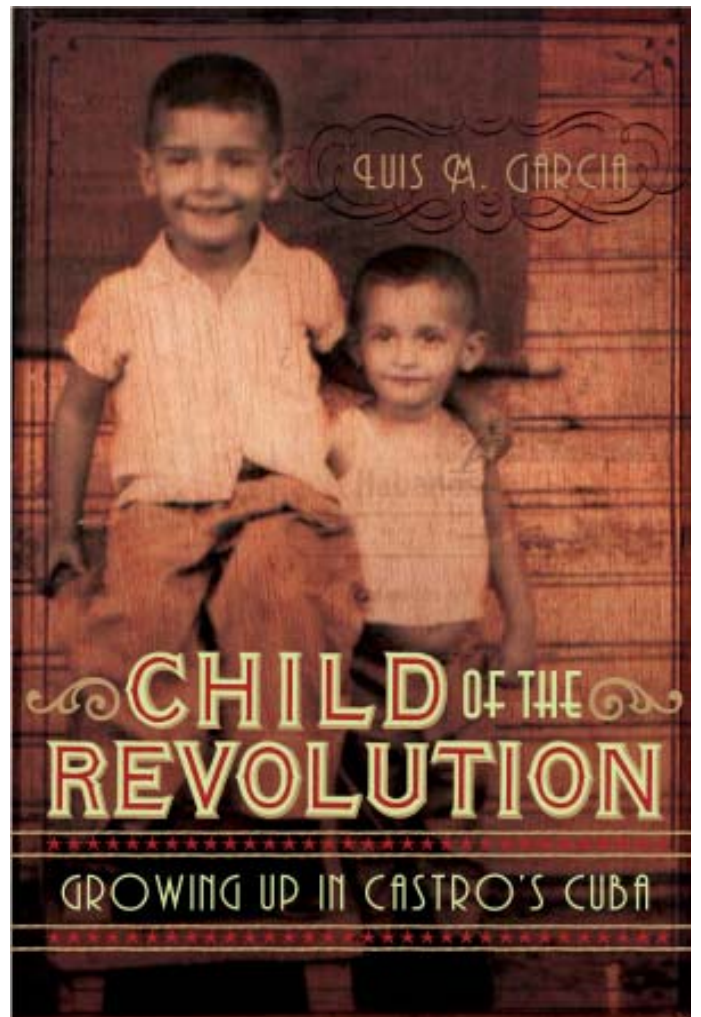


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About Luis Garcia

Luis Manuel Garcia was born in Banes, Cuba, in July 1959. He left Cuba with his family in 1971 – three years after his parents applied for permission to leave. He lived in Madrid, Spain, for about 12 months before migrating to Sydney.

In Australia, Luis was educated at Fairfield Boys' High School, in south-western Sydney, and at The University of Sydney. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree majoring in government and public administration. He began his journalistic career in 1981 when he gained a cadetship at *The Australian Financial Review*, before moving to *The Sydney Morning Herald*. There, he covered Business, Finance, the Education round and politics. He also edited the Stay in Touch column, was acting Chief of Staff and edited a number of sections across the paper.

He has spent time as a media adviser in State politics (1992-95) and as Chief of Staff to the former Leader of the Opposition in New South Wales (1998-2002). He is now a Partner with one of Australia's leading corporate communications firms, Cannings.

Luis is the co-author of the biography *Chika* (Lothian, 2004). He is married, with a daughter and a son. They live in Sydney.

On writing *Child of the Revolution*

What inspired you to write *Child of the Revolution*?

Sometimes, it seems as if I have been writing this book since the day I left Cuba. At least in my head. I guess it's what happens when you leave your birthplace, whether by choice or by force. You try to retain as much of that past as possible: the language, the food, the music, even the aroma of a place. It stays there, inside your head, for better or worse.

I have been toying with the idea of this book for a few years, probably since about the time my children started going to school and asking questions about my own childhood and what it was like to grow up in such a different place. But you know how it is: I kept putting it off again and again as family and work commitments took precedence.

Then, a couple of years ago, the urgency to write *Child of the Revolution* became all too apparent when I overheard my daughter, who is now 19, speaking to her grandfather - in a combination of Spanish and English - about Cuba and those first few years after Fidel Castro came to power. It seemed to me, listening to that conversation, that I had to get moving – otherwise I'd be writing the book not with my children in mind, but my grandchildren. A scary prospect for someone approaching middle-age, I can assure you.

So, what's *Child of the Revolution* about?

