



Days of Awe

Achy Obejas

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“RICH AND SONOROUS PROSE . . . There’s plenty of reason to hope for the future of a fiction that welcomes writers with such a passionate sense of the past.”

–*San Jose Mercury News*

On New Year’s Day, 1959, Alejandra San José was born in Havana, entering the world through the heart of revolution. Fearing the turmoil brewing in Cuba, her parents took Ale and fled to the shores of North America—ending up in Chicago amid a close community of Cuban refugees. As an adult, Ale becomes an interpreter, which takes her back to her homeland for the first time. There, she makes her way back through San José history, uncovering new fragments of truth about the relatives who struggled with their own identities so long ago. For the San Josés, ostensibly Catholics, are actually Jews. They are *conversos* who converted to Christianity during the Spanish Inquisition. As Alejandra struggles to confront what it is to be Cuban and American, Catholic and Jewish, she translates her father’s troubling youthful experiences into the healing language of her own heart.

“Lyrically written, *Days of Awe* reflects the way Cuban Spanish is spoken with poetic rhythm and frankness.”

–*Ms.*

“An ambitious work . . . A deft talent whose approach to sex, religion, and ethnicity is keenly provocative.”

–*Miami Herald*

“With intelligent, intense writing, Obejas approaches . . . the heady climes of Cuban American stalwarts Oscar Hijuelos and Cristina Garcia.”

–*Library Journal* (starred review)

Days of Awe Details

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From Reader Review Days of Awe for online ebook

Nancy Alexander says

AS a Black Jew who grew up in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in Chicago thinking I was Puerto Rican, I could relate quite well to some of the themes in this book: religion as identity, language as expression of culture, secret identities. At first I found the skipping around of the story's timeline annoying in its looping. Eventually I found the circularity of the storyline like memory itself, kind of random and out of order. I really liked the main characters, Alejandra and her parents and their secret history and observances. I also eagerly absorbed Obejas' view of the Cuban Revolution, a political action which I had supported as necessary, but now am not so sure, like the characters who have remained in Cuba at great personal sacrifice. I learned a great deal about santeria, palo monte, and the sephardim who became conversos and anusim. Living with a secret religion in a country as catholic as pre-revolution Cuba really warped the main character's relatives. They all bore the scars of either living openly Jewish or living secretly Jewish or ignoring it completely. Only the main character, Alejandra, who had the choice to live openly in America as Jewish, as Cuban, as gay, or as anything she wished, still had difficulty defining who she is and what she believed. The racial aspect of this novel was unstated but there nevertheless; the non-African featured San Jose family gets out, while their neighbors, the black Menachs stay in Cuba and endure the Revolution for 40 years. I wondered why the father, after he got out of Cuba and moved to Rogers Park, one of the most diverse Jewish neighborhoods in Chicago, continued to practice Judaism secretly, why he didn't join one of the many Sefardi congregations there, why in America he continued to bear the burden and shame of 500 years of secret observance. There is definitely a culture clash between the Sefardim and the Ashkenazim in this story, which I can appreciate. Having grown up with Ashkenazim, I found the Sefardim much more accepting of my skin and hair, and I didn't have to prove my Jewishness all the time. Setting this story of secret observance in Cuba where santeria synchronizes with the Catholic saints, it's easy to see how things become jumbled after hundreds of years. There were other culture clashes as well: immigrant v. refugee, Cuban American v. Cubano, outed v. in the closet. It was thoughtful read that got me to question what exactly IS faith.

Sean Hoskin says

Visiting the inescapable question of identity, Obejas gives us characters assiduously striving to reconcile the known and previously unknown elements of cultural identity. The Americas are a confluence of ethnicities, and in our daily public lives most of us have assumed one or another without addressing the multiplicity we all bear. The protagonist of this work when faced with a lost heritage unwinds the identity in which she has been brought up to craft, for herself, the one which represents a full flowering of her cultural inheritance.

Brent says

Beautifully told story of a Cuban-American woman discovering her Jewish roots and the conflicts that arise. Because it's told as a memoir, it's easy to forget this is a novel and I always had to wonder if it was really an autobiography or not. If you're interested in the topic, Jewish literature, the stories of anusim, conversos, the nature of Cuban exiles, etc. then this is a must read. It does drag a little in the middle, and gets a little confusing as there are flashbacks (and flash forwards), but well worth the effort.

