



# A Simple Habana Melody

*Oscar Hijuelos*

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It is 1947, and Israel Levis, a Cuban composer whose life had once been a dream of music, love, and sadness, returns to Cuba after being mistakenly imprisoned during the Nazi occupation of France.

When Levis arrives back in Habana, his mind returns to an unrequited romance with the alluring Rita Valladares, a singer for whom Levis had written his most famous song, "Rosas Puras." This 1928 composition became the most famous rumba in the world and changed American and European tastes in music and dance forever.

A love story—of art, family, and country—*A Simple Habana Melody* is a virtuoso performance from one of our most important writers.

## A Simple Habana Melody Details

Date : Published June 17th 2003 by Harper Perennial (first published 2002)

ISBN : 9780060928698

Author : Oscar Hijuelos

Format : Paperback 368 pages

Genre : Fiction, Novels, Music, Historical, Historical Fiction, Cultural

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# From Reader Review *A Simple Habana Melody* for online ebook

## Roger DeBlanck says

Most of Hijuelos's novels deal with Cuban immigrants and their process of acculturation in America. In his most interesting work, *A Simple Habana Melody*, he turns to Cuba, the homeland of his heritage, to explore the life of Israel Levis, a gifted and distinguished musician living in Habana. (Hijuelos chooses to use the phonetic spelling of "Habana" instead of Havana.)

The novel begins with Israel's return voyage home to Habana from Europe after his captivity in the Nazi concentration camp at Buchenwald. Having been on tour in Paris when the war hits France, Israel's name makes his identity mistaken for a Jew, and so he is sent to a labor camp. In the opening pages of the novel, he is sailing back to Habana and the story begins to work backwards. With resplendent descriptions, Hijuelos covers Israel's life from an inquisitive childhood to his successful career as a composer. A bulk of the plot addresses Israel's lifelong love affair with the elusive Rita Valladares.

This is a standout novel in Hijuelos's oeuvre. His prose is achingly rich and elegant with sadness and longing. He captures the pristine loveliness of Cuba and an era of musical wonder in Habana before the war and the subsequent revolution with its rise of communism. Hijuelos is a writer to admire for his literary gifts: the fine and precise prose, the polish evident in each of his sentences, the guilty pleasure of sensuality and eroticism in his scenes, and the immensely real and unforgettable characters he creates. *A Simple Habana Melody* is my favorite Hijuelos novel, one in which images and passages of Cuba remain vivid like photographs in my memory.

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## Danny Musgrove says

Israel Levis, a fictitious character, one of the most famous Cuban pianist and composers, returns home to Cuba after spending the last 14 months in a Nazi concentration camp. His most famous composition, is a rumba called "Rosas Puras" (his La Vie En Rose, if you will), a song written for the love of Levis' life, Rita Valladares. The book goes back and forth between Israel's younger life, growing up in Cuba, happiness mixed with conflicting emotions, such as his love for Rita that he cannot verbally express, to his confusion about his own sexuality, to the horrors of Nazi occupation after he moves to France and being labeled a Jew. But he always has his music to fall back on. In his final days he reflects to find meaning and come to terms with everything he has been through. The mix of culture, history, and music is Oscar Hijuelos at his best.

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## Robsy says

I agree with previous posters that this book is hella repetitive. Take, for example:

P98: "...in her case it was with the composer of "Rosas Puras", Israel Levis himself, who, ever gentlemanly, to her disbelief, had always been too timidly disposed around her."

P143: "...in her case with the composer of "Rosas Puras", Israel Levis himself, who, to her disappointment, had always been too timidly inclined around her."

That is but one example out of many.

Yet, I did not think this book was boring and I very much enjoy his writing style. I am excited to read *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*- his Pulitzer winner. This book could have used some editing, however.

