman* imagines a marvelous system of doors, a different one for each seeker:

And through these doors everyone, finally, will eagerly rush in. That is, all except me, the doorman, who on the outside will watch them disappear forever.