It's a story about growing up at an extraordinary time in an extraordinary place. What is it like to grow up in a country that becomes the epicentre of super-power confrontation during the Cold War – the closest the United States and the

Soviet Union came to using nuclear missiles? What is it like to grow up in a place where everything seems to be in a constant state of upheaval and change?

It's told from the perspective of a child of 10 or 11 living in Banes, a small sugar town some 15 hours or so from Havana, during the 1960s. He doesn't really understand what's going on around him, but he wants desperately to fit in, to belong, to become a better revolutionary. A impressionable child who wants to grow up to be like Che, because that is exactly what he has been taught at school, much to the dismay of his parents.

It's set in a spectacularly beautiful land ruled by an omnipresent Maximo Lider who controls everything, sees everything and spend much of his time dreaming up bizarre, predictably ill-fated schemes, like growing the world's largest tropical strawberry. Or getting primary school children to learn Russian because 'it's the language of the future'. Or cancelling Christmas because, well, it's a capitalist invention.

It's a story about family too...

Yes, it's also a story about families torn apart by politics and fear and eventually, the harsh reality of exile. It's a story about separation and about not wanting to be an outsider. I guess this is what makes *Child of the Revolution* a universal story even though it is set in a very specific place.

Is this a political book?

I don't see it as a political book, although I suspect that when it comes to Cuba, politics are often unavoidable. I certainly didn't write the book as a way of making a political statement.

The experiences I recount in the book are not unique. More than a million other Cubans have left the island since Castro came to power in January 1959 – and most had to go through the same hardships and humiliations my parents had to go through when they asked permission to leave. At the time, and until recently, in fact, wanting to leave Cuba was considered by the Castro regime as nothing short of treason. And you paid a price for that ...

Surprisingly, there is no bitterness ...

That is something I learnt from my parents. Despite what they had to go through – losing their home, their business, their family – they have always taken the view that there is not much they can do about the past. Life's too short – you've got to move on.

They still miss Cuba and they talk about Cuba often but they certainly don't regret ending up - almost by accident - in Australia as migrants and rebuilding their lives here. This country, which I now regard as my home, has been very good to us. Australia has given us enormous opportunities and of course, my children are dinky-di Aussies. We will be forever grateful.

Did you get much input from other members of the family in writing the book?

I have attempted to write a book that is a faithful retelling of memories that have endured with surprising clarity over all this time. As far as possible, I attempted to confirm what I recall with my parents and other members of my extended family – most of whom are now living outside Cuba. They were very helpful.

But it's a story based on what I remember. It's my interpretation. So, some of the events I describe in the book may be remembered differently by others. It doesn't mean I am right and they are wrong, of course.

To what extent is *Child of the Revolution* an exercise in coming to terms with Cuba? Expunging Cuba from the subconscious?

I open the book with a quote from Guillermo Cabrera Infante, probably the best known Cuban writer of the past half century. Cabrera Infante was a strong supporter of the Revolution initially but was forced into exile in the mid 1960s. He died in London last year without ever returning to Cuba – his greatest regret. He said that:

To be Cuban is to go with Cuba everywhere.


Cuba is a paradise from which we flee by trying to return.


I think he is spot on. I know what he is talking about. Hardly a day goes by that I don't think about Cuba. Whether you want it or not, Cuba comes with you everywhere. Sometimes, it can be quite infuriating.


Reviews


Reviews to come shortly.


Some suggested points for discussion

 In *Child of the Revolution*, the author is constantly trying to be a 'good revolutionary', to the dismay of his not very revolutionary parents. Why this urge to belong? Is it based on fear?


 The author's parents think he is being brain-washed at school: indoctrinated by the communists. How accurate is this? Does it make them more determined to seek permission to leave Cuba?

 What impressions do we get of Banes? Is the fact that the town was 'the most Americanised in Cuba' before Fidel Castro play a part in the narrative?

 How important is the notion of extended family in the context of this book? How difficult is it for the author's parents in particular to leave behind their brothers and sisters?

 From reading *Child of the Revolution*, you'd imagine that nothing happens in Cuba without Fidel Castro's approval. Does the omnipresent Fidel become a member of this extended family?

 What role do music, food and cigars play in the book?

 In the last chapter, the author looks out of the plane window and thinks that, 'It's always sunny in Cuba'. How important is this mental image, especially for a boy who thinks he will never return home?

Further reading

Three Trapped Tigers by Guillermo Cabrera Infante

The Cuba Reader: History, Culture and Politics edited by Aviva Chomsky

Cuban Diaries: An American Housewife in Havana by Isadora Tattlin

Dreaming in Cuban by Cristina Garcia

Dirty Havana Trilogy by Pedro Juan Gutierrez

The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love by Oscar Hijuelos