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## **David Lentz says**

The writing in this novel about the musical career of a Cuban composer is itself lyrical. The narrative is prose that aspires to be, and is, both poetry and music. The phrasing and the flow of the syntax is melodious as the composer's experience, because of his name, in a Nazi concentration camp runs counterpoint to the theme. And "Rosas Puras", his most famous and enduring composition, reappears faithfully as a leitmotif throughout the narrative. El Gordito, Israel Levis, and his close relationships with Rita Valladares (singer), Manny Cortez (composer) and his family are full of tender and touching moments. He is simply a man on a quest to find the beauty of life, the music hidden just beneath its surface and awaiting his discovery of its simple melodies. His devotion to his music can be a demanding mistress whom he has no choice but to love with pure devotion and ultimately proves to be his salvation. *Hijuelos* reinforces his stature as one of America's most supremely talented writers in this sensuously rich and sonorous novel. The close of the book holds moments of heartbreaking tenderness without sentimentality. *A Simple Habana Melody* is original, germinal, mesmerizing and sung in a distinctive, if not unique, lyrical voice that could only be proffered by a truly gifted writer of the stature of Oscar Hijuelos.

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## **1.1 says**

Halfway into this novel I was already thinking about the review (I hate this when it happens, but it does) and wondering if two stars was too unfair. At the time I thought so, but somehow I was won over by the final pages, though still not convinced of any inherent greatness. It's a decent piece of fiction, but there are some really flawed and/or plain sections of prose (from a writer who is clearly capable of more) and the story is not entirely there. I don't like prodigies or stories about prodigies, I suppose, because the struggle to master something is simply more compelling (to me) than 'God-given' hypertalent with which Israel Levis is bestowed. He also is granted a 'magnificent member'... his only flaws are that he is a bit of a momma's boy, possibly bisexual (look - I don't consider this a flaw, but it is so treated in the book), indecisive (but then, who isn't?), and I don't remember any others. I suppose this may well be the author's way of indicating the privilege of the protagonist's life, which is why I forgive.

From the start, I was worried because of the cover of this book that it would be an oversaturated, unreal, sentimental piece of romantic-historical fiction. It takes itself very seriously, but this only makes the whole thing kind of ridiculous at points. It was, to a certain extent, kind of stupid. But then life is kind of stupid, as well, so by the end it had won me over, and therefore I give it three stars. But make no mistake, these are three stars of mediocrity. It's the decent kind of mediocrity, though.

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## **Mike says**

This book is sort of two things, a story of unconsummated love between Rita and Israel and a look at the pre-WW2 world, particularly Cuba and Paris, through the eyes of a musician. The third leg of it, if you will, is

mentions of Israel's magnificent virility. I read a review after the fact that mentioned the book lacked a strong narrative thread, and that's definitely the case. The bulk of it is adequate, but it doesn't sing. The ending is better, but it wasn't enough to lift this to 4, I think.

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## **Nick says**

It is possible that no one admires Oscar Hijuelos' "The Mambo Kings Sing Songs of Love" more than I do. In "Mambo Kings", Hijuelos wrote what is my favorite kind of novel, one that opens up a community with depth and resonance, in which the narrative flows irresistibly. Subsequent efforts, some of them admirably in themselves, haven't measured up. "A Simple Habana Melody" reads almost like Hijuelos' effort to recapture the magic. Again, an aging musician lives in exile, again the haunting melody written for a lost love, and again, the lost love. Israel Levis inhabits an earlier Cuba than the Mambo Kings; the oppression that drives him abroad comes from the Machado presidency, not the Castro regime, and he winds up in France, not New York. The "beautiful Maria" of Levis' life is Rita Valladares, a singing and dancing star (and sometime rival to Josephine Baker - Hijuelos lays on the famous cameos a little thickly in this outing). Valladares actually comes across the greatest vitality of any character in the novel; the character of Levis in comparison seems pallid and diffident, despite the gastronomic and erotic appetite that Hijuelos gives him. He is in fact most interesting early in the novel, as a shrunken man returning from a camp, the Nazi having decided, perhaps accurately, that he has a Jewish heritage. The language occasionally overheats as well, especially during the repetitive sex scenes.

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## **Gabriela says**

The prose was enjoyable, the reading really flowed. I liked much better the first part that describes his childhood in Habana, his family life and learning music.

After he composes "Rosas Puras", the novel turns to be very repetitive, he goes to some cities, drinks, plays, sleeps around, repeat cycle. His indecision and the repetitive nature of his middle life were boring, specially all the mentions to his "majestic virility", the plot only changed a bit when the Nazi enter the picture, but that wasn't explored either.

