



Stories heard in Miami piqued Roland Merullo's interest in Cuba.

## Characters Come First

Roland Merullo talks about his latest novel BY NATALIE JACOBSON MCCrackEN

YOU CAN'T TELL the double agents from the triple agents (nor can they) in Roland Merullo's latest novel, *Fidel's Last Days*, a thriller about a plot to assassinate Fidel Castro.

Former CIA agent Carolina Perez is on a mission to take the leader out. Meanwhile, Carlos Gutierrez, the minister of health, must decide whether to violate his loyalty to a regime he has been part of and his Hippocratic oath. *Fidel's Last Days* (Shaye Areheart Books) is an intricate web of intrigue, lies, and disguises, with, near the close, an engaging picture of the aging, ailing dictator.

Merullo (COM'75), who often visits Miami and talks with Cubans who have fled their homeland, has long been fascinated by the island nation. "The whole Cuban story — in its ugly and healthy aspects — just captured my imagination," he says. "Meeting and talking with these people lit a spark."

Merullo's nine previous books include the Revere Beach trilogy, *A Little Love Story*, *Golfing with God: A Novel of Heaven and Earth*, and *Breakfast with Buddha*.

He spoke with *Bostonia* about his work.

### Why did you write a novel about Cuba?

I have gone to Miami every February since 2004, and I have met people whose families had fled Cuba or who were chased out after the 1959 revolution and Castro's rise to power. These people told me their stories and a bit about the Cuban-American culture.

Having lived in the former U.S.S.R. for three years, I had some firsthand experience with the way communism changes a society, the way people live under communism, the way the media are used, the way dissidence is stifled, the dark art of propaganda.

### Did you do much research?

I interviewed some Cuban-Americans. I read as much as I could about Castro and about Cuban history and culture, studied guidebooks to get a sense of Havana, looked at photos, watched an interview with Castro to get some of his gestures and expressions. A generous Cuban woman read the manuscript for me, checked for errors, and gave me certain details about Cuban life.

### Is there really as much torture and other "quiet," meaningless brutality in Cuba as your novel implies?

I didn't find evidence of exactly the type of torture described in the novel, but if you read the Amnesty International reports on torture and on the treatment of political prisoners, you will see that torture has been used in Cuba, and that prison conditions, for the politicals especially, are not good.

### The plotters are almost entirely Cubans of privilege. Are there many living comfortably who are willing to sacrifice themselves for the country?

I have no way of knowing. But people of privilege have been involved in every revolution I can think of, including our own, and in countless coup attempts. I think a novelist asks himself, could it be true? not, is it true?

# Comfortably Isolated

In Midge Raymond's short stories, women seek geographic and emotional isolation

**I wondered, as the character Carolina does, why would anyone bother to kill a sick old man?**

He is such an iconic figure that the organizers of the coup believe he has to be done away with in order for the country to change. I think they are probably correct in thinking that his death — however and whenever it occurs — will be a moment of real change for the country.

**Carlos says, "People are human beings first and spies second." Are you more interested in character than in intrigue?**

Yes, much more. Like most novelists, I have a peculiar fascination with the way people behave and the psychological roots of, or reasons for, their behavior.

**You've written memoirs set in Revere, Massachusetts, satires set in heaven, and thrillers set in communist countries. What are you working on now?**

A novel about a very poor girl living in the woods of rural New England with exceedingly strange parents.

And then another offbeat "spiritual" novel, something in the mold of what I think of as "the God trilogy."

I have a travelogue coming out in April, *The Italian Summer*, about a wonderful summer spent near Lake Como, playing a lot of golf and eating well.

I have had editors counsel me to write

the same book over and over, and some readers who complained that I haven't kept writing books set in greater Boston.

But it would be like trying to keep a migratory bird in your backyard. I just want to go places, to see things, to observe the human predicament in different forms.

"Forget English," the Chinese tutor advises Paige in the title story of Midge Raymond's short story collection. Newly arrived in Taipei, Paige and many of the other thirty-something women at the center of these melancholy stories have chosen the isolation of living in a culture and with a language very different from their own; Paige, in fact, wants to learn only enough Chinese to read numbers, addresses, and menus. For her, says Raymond (COM'95), there is safety in being unable to communicate.

The collection, *Forgetting English*, won the 2007 Spokane Prize for Short Fiction



**Midge Raymond says her characters do their best to avoid finding themselves.**

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