Note: the back cover of the book proclaims "Winner of the Lambda Award for Lesbian fiction." For those of you who may want to read the book for the "lesbianism," don't bother. Our protagonist has relationships with both men and women and there is no graphic content. Well, maybe a little. Very little. Mostly it's just an acknowledgment that she happens to have a boyfriend or girlfriend at that time in the story. This book is about family, relationships, and history. The search for meaning.

MichelleCH says

If the main character hadn't been so self-absorbed and whiny, I think I would have enjoyed the story more. The conflict between being Cuban and Jewish would have been made so much stronger without the shallow characters and random, almost forced, sex scenes. There are so many better writings exploring the competing forces of cultural identity.

Eliana says

I loved this book. It took me sort of a long time to get through it, but I didn't even mind because every time I picked it up, it felt like a treat to be reading it. There were so many beautiful passages about Judaism and about Cuban history and the fact that Ale's father is a translator and Ale is an interpreter allowed for so many wonderful musings about language that were incredible to read. All of the characters felt very real and relatable, and I loved that Ale is bi and there's never a big deal made about it. Also, I started this book on Rosh Hashanah and finished it on Yom Kippur, so I read Days of Awe during the literal days of awe!

Dana says

I don't think I would have finished reading this book if I weren't interested in Cuban history and current issues. Obejas writes beautifully, but this book was disjointed and I felt like there were random characters and experiences without relevance. In fact, it really reads more like a memoir or non-fiction book ... I found I kept double-checking that it really was a novel and that the author's name wasn't the same as the main character's. From reading the author's note, their stories and backgrounds are similar, so surely this book has some basis in truth. In addition, because so much historical background was shared throughout the book, it added to the non-fiction feel of it. Nonetheless, the book kept my interest and although I've read a lot about Cuban Jewish history and even visited Cuba on a Jewish mission, some gaps in my information were filled and I learned several things I hadn't previously known. I think this book would be a great read for people I know in New Mexico - until moving there, I hadn't heard of conversos or crypto-Jews - and Obejas' research in this area is very thorough and enlightening.

Brandi Larsen says

Days of Awe is a poetic book. It's the story of a family of exiles who settle in Chicago after leaving Cuba. Told from the point of view of narrator Alejandra, who was born on the same day that Fidel Castro rose to power, the novel explores what it means to belong.

This novel is as much about the family as it is about Alejandra. They're all caught between multiple worlds, trying to find how to balance being Cuban with being American and, for Alejandra's father and his extended family, how to balance being Cuban with being Jewish.

Both Alejandra and her father work as translators, which adds a lyrical edge to the novel as the readers get to explore the root of words in Spanish and English (love is one of them) along with the characters. Achy Obejas also excelled at writing the landscapes of Havana: everything is so crisp, it feels like you're there.

The novel unwraps like an onion and it's well-crafted; however it ends abruptly after a critical plot point is revealed. I felt a touch cheated, as the final incident didn't seem strong enough to be the catalyst for the rest of the book. Also, even though there's a glossary in the back, so much of the allusions and symbolism is based on an understanding of Judaism and Cuba that I wonder if the novel would make sense to someone unfamiliar with Hebrew and Spanish. At times, I was annoyed by the constant switch in the way she identified people. She'd use "my father" and "Enrique" (his name) in the same paragraph, which pulled me out of the story.

That said, it's a beautiful book that I'm glad I read.

Ruthie says

I thought the subject matter of this book would grab me - I have been on a Spanish Inquisition kick lately. As I was reading I was convinced it was a memoir and kept forgiving the author her tangents, off topic threads, unbelievable coincidences, and highly unlikely episodes- after all it was a memoir right? Except that it isn't a memoir, and so the inconsistencies and other odd occurrences, random historical mentions, just annoyed me! I also was put off by the brief, tossed off mentions of important and/or interesting details - especially those relating to santeria, palo monte, the prenda judia. There is a glossary at the back, but there were mentions of these practices that were jarring and no explanation was offered.

