

Between two cultures

Thriller becomes a quest for identity

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

One of the remarkable aspects of Canadian life is the cultural diversity we experience on a daily basis. It is often observed that, compared with our neighbours to the South, Canadians are a more open, more welcoming people, tolerant of other cultures and celebrating their differences. As a result, Canada attracts some of the most talented immigrants from around the world, enriching us all. Such is the case with this week's author. Forsaking the familiar path of Cuban expatriates who settled in South Florida, José Latour left Cuba for Spain, and subsequently came to Canada in the fall of 2004. With less than three years on our soil, he has already enriched the Canadian literary scene.

José Latour

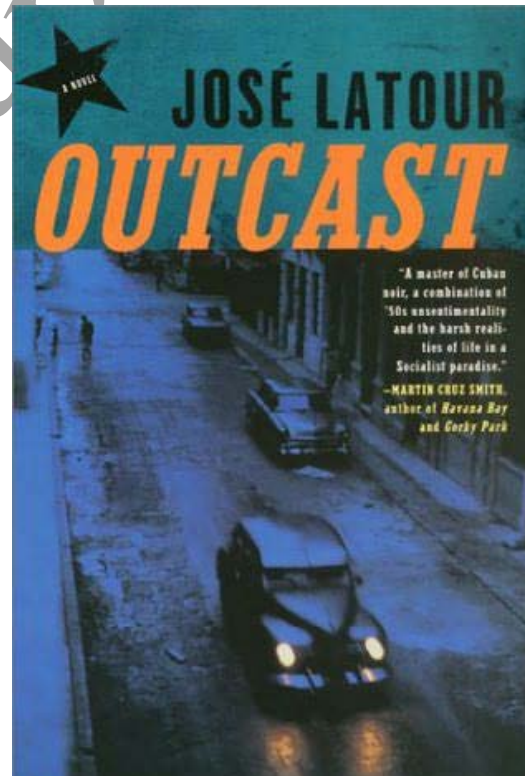
Latour brings with him impressive credentials. A former vice president of the International Association of Crime Writers, and one of the Spanish-speaking world's top crime fiction writers, his novels have been published in Britain, the United States, Japan, Germany, Italy, France, Spain, and the Netherlands. Latour currently lives in Toronto.

Outcast

(McClelland & Stewart, 2007)

With the fall of the former Soviet Union and the co-opting of China into the Capitalist camp, Cuba remains today the last bastion of old-school Communism.

Elliot Steil is a forty-four year old schoolteacher living in Havana, eking out a squalid existence teaching English to his charges. Because his father fled Cuba for America, Elliot is viewed with suspicion by the Communist Party authorities who run every aspect of Cuban life. His career has been placed on hold, and his personal life is not much better. He feels frustrated with his government and betrayed by his father, who abandoned him and his mother soon after settling in the United States.



Elliot has long considered trying to reach American shores, but he is all too aware

of the dangers, both physical and political, in attempting to escape from the land of his birth. He has no desire to drown at sea, as have so many of his countrymen; nor does he wish to become an outcast—a social pariah—if he were to be betrayed to the authorities.

Small wonder, then, that Elliot is intrigued when an American appears, claiming to be sent by his father to get him out of Cuba and into the US. He makes his plans carefully and furtively, arranging to be picked up by the man in a small power boat just off the Cuban coast. The boat arrives as planned, Elliot swims out and is hauled aboard, and dares to dream of a new life in a new land.

Of course, things are seldom that simple. A few miles at sea Elliot is attacked by his alleged benefactor and thrown overboard. Several hours later he is picked up by a family of rafters who are themselves trying to escape to Florida. After days at sea, and nearly dead from thirst and starvation, the group is finally spotted by a US Coast Guard patrol and taken to Miami. After they are subjected to close questioning, Elliot and his fellow rafters are given political asylum.

Elliot's first goal is to establish himself in his new home. Immersing himself within the local Cuban community, he takes a succession of subsistence jobs, legal and otherwise, and gradually improves his situation. Before long he begins to get his bearings and gradually acquires the means to allow him to move to the next step: to track down the man who attempted to kill him, to find out why, and to discover just exactly what happened to his father and why he abandoned his family so many years ago. Elliot's quest will be a journey that cuts across all strata of American life,

from car thieves to small businessmen, to the dark halls of the CIA, and more than once he will find himself in the crosshairs of dangerous adversaries. The fears and uncertainties of his homeland, it seems, have followed Elliot Steil to the shores of America.

Compelling and insightful

Outcast is a richly complex, yet very readable novel. On one level it is a challenging and original crime story. On another level, it is a penetrating and insightful account of life in Cuba, with all the immediacy one would expect of a narrator who has spent much of his life there. Latour is not sparing in his criticism of his homeland: it is, he notes, a land of chronic blackouts, widespread shortages, rationing, favouritism among the Party faithful, indoctrination, constant surveillance, and control. But neither is the author seduced by the affluence of America. He rejects both its rampant materialism and widespread violence, his protagonist reflecting that “*Somehow fifth- and sixth-graders manage to smuggle knives, marijuana, porno magazines and even guns into schools...Imagine. Hundreds of shiny patrol cars manned by beefy guys armed to the teeth, and they can't control gunfights in elementary schools. The most dangerous thing ever found in Dani's classroom in Cuba was a razor blade for sharpening pencils; the heaviest drug, a stinking cigarette butt.*”

This then, is Elliot's dilemma: even as he closes the door on his life in Cuba, with its shortcomings that he knows all too well, he has not, nor, we suspect, will he ever fully embrace his new land. Like so many immigrants, Elliot finds himself between cultures, a man without a country. It is an engrossing tale of an individual struggling to define himself in

a world that, torn between two divergent value systems, ultimately defies understanding. In the end, *Outcast* is more than a simple crime novel; it chronicles one man's desperate quest to achieve personal identity and closure.

Outcast was shortlisted for an Edgar Award by the Mystery Writers of America.

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