There were moments when I had the feeling that the Israel and the song really existed, but the fact that he met every single artist and historical figures of the time convinced me that it was all fiction. The author mentions in his "Author's Note" that he was inspired by the life of a real Cuban composer and that his persecution in Europe, I found it curious because his life under the Nazi was hardly explored. I understand that he didn't wanted to turn into "The Pianist" movie, but if it is only a "fade into black", it misses the point.

I think the problem is that the novel is almost a biographical depiction of Israel's life in chronological order, but it didn't have a topic. It could have easily explored the construction of identity, how music is turned into a commodity and sells some cultural aspect as exotic, race as a social construct, life as an immigrant, the rapid changes of the world and Cuba, etc. but it seems that wasn't the author's intention.

About the edition, several accents and translations of Spanish were odd, also, there were some typos.

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## **Dave says**

Rita Valladeres is a fascinating woman, and her time touring America as a singer of top end ability while her family unravels was quite good. Unfortunately that's only about 10% of the book and the bulk of the rest is devoted to Israel Levis, a Cuban composer who just may be the Least Interesting Man in the World.

Israel is good at composing and, as the author reminds us every other page, he wrote 'Rosa Puras', which Rita made her own and hundreds of musicians covered. He also likes bourbon, brothels, and turning down Rita. He could marry her, but, no, because reasons. How about have her as a mistress when she all but throws herself at him? Again, no, because reasons. And when her husband is out of the way. No, again, because booze and hookers are better than the most desirable woman he's ever known apparently.

Also, Israel has a big dick. Hijuelos tells us this almost as frequently as he mentions 'Rosas Puras'. I'm not exaggerating when I say that it is unlikely a male porn star's memoir would mention penis size as much as this novel about a composer.

Randomly, Israel somehow ends up in a concentration camp, because his name is Israel and he's circumcised and 'Muh Nazis'. This was at least a bit more interesting, though far less plausible, than the bulk of the book - a boring read about an old man come back to Havana after years in exile.

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## **Sue says**

With a style as lyrical as music itself, Hijuelos explores the depths of longing and loss, and the pinnacles of life and love. Israel Levis, a devout Catholic and successful composer in pre-war Cuba, struggles with the challenges of success, love, and family, survives imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp, and ultimately finds salvation and peace.

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## **Ruthanne Taylor says**

I devoured this book. I loved every word. One of the most beautifully written, wonderful stories I have ever read. I will certainly read more from Senor Oscar Hijuelos.

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## **Bjorn Arvidsson says**

As every book by Hijuelos I've read, this was sweet and had much in common with South- and Latin-American authors I know; colours, smells, feelings: this is the essence of this book, I feel. What this lacks and The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love, The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez-O'Brien and Mr Ives' Christmas had which this one lacks, is a really interesting story which progresses through the book. I suppose that IS the idea here; a man who essentially remains the same, though partially altered by his war-time experience. So; sweet, but ultimately it left me wishing for just a bit more.

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## **Maria Aenlle says**

I liked the book. The characters were memorable and the description of what the musician went through in Germany during WWII was quite disturbing and impressionable. His description of what happened in Cuba under Machado was accurate in some way and not in others. The book could have been shorter. A little repetitive but I finished it.

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## **Mary says**

I really did not like this book and did not finish it. The book was very boring. it just gave info about different uneventful happenings in the life of the composer. There are too many good books to read to waste time on this book.

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## **Ronald Wise says**

Cuban composer Israel Levis writes a simple melody called "Rosas Puras" which becomes world famous. Its fame and royalties allow him to relocate to Europe in time to be arrested in Paris as a Jew — he was a devout Catholic but the Nazis could not see beyond his name. I enjoyed the opportunity to see Cuba from times way before mine, and before my country's obsession with humiliating Castro. To me the simple melody was symbolic of a pure innocent desire, which lingered after all the destruction and broken souls of World War II. I learned of this book through a *Writer's Almanac* tribute to Hijuelos' birthday (08/21/1951), its inclusion on the Seattle Public Library's reading list "Reading Across the Map: Latino Fiction", and on the list "Cuba Si!" in Nancy Pearl's *Book Lust*.

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