Most of the characters were not well developed and their actions were often reprehensible without rational. The main character was someone I found unpleasant, selfish and annoying. Such a shame - this should have been an interesting book about a small group about which little is known.

Nicholas Tasca says

No Forward Momentum

The book was boring... there's nothing more too it. Nice use of poetic prose, but it never went anywhere unfortunately.

Jessica says

Did not actually finish this book! I gave it a sporting chance - read 50 pages while traveling when I had no other books to distract me. Found myself continuing to wonder when it was going to get going. :(The

memoir style writing is very dry and factual, and I found nothing to suck me into the story after 50 pages. Bummer, because I completely love Latin American fiction of diverse genres and went in expecting to love this Cuban female centered story. All the elements were right, and even though I'm intrigued about what will happen to the characters, it's a very rare occasion where that's not enough. I have no doubt it will interest others who can give it more focus!

Elaine says

A marvelous read. Elegant prose which flows gracefully from start to finish. Intricately drawn, varied characters with many beliefs, often contradictory but reconcilable. The book is about one's identities and inner conflicts. The characters and events are so well-drawn, one must remind oneself this isn't a biography

As part of the central issue of identity and how we choose among them, the author presents a fascinating history of the conversos and marranos from the Spanish Inquisition and how their Jewishness survived secretly for 500 years, surfacing in modern Cuba. I knew that many conversos fled from Spain and Portugal, but not that their religion had survived alongside their outward Catholicism, at least to the extent recounted in this book. Living in Southeastern New England, I did know that some Azorean Portuguese practiced vestiges of Jewish ritual, like going down into the cellar on Friday nights to light candles. I also knew that Portuguese surnames like Silva and Perreira were originally Sephardic Jewish ones.

This can be read for its artistic achievement or its historical information or both

Amanda Lichtenstein says

the best part about this book is obejas' sensuous, poetic prose and her insights into Cuban culture & identity through the lens of her ancestors, real & imagined. i could do without the fragmented and nonlinear sex threads running through it -- it's not really hot, just sort of irritating to get through on the way to more fascinating political, cultural, and social commentary. still, she's a Chicago writer, and really honest in her approach. i'm enjoying it.

kate says

fuck.

just -- fuck.

a little more than halfway through & frustrated, i went running my stupid mouth about how i'd hit what felt like the doldrums at the center of the novel, how the book lacked "forward momentum." then i came home tonight, picked it up again, & finished it in one sitting, alternately holding my breath, sighing, & laughing to myself despite my roommates' bemused glances.

probably too much of this gorgeous, gorgeous novel was lost on me -- but i know i'll read it again, hopefully soak up a bit more of obejas' prose, the way she holds up an image, turns & turns it in the light until it becomes something else entirely. i feel certain that i'll carry the collected weight -- & yes, momentum -- of

this book with me for a good long while.

i'm looking forward to it.

simon says

Ok, so maybe I'm just obsessed, or read this is a moment of Feminist Latina Surrealist Fiction, but i think this book is mostly flawless. i know not everyone thought that (it didn't get the best reviews) but there's something so tangible, sensual, erotic to Obejas's writing. like she's this hot shit dyke trying to turn on the ladies at the bar by the way she drinks her beer. and if yer not watching her mouth, you'd miss it.

the book is primarily about family and translation. but it is also foundationally queer and Cubana. when communication is difficult between characters, Obejas uses words that feel clumsy on the lips. her word choice and prose are so excellent in this book.

it's a little long, and at parts, just a bit slow. but because the rest is so good, my patience for these things was very high.

Tisha Marie says

This novel is about love and language. Love of country, culture, and familia; not always biological but family of proximity and necessity. The characters are passionate and sensual. This novel is also about translating not only words and emotions but the historical experience of a culture that exists in two worlds and the two worlds within one culture. Obejas juxtaposes the terrible and the awesome during the Cuban revolution. Reality for most people under Castro regime is bleak, a pitiful resemblance of the homeland they once knew. Obejas follows those in exile on their new journey while returning them to Cuba where even the frailest roots hold fast. With elaborate description, Obejas conveys the Jewish-Cuban reality and the transformation of the landscape. In the end, Obejas leaves readers curious about Alejandra and Celina, wondering what becomes of Nena and